Terminology choice in generative acquisition research: the case of "incomplete acquisition" in heritage language grammars

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Pascual y Cabo & Rothman (2012) and Kupisch & Rothman (2018) argue against the use of term 'incomplete' to characterise the grammars of heritage speakers claiming that it reflects a negative evaluation of the linguistic knowledge of these bilingual speakers. We examine the reasons for and against the use of 'incomplete' across acquisition contexts and argue that its use is legitimate on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Our goal is to present arguments for using the term, not to evaluate the scientific validity of incomplete acquisition over other possible accounts. Although our conclusion is that the term should not be abandoned, we advocate a position whereby researchers consider the possible negative impact of the terminology they use and how they use it. This position aims to resolve the tension between the need to prioritise scientific effectiveness and the necessity to avoid terminology which can be negatively misconstrued by the general public.

1. A time to reflect on our terminology

Recently, criticism of certain choices of terminology has arisen in the area of heritage language acquisition. The main criticism that concerns us here can be found in Otheguy (2013), Pascual y Cabo & Rothman (2012) and especially Kupisch & Rothman (2018) (henceforth K&R). These authors warn against the use of the term 'incomplete acquisition' when describing the process of language acquisition experienced by heritage speakers (henceforth HS), broadly defined as bilingual speakers of an ethnic or immigrant minority language. Incomplete acquisition is now widely used in our field to account for the possibility that some property of the target grammar fails to be acquired due to insufficient input (Montrul, 2002, 2008, 2011, 2016; Polinsky 2006, 2008; Silva-Corvalán 2018).[1] Broadly speaking, the term incomplete acquisition has come to describe a process of heritage language acquisition (distinct from attrition) which is often characterised by grammatical reductions, simplifications and reanalyses (see overview in Benmamoun et al 2013a).[2] For instance, Spanish-English bilinguals in the US have been found to exhibit a reduced tense-aspect-mood verbal system, omit object clitics and realise overt subject pronouns with different distributions (Silva-Corvalán 2018); Polinsky (2008) argues that Russian-English bilinguals develop a reanalysed gender marking system which is different from monolingual Russian.

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[1] Recently, Putnam & Sánchez (2013) have argued that differences in heritage grammars can be explained by fluctuations in the levels of activation of the lexicon and relevant formal features, rather than being the result of acquisition based on insufficient input. Although pinning down the potential sources of incomplete acquisition is important, it is tangential to the concerns of this commentary regarding terminology choice.

[2] In general, incomplete acquisition is proposed to account for divergences from a baseline which is not exactly as the standard variety available to native monolinguals.

In our view, incomplete acquisition does not necessarily have to describe the outcome of bilingual acquisition. That is, a grammar of a heritage speaker could be incomplete due to the acquisition conditions which are specific to that speaker, regardless of whether it resembles the grammars of their parents or not. Our assumption is that incomplete acquisition can arise when input conditions change during the course of acquisition (and, crucially, before a mature and stable grammar has fully developed) and that change impacts upon the overall pattern of acquisition and resulting grammar.

Although it may appear that the outcome of incomplete acquisition is a simplified or reduced version of the full grammar[3], HS grammars are nevertheless regarded as coherent in their own right (Polinsky 2008: 41) and obey the same principles of language as any other grammatical system (Montrul 2006: 167). These authors have nothing to say about the (in)ability of HS to function as bilingual speakers or about any other issue which is not strictly linguistic. This is important since when discussing the inappropriateness of using the term incomplete acquisition, K&R ask:

> "What does 'incomplete' mean? In our view, it should mean that a grammar is somehow unable to fulfil the remit of language because it lacks properties that govern the constitution of natural language, …. or is not sufficiently developed as a system to reliably encode and decode all necessary linguistic information" (Kupisch & Rothman 2018: 573)

