New perspectives on the 'incomplete acquisition' debate in heritage language bilingualism

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What is the debate about?

- At the heart of the matter is a question of terminology.
- Not a trivial debate.
  - Words matter! (in academia and beyond)
  - Beyond that, the debate reflects a very real dilemma in describing and ultimately explaining heritage speakers' language abilities.
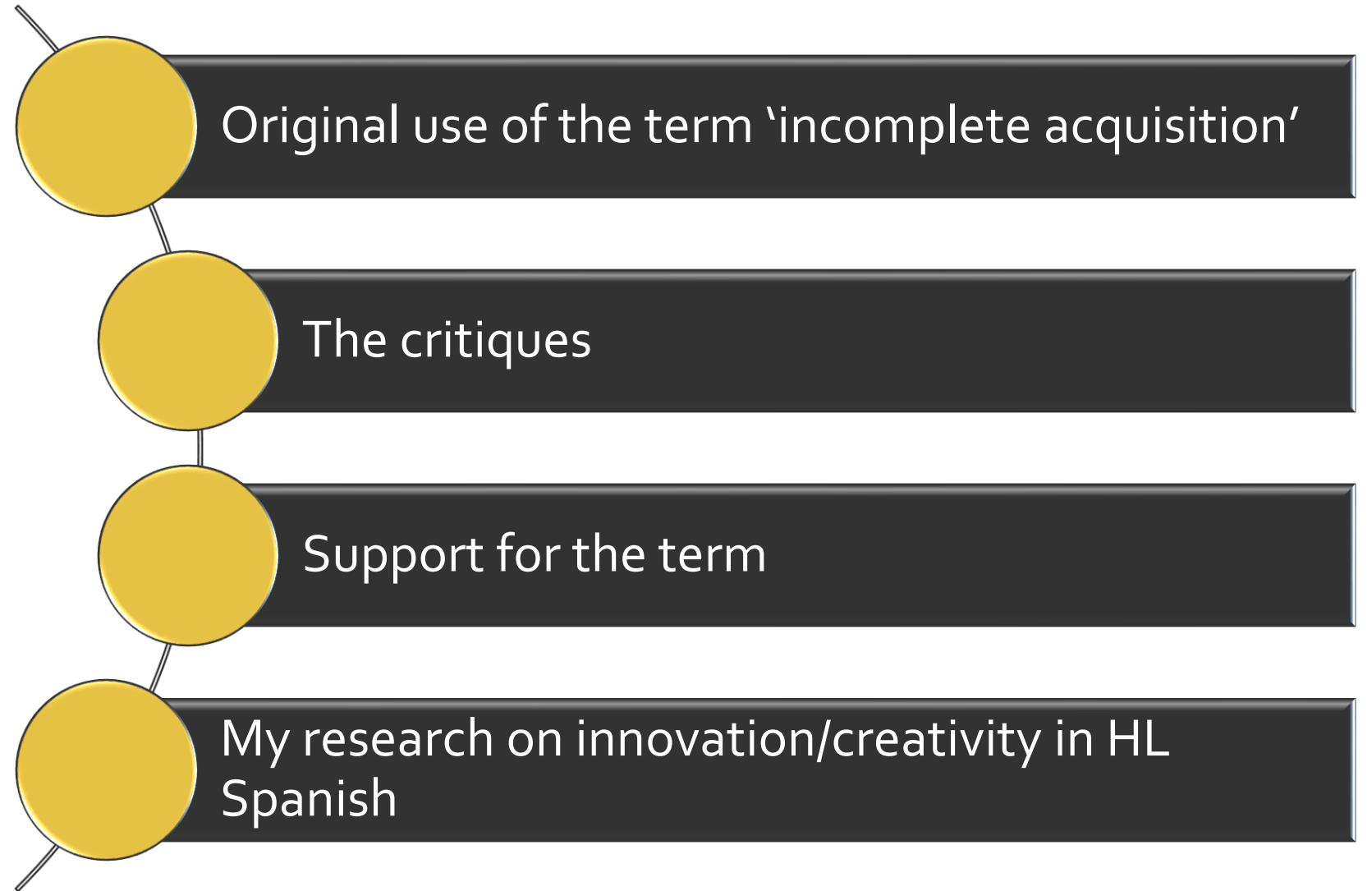
Think of something incomplete

