

**DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES  
PRESENTS**

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*COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS IN THE LANGUAGE OF EARLY BILINGUALS:  
EXPERIMENTAL STUDY OF RUSSIAN HERITAGE SPEAKERS*



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The rapidly growing research on heritage speakers and the sociolinguistic dimensions of their identities reflects the social and cultural dynamics in immigrant communities in the US in the past few decades. Researchers from various fields of linguistics have increasingly emphasized the unique language behavior of these early bilinguals, which exhibits distinctive characteristics of maintenance or attrition in several areas. One of these areas, semantics has been intensively researched in second language acquisition but unfairly underrepresented in experimental work with heritage speakers. The present study contributes to the empirical research in this area and offers an interpretation of particular problems related to the comprehension of Russian partitive expressions, such as *несколько* ('some'). The focus of the presentation is on the results of a classical picture-matching experiment conducted at UNM with heritage speakers of Russian, namely, the main effect of partitivity recorded in reaction times and accuracy of response. *Is language transfer responsible for such effect? Or is this a case of certain maturational constraints that have led to difficulties in the interpretation of particular semantic categories, such as partitivity?* The study opens a discussion of these important questions by advancing a hypothesis about the semantic ambiguity of 'some' in its presupposed vs. asserted content. It is argued that this ambiguity is the trigger for the comprehension problems in the language of the early bilinguals that participated in the study.

Finally, in order to present a more complete picture of the linguistic profiles of the heritage speakers, the linguistic data was correlated with the results of a sociolinguistic survey of the participants' self-identification and motivation to preserve their first language, Russian.