It seems to us that this line of criticism is based on the mistaken assumption that terms such as 'deficient', 'attrited' or 'incomplete' may be taken to represent an evaluation of the linguistic abilities of a bilingual speaker as a person. K&R question the theoretical appropriateness of incomplete acquisition as a hypothesis to explain HS acquisition, but their criticism seems to focus on the appropriateness of the term as well as its potential offensive connotations (Kupisch & Rothman 2018: 567). In our view, this criticism seems to be about beliefs and ideology (i.e., what the bilingual speaker should or should not be able to do). Yet given that generative approaches to second language acquisition and bilingualism are only interested in the grammatical representations in a speaker's mind, they do not (and indeed, cannot) make evaluations of speakers. On the other hand, HS researchers clearly do have a duty to address the terminology problem highlighted by K&R, with three main considerations making this matter currently relevant. Firstly, in the United States, the language proficiencies of HS *are* often evaluated formally on an institutional basis. Secondly, unlike instructed second language learners, HS often face issues of identity and belonging and this is particularly critical when learning their minority language in a classroom (Carreira & Kagan, 2011). For instance, in the US many Spanish HS find it difficult to reconcile negative attitudes and beliefs of their own variety of Spanish when compared to the standardised version of Spanish as a prestigious world language

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[3] A reviewer points out that bilingual children can be successful language learners. Indeed, we agree that simultaneous young bilingual children have been shown to develop two autonomous linguistic systems, go through similar processes as monolingual children and can attain nativelike competence (Genesse 1989, De Hower 1995, Paradis & Genesse 1996, Meisel 2001, 2004, 2007). Based on data from a group of French-English two year olds, Paradis & Genesse (1996) claim that these simultaneous bilingual children follow the same pattern as monolinguals. In contrast, some have argued that successive bilinguals may be different to monolinguals (see de Hower 1995 and Meisel 2011). In some contexts, HS do achieve full attainment in both languages (Flores & Barbosa 2014; Kupisch et al., 2016; Flores et al. 2017). We refer the reader to a relevant discussion on high proficient HS in Benmamoun, Montrul & Polinsky (2013b) who note that these are found more often in Europe than in the US.

(Carreira, 2016:164). Thirdly, pressure to make our results impactful to society means that communication of scientific results to a general public is flourishing. Bilingual speakers themselves, as well as other observers outside our field, are discovering our research and without the relevant grounding in the methodological and terminological conventions adopted in the field, may mistakenly interpret our findings as either evaluation or a judgement of failure.

By extension, bilingual educational programmes may also be misinformed by this terminology. In these respects, K&R correctly claim that: "Once offered to the public domain, terminology can have far reaching and long-lasting effects, even—perhaps especially—when these are unintended by their original promoters." (Kupisch & Rothman 2018: 574). Likewise, Rothman, Tsimpli & Pascual y Cabo (2016) argue that since theoretical discussions on HS should be used to inform educational debates concerning these speakers, referring to them as incomplete learners is detrimental.[4]

This paper is organised around the arguments for the two opposing positions regarding terminology in L2 acquisition and HS research, which we identify in response to the criticism above:

    I)   As a scientific enterprise, L2/HS research should apply whatever the most descriptively transparent terms are to describe and explain the object of our study: if any persons or communities feel offended, threatened or further marginalised by our terminology, then this is a misconstrual or misinterpretation on their part.

    II)   The risk of even indirect offense and marginalisation should be avoided at all costs: L2/HS research should avoid any terms that have the potential to do that, even if only via misconstrual or misinterpretation.

We then identify and argue for an 'intermediate' third position in this debate which we hope offers a guideline for minimising any negative impacts as far as possible, while prioritising the effective communication of our research assumptions, methods and findings. Specifically, in reaching this position we make the following points:

    a) Ostensibly 'negative' terms exist in all acquisition contexts regardless of socio-economic status, education or other sociolinguistic variables. They do not constitute a judgement or evaluation of the speaker; to do so would be to misunderstand or misrepresent the discipline.

    b) We need to be mindful and clarify that HSs are not 'incomplete' bilinguals but some aspect(s) of their grammars can be, although this is not the only outcome. More scrutiny on the sources of problems for these speakers is necessary by researchers.

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[4] This criticism seems to focus on the term 'incomplete learner' specifically, and how it has been (incorrectly) applied to characterise the learners themselves rather than their grammatical knowledge. This seems to be an unfortunate overextension of the terms 'incomplete acquisition' and 'incomplete grammar', which are strictly linguistic terms, and which has spread in our field (see discussion in Montrul 2016 and Polinsky 2018). The points raised in Rothman et al. (2016) are important as they highlight our responsibility as researchers to choose—and apply—our terminology carefully.

c) We need to communicate our findings to HS and external bodies in a way that is positive and easy to understand in order to avoid misinterpretation, misconstrual, and even mistrust of our research.

2. The object of our study

Generative linguistic research provides principled scientific explanations to questions regarding the nature of linguistic representations and how these are acquired (see details in Roberts, 2017). It is interested in examining the acquisition and development of grammars, or "I(nternalized)-language": the internal, individual and implicit knowledge of the grammar represented in the mind of a speaker (similar, although not complete identical, to linguistic competence). Following one of the fundamental scientific developments of the Chomskian approach to the study of language, I-language is formally divorced from E(xternalized)-language, which covers aspects of language use. This distinction does not serve to set adjacent disciplines against each other or establish I-language as inherently worthier or more suitable for study, but it does formalise and emphasise a key distinction in the object of study for research into language structure and research into language use. This is significant as it may not be immediately apparent to (even interested) observers of our field, since:

a) even though our research focuses on I-language properties, just like research in formal linguistic theory, we can only access these via inference from E-language properties, either in naturalistic or experimental conditions;

b) in instructional contexts, learners' E-language typically *is* formally evaluated in a way that native speakers' E-language typically is not.

The distinction shown above delimits the research agenda within the field of generative second language acquisition (SLA), underpins our research questions, and shapes the kinds of explanations we seek.

Generative SLA is often criticised because of its native (or monolingual) bias, namely that it tends to evaluate L2 learners' grammars against the grammatical knowledge of native speakers (and sometimes only educated ones, at that).[5] Critics of the field have often taken the native vs. non-native comparison to imply that generative researchers have expectations that L2 learners should aspire to behave like monolingual speakers, when this is clearly not the case. As clarified above, in generative SLA research, the object of study is not the learners themselves, but the learner's mental grammar: that is, a system of tacit internalised linguistic representations, decoupled from contextual considerations, acquired via an inferential learning procedure under exposure to external linguistic input. Generative research into L2 grammars does not, then, concern itself either with the socio-cultural context surrounding the act of learning or using a language, nor with the personal characteristics of its users (such as status, personality, education, motivation and so on). For this reason, the description of learner grammars makes no implicit or explicit evaluation of such characteristics, and indeed has nothing to say about whether learners should aim to become nativelike.

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[5] Bley-Vroman's (1983) 'comparative fallacy' famously cautioned against comparing learners' grammar with any other grammars as "the learner's system is worthy of study in its own right, not just as a degenerate form of the target system" (1983:4).

Under the above working assumptions of our field, the comparison between second language learners and native speakers is warranted by the scientific method we use. Any scientific study of some well-defined properties of a target population or experimental group (in our case, the mental grammars of second language learners) is likely to measure those properties against those of a control group which serves to establish a baseline. In language acquisition, this is necessary to confirm or refute hypotheses stemming from theoretical considerations and based on different variables, to test whether interventions can alter linguistic knowledge or behaviour, to test the validity of a test or task, and so on. The control group consists of adult native speakers not because of any inherent value we assign to the speakers themselves, but because their grammars are scientifically useful: typically they are relatively stable, broadly homogeneous within a given variety of a language (and in many respects even across them) and often well documented within linguistic theory concerning the formal grammatical mechanisms underlying key properties (like verbal inflection, *wh*-constructions, the binding conditions etc.).

This valid and necessary research method of comparison against the control group, alongside some of the key findings of generative second language research, is borne out in some of the terminology we use to describe non-native grammars. These have sometimes been taken to be controversial, particularly—though not exclusively—by those outside our immediate research field. Yet a grammar described as 'deficient' cannot be equated with a speaker who is somehow deficient. By the same token, we argue that a grammatical representation described as 'incomplete' in our field does not entail that the person is somehow an incomplete learner. It simply describes the fact that the grammar does not share the features or properties of the input of the full grammar (White, 2003; Rothman, 2007). On this issue, White (2003) argues that:

> "The aim of much of the research described …. has been to discover the essential characteristics of the L2 learner's or L2 speaker's representation of the L2 input, the central issue being whether interlanguage grammars are of the type sanctioned by UG, not whether they are identical to native-speaker grammars (2003:242)."

These considerations constitute the thrust of the defence of position I) as outlined in Section 1. We next consider the fallacy of position II).

3. Incomplete grammars exist in all acquisition contexts

3.1 Child grammars

Explaining similarities and differences between child and adult grammars has been central in the generative research agenda. In seeking to explain these shared/distinct characteristics, generative researchers assume that the acquisition of a grammar is input-driven but constrained by Universal Grammar (UG), broadly understood as a biological human capacity, restricting the type of structures/grammars that learners can entertain and ultimately acquire. It is assumed that children acquire an adult grammar based on scarce evidence in the input (a.k.a. the Poverty of the Stimulus argument).[6] Even if learners have some innate knowledge of the grammar, it seems that they still

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[6] This learnability puzzle has also guided research in child bilingual acquisition, child/adult second language acquisition, heritage language acquisition, etc. All together, the generative enterprise aims to provide an

need exposure to input to figure out some of the abstract structures underlying sentences in the target language (see Lasnik & Lidz (2017:248)). It seems also possible that children use a number of cues and some probabilistic learning to determine an adult grammar from the input (Yang, 2002; Becker, 2006; Westergaard, 2009). A further assumption derived from UG is that variation across I-language grammars (for example among individual speakers of the same language variety who are at different stages of acquisition, among speakers of different language varieties, or among speakers of different languages) is then restricted to 'parametric' differences, where the parameters are supplied as a component of UG. These shared assumptions then allow us to explore the predictions of different theoretical models of parameters and their suitability in accounting for acquisition patterns.[7]

Our main point here is that research has shown that children's grammars are often not adultlike in certain respects: their grammars lack certain adult grammatical features, they map input onto syntactic structure incorrectly, or they interpret sentences differently, for example. Since the target features or properties are available in the input, one must assume that children must have had an opportunity to acquire them but somehow failed to do so. In this respect, child grammars are characterised as being 'deficient' or 'incomplete' and while grammatical deficiency or incompleteness is typically only temporary, it persists throughout most of the acquisition process. This characterisation accounts for the names of some of the proposed explanations for the observed patterns of acquisition (our emphases), e.g., **Truncation** Model (Rizzi 1993/1994); A-chain **deficit** (Borer & Wexler 1987, 1992; Principle B **delay** (Chien & Wexler 1990; Grodzinsky & Reinhart 1993), **missing** subjects and parameter **missetting** (Hyams 2011), among many others. Terms of this kind, taken out of context, might perhaps be perceived as having a negative connotation, yet to the best of our knowledge no-one has sought to argue against them on the basis that they somehow characterise children themselves as delayed, deficient, or incomplete: these terms help us to frame the process of child language acquisition and refer to features of the normal path of acquisition of a developing grammar. The use of these terms is entirely compatible with an understanding of normal language acquisition whereby grammars may fluctuate, change, develop and show sensitivity to maturational constraints.

The case for applying such a terminology to describe a developing I-language grammar transfers naturally to generative SLA, which—sharing the same theoretical foundations—similarly seeks explanatory answers to essentially psycholinguistic questions about the human capacity for language, for instance whether adult L2 speakers can acquire new mental representations from exposure to L2 input. SLA research thus follows the same scientific method, with the object of study the internalised grammar.

3.2 L2 grammars

L2 learners face fundamentally the same learnability problem as children, i.e. of acquiring a language under impoverished input conditions. The state of the L2 grammar at any given point

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understanding of the human capacity for language and its limitations (e.g. language acquisition after the critical period, acquisition under reduced input conditions, etc).

[7] For example, as (binary) parameterised universal principles as originally conceived (Chomsky, 1981), or as different combinations of formal features of functional heads whose morphological expression varies across languages (Borer 1984, Chomsky 1995), known as the "Borer-Chomsky Conjecture" (Baker, 2008).

is measured against a benchmark provided by a reliable control group of adult monolingual or bilingual native speakers, whose grammars have been fully acquired. The differences we find between the control group and the L2 learners inform our understanding of the language learning capacity under different internal and external conditions (different L1s, less input, or different timing, for example).

Just as in child language acquisition, L2 grammars have been reported to be divergent, deficient or incomplete. For instance, we often find quotes in the literature which directly argue that for most L2 speakers "failure to acquire the target language grammar is typical" (Birdsong, 1992:706); some have also argued that "very few L2 learners appear to be fully successful in the way that native speakers are" (Towell & Hawkins, 1994:14); definitions of 'incomplete' L2 grammars have been proposed to describe cases in which an L2 grammar lacks a property available in the input (e.g. Schachter, 1990; Sorace, 1993); furthermore, in order to account for variability in the production of inflectional morphology (e.g. *-ed, -s*), some have proposed a representational deficit in the grammars of L2 speakers (e.g. the **Failed** Functional Feature Hypothesis (Hawkins & Chan, 1997); the Local **Impairment** Hypothesis (Beck, 1998); the Representational **Deficit** Hypothesis (Hawkins & Franceschina, 2004; Hawkins & Hattori, 2006). All of these seek to describe the particular aspect of L2 grammatical knowledge which accounts for the challenges that learners face during the acquisition process and thereby contributes to an overall understanding of the possible outcomes of second language acquisition. Note that nothing in the use of this terminology presupposes how temporary or long-lasting any 'incompleteness'/'deficit' may be, unlike child language acquisition, where existing deficits are typically temporary.

3.3 HS grammars

In the field of heritage language acquisition, HS are also often characterised as not being able to achieve fully nativelike levels of competence in the minority language (see e.g. Benmamoun et al., (2013a) for an overview). The two main explanations for why we find gaps in the grammatical knowledge of heritage languages are attrition (aspects of the heritage grammar are acquired but subsequently lost due to interrupted L1 input exposure) and incomplete acquisition (aspects of the heritage grammar do not have a chance to be acquired due to insufficient L1 input exposure).[8] There are abundant examples in the literature arguing that bilingual speakers of different language combinations have incomplete knowledge of some aspects of their heritage grammar (see a.o. Montrul, 2002, 2008; Polinsky 2006, 2008; Albirini & Benmamoun 2012; Silva-Corvalán 2018).

Yet we should be cautious not to characterise all HS as having incomplete knowledge of the heritage language as other possible outcomes exist. Below we present four possible outcomes of heritage language acquisition concerning the acquisition of grammatical features. In most cases, these will affect individual properties within a single grammar, so one speaker may show successful acquisition of some properties and incomplete acquisition or attrition of others.[9]

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[8] See Meisel (2014) for a critical review of these possibilities.

[9] Just to reiterate, our goal in this piece is not to defend incomplete acquisition as the hypothesis which can better explain aspects of heritage acquisition. We are mainly interested in contributing to the debate concerning whether

i. Successful acquisition based on **monolingual-type** input (e.g. Flores & Barbosa 2014; Flores et al. 2017; Kupisch et al., 2016). This assumes nativelike attainment based on input which has not changed or attrited. In this case, the nativelike outcome is the same for the monolingual controls and HS.[10]

ii. Successful acquisition based on **divergent input** (e.g. Rothman, 2007; Domínguez, 2009, 2013; Pires & Rothman, 2009; Pascual y Cabo 2013; Polinsky, 2018a). This assumes nativelike attainment based on input which has undergone some changes as the result of L1 attrition, dialectal levelling or other contact-induced changes. In this case, the nativelike outcome is different for monolingual speakers and for HS, although the process of acquisition is fundamentally the same.

iii. Attrition or reanalysis of previously acquired features (e.g. Polinsky, 2011). In this case, a feature of the grammar which is acquired by bilingual children is lost or reanalysed later in life.

iv. Incomplete acquisition of certain available features under limited input conditions (e.g. Montrul, 2002, 2008; Polinsky 1997, 2006, 2008; Silva-Corvalán 2018). This is the scenario discussed in earlier sections of this paper.

Due to the characteristics of the input available to HS, scenario ii) presents an interesting acquisition context which merits detailed examination. However, scenario ii) does not necessarily preclude the possibility of scenario iv) happening. What is more, empirical evidence from monolingual L1 acquisition can be used to support the validity of scenario iv) as we show next.

We have explained that during the process of language acquisition, learners have to map a string of words available in the input onto a syntactic structure sanctioned by UG. This is often not an easy task. For example, an English child upon hearing sentences (1a) and (1b) may infer that both share an underlying common structure when this is not the case (see Becker 2005, 2006, 2009).

> 1. a. Mary$_i$ seems [t_i to be happy] (raising, fewer theta roles, Move)
>   b. Mary wants [PRO to be happy]   (control, more theta roles, Merge)

(1a) is an example of 'subject raising' whereby the theta-role of 'Mary' is assigned by the predicate in the subordinate clause, before moving into the matrix clause (since 'seem' provides no thematic subject to fill this position). (1b) exhibits 'subject control' whereby 'Mary' is the thematic subject of 'want', and the empty subject position in the subordinate clause is not a trace of a raised subject, but a null subject pronoun (PRO) whose interpretation is controlled by the matrix clause subject. Hence, different syntactic structures underlie the two superficially similar sentence patterns. This presents a learnability problem known as the 'string identity problem,'

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terms like 'incomplete acquisition' should be abandoned on the grounds that they can be perceived as being offensive despite their scientific justification.

[10] See Putnam & Sánchez (2013) and Cuza (2016) for arguments that bilingual acquisition based on monolingual-type input may not always result in nativelike attainment.

as children must infer two different syntactic structures from almost identical input (see Santos, Gonçalves & Hyams, 2016 for discussion).

How do children cope with and ultimately solve this learnability problem? Some studies have proposed that control is acquired before raising (Hirsch & Wexler, 2007; Hirsch, Orfitelli & Wexler, 2008), whereas in other accounts children apply the raising structure as a default (i.e. they interpret control verbs as raising, Kirby, 2009). Becker (2009) argues that the fact that children unexpectedly do not overgeneralise the control case (the more restricted and for which there is clear positive evidence in the input) means that children are likely to pay attention to a cluster of cues to take a probabilistic guess whether a verb is likely to be in a raising or a control structure. Although not relevant for our discussions, these cues include the animacy or inanimacy of the matrix subject, predicate eventivity, whether the subject is expletive, and whether the verb can occur in both a transitive and intransitive clause.

This example shows three important aspects concerning the role of input in language acquisition: first, target features, properties or structures may be too infrequent in the input or opaque to support correct generalisation (see Legate & Yang, 2002; Hsu & Chater, 2010); second, learners may look for clusters of cues in the input which lead them to guess the particular feature, structure or property; third, it may take time for learners to acquire a property if there is no direct or transparent evidence in the input.

What does this mean for HS? Many HS are often exposed to the minority language only until around the age of 3 or 4 when they start school and get massively exposed to the majority language, coinciding with a decline in the L1 input.[11] It is possible that since monolingual children up to 5 years old still have problems with these structures, HS may not have sufficient time to acquire them which can result in incomplete knowledge of this grammatical area.[12] In this case, and for this grammatical structure, we can safely say that HS grammars could be incomplete (scenario iv) because the bilingual children have not had a chance to learn all the available cues.

Based on the discussions in this section, our view is that generative research explains and legitimises the use of 'incomplete' as an appropriate characterisation of one of the many possible outcomes of language acquisition, including HS grammars, although it is not the only one. In short, the argument against position II) from Section 3 is that aligned terms are used to describe parallels in the grammars of child speakers, L2 speakers, and heritage speakers. The scientific usefulness of the terms is consistent across the three groups. However, the likelihood of any objections to such terms and the apparent potential for negative impacts arising from their use is quite different for each of those groups; similar terms in L1 acquisition might equally be criticised on the same grounds, but they never are. Most prominently for our focus in this paper, there seems to be a particular issue concerning the status of HS either as immigrants or belonging to a minority ethnic group.

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[11] We do not wish to imply that this is the case for all heritage speakers, but it seems to be the case for a large number (Benmamoun et al. 2013; Meisel 2014). We use this as an example of a real scenario where acquisition of a structure would be affected by insufficient input.

[12] Our view seems to agree with that of Meisel (2014) in that we cannot deny that insufficient input does affect the grammars of heritage speakers (see also Flores and Barbosa 2014). Meisel calls for future research on incomplete acquisition to be more rigorous with what is taken to represent insufficient input to be in each particular context.

4. Why 'different' is not good enough

Both Montrul (2016) and Polinsky (2018b) have recently advocated avoiding the term incomplete acquisition altogether, as it can "unintentionally lead to a negative interpretation and portrayal of the ethnic minorities who speak these languages (Montrul 2016: 225)."[13] This is also reflected in Benmamoun et al. (2013b) when the authors admit that although they think that incomplete acquisition is scientifically valid, it would be better not to use it. For us, the important question is whether there is another term which can be an adequate substitution.

Benmamoun et al. (2013b) and Montrul (2016) argue that 'divergent' is a better choice than 'incomplete' when referring to the grammars of heritage speakers, as it is more neutral and does not carry the same negative connotations. For their part, K&R (p.16) propose using 'differential acquisition' instead of 'incomplete acquisition.' Similarly, Scontras et al. (2015) have argued in favour of using the term 'divergent attainment,' instead of 'incomplete acquisition.' We understand that by 'divergent' these authors mean 'different,' which is in line with K&R's line of argument.

We see some potential problems with these three proposals (see also Silva-Corvalán, 2018). One issue is that divergent means different indeed, but different and absent (incomplete) are two different things (see Sorace, 1993). If a feature is not acquired, then it is not completely appropriate to say that the grammar is divergent or different, as the term does not provide an accurate description of the phenomenon. If K&R think that 'incomplete acquisition' should not be used because it is theoretically inaccurate, then the same should be said about 'different' which lacks explanatory import and is descriptively nebulous in that it does not provide an accurate depiction of the phenomenon. In our view, the term 'different' is not an effective substitute for 'incomplete', since a grammar that is different from another might be incomplete or might be complete (see discussion in Section 3.3). In other words, we argue against adopting a position that approaches II) on the grounds that adopting a more 'neutral' but descriptively diluted term ultimately risks downplaying key insights of generative research in identifying and accounting for grammatical properties of speakers in monolingual, bilingual, and L2 contexts, both in adults and children.

Nevertheless, the question remains to be addressed: is it legitimate to still use terms such as 'incomplete' or 'attrited'? The discussion above presents a problem in that scientific considerations lead us to position I) over II), while we must recognise that using terms which may appear to be outwardly negative or judgemental to a certain extent invites misconstrual and misinterpretation of our field. Moreover, there may be potential for unintended and unjustified negative impact upon the very people whose language we want to study and understand. If the alternative is the descriptively inferior characterisation of bilingual/multilingual grammars as simply 'different' while we know that there are alternatives that do a better job, then it is surely the right time to have an open discussion about the grounds on which we make that terminological shift.[14]

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[13] See Silva-Corvalán (2018) for a different view.

[14] A further issue concerns the adequacy of the terms themselves in removing the negative connotation. For example, if the change is justified to avoid a negative portrayal of HS, then we are doubtful that the term 'divergent' will offer

A possible resolution may lie in the intermediate position, as follows:

III)   Researchers should consider the connotations and implications of the terms they use, and while prioritising their scientific effectiveness in describing/explaining the object of our study, all else being equal in this respect, select terms that are as neutral as possible and/or are not very likely to be negatively misconstrued by the general public.

This position concedes that we as researchers have a duty to be aware of potential indirect effects of (misinterpretation of) our terminology, and minimise this as far as possible by avoiding them, if there are alternatives that will do just as well or better. For instance, we invite scholars to consider the potential negative impact of using 'incomplete' in titles and headlines whose exact scientific meaning can easily be misinterpreted. It does not mean, however, that we dilute our theoretical vocabulary and put this ahead of our scientific objectives. The benefit is that even the more 'pragmatic' position III) remains consistent with the matters raised in Section 2 (concerning the object of study in the field being mental grammars and not speakers) and in Section 4 (concerning the risk of adopting descriptively inferior terms). The difference is that this position, rather than I), would entail a degree of comparison of some of the terms available. This could be done more or less formally, and our aim in this paper is only to discuss this in the case of the term 'incomplete', as we have in Section 3, where it was argued that 'incomplete' is more accurate than the alternatives proposed in the recent literature. However, it is then necessary to reflect further on other related terms such as 'different', 'divergent', 'defective', and consider whether the contexts in which they are applied typically meet the guideline for use that we propose in III).

5. Concluding remarks

One question seems very relevant right now: how do we describe the process and outcome of heritage language acquisition? Do we need to revise the terminology we use in our field? Based on the evidence reviewed in this piece our answer is no, as the term incomplete acquisition can be legitimised by means of the theoretical model we assume. We have argued that describing some aspect of L1, L2 and bilingual grammars as incomplete or deficient is necessary in order to achieve a full understanding of the language acquisition process. The terminology used is not—nor can it be construed as being—the basis for any judgement on the speakers themselves. Furthermore, replacing the existing terminology with imprecise or nebulous terms will not help us getting close to understanding how language acquisition takes place across different contexts and in varying conditions.

Since both complete acquisition based on attrited input and incomplete acquisition are possible for HS (scenarios ii and iv in Section 3.3), researchers would need to employ more sophisticated research methods to discern between these two possibilities. Research investigating the grammatical knowledge of HS would benefit from including at least two control groups, a group of monolingual speakers and a group of speakers representing the parental/community input that the HS receive in that context (see e.g. Montrul, Bhatt & Girju 2015). This could help clarify whether properties not instantiated in HS grammars were present in the input to begin with.

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a satisfactory outcome in this regard. The same may be said about using 'different', although it appears to be slightly less problematic.

Finally, our aim with this piece is to contribute to an important discussion on the choice of some terminology in our field which K&R have laid out. We hope that our arguments stimulate more fruitful discussions on this very relevant issue in our field.

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