Top collocates for "incomplete"

- Incomplete information
- Incomplete data
- Incomplete pass
- Incomplete picture
- Incomplete understanding
- Incomplete combustion
- Incomplete knowledge
- Incomplete sentences

From the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

Overview of today's presentation

- Original use of the term 'incomplete acquisition'
- The critiques
- Support for the term
- My research on innovation/creativity in HL Spanish

A starting point

- Heritage speakers (HS) acquire language X from birth, naturalistically in the home. The development of this language is supported by input from family and, sometimes/to some degree, by input in the community.

- HS typically experience a significant reduction in language X input when they begin formal schooling (Language Y is the majority language).

- When we study HS as college-age adults, we are seeing the end result of their linguistic experience.

The end result (ultimate attainment)

First generation speakers

HS

Age-matched peers in country of origin
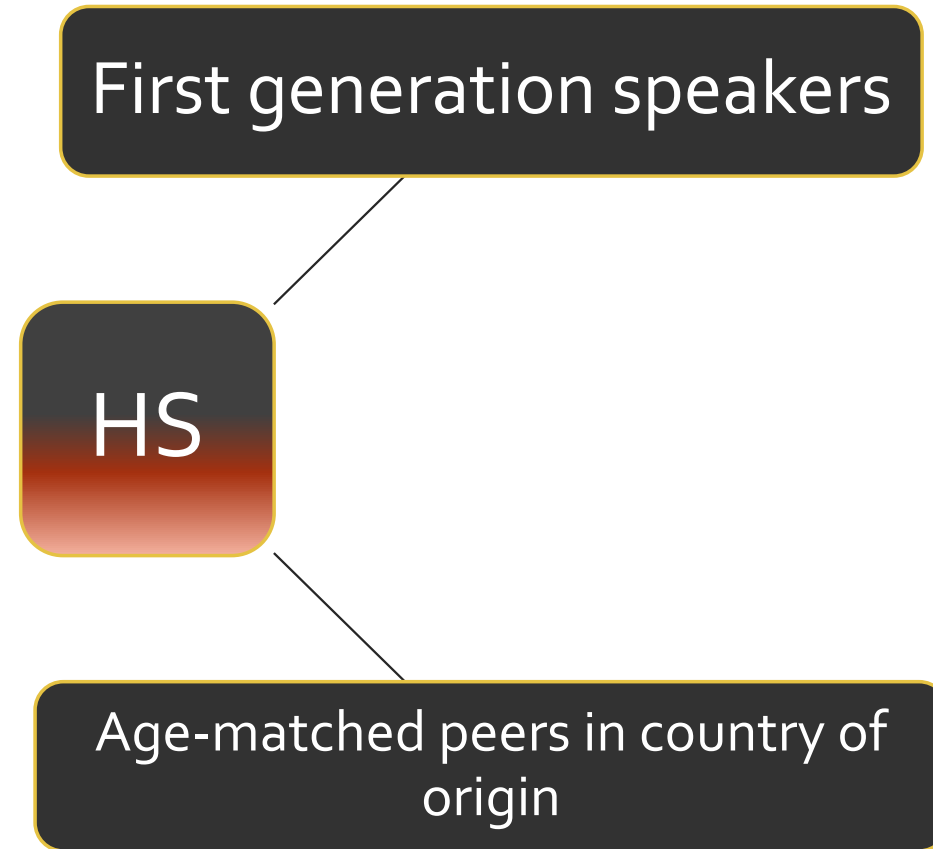
- We know from 100+ empirical studies that HS typically display structural changes in their grammatical system.
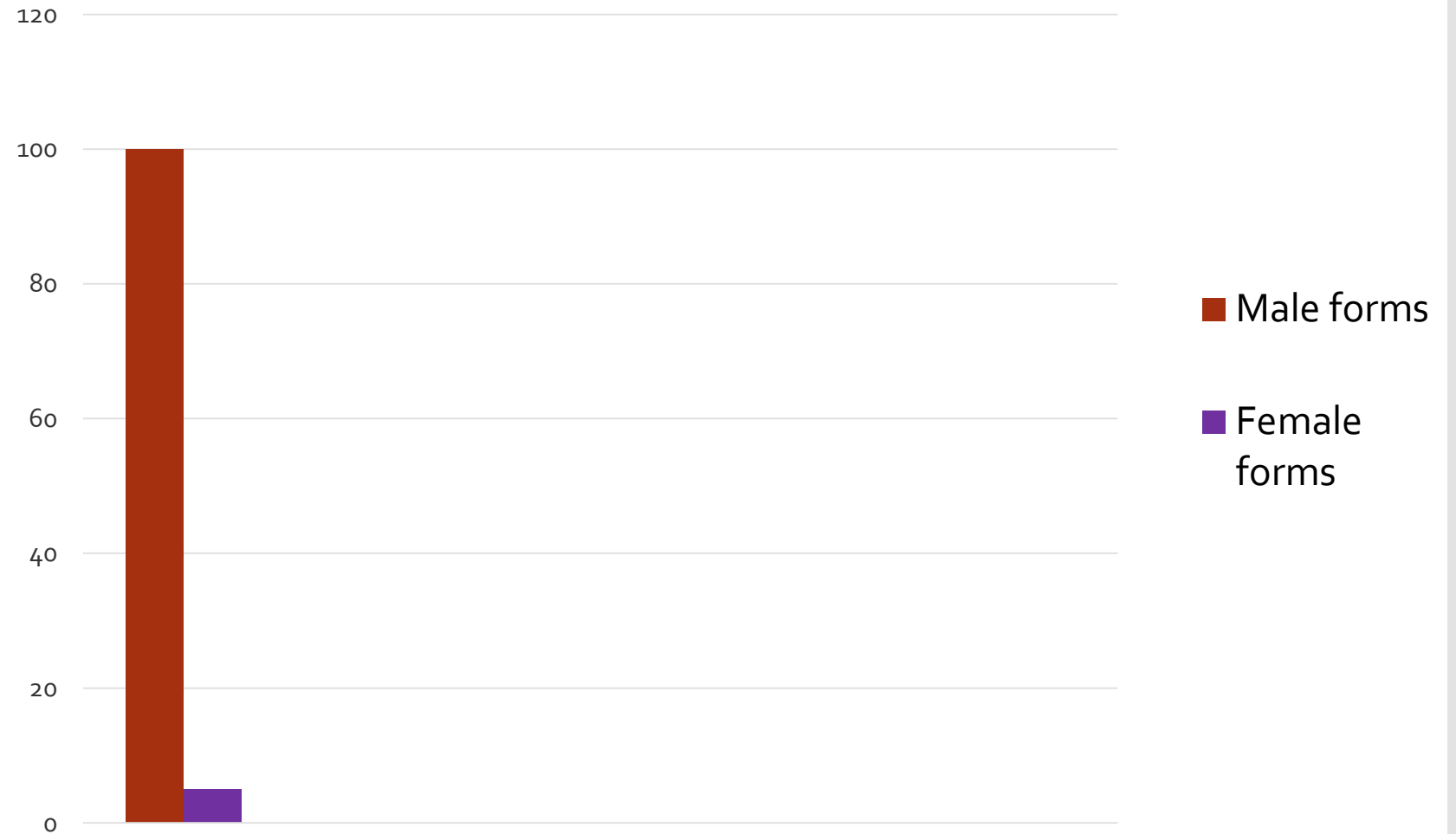
HSs are different from the baseline

One example: Polish verb inflection

- Polish verbs in past tense are inflected for gender.
- A simple question like "What did you do today?" depends on who the hearer is.
  - Co zrobiłeś? (addressed to male)
  - Co zrobiłaś? (addressed to female)

What might reduced input look like?

(Assume that male HS is an only child)

Hypothetical: Exemplars heard by male HS in one day

- Male forms
- Female forms

Results of reduced input

- HS of Polish (age 7) uses male-inflected forms for ALL verbs regardless of the hearer.
- This is clearly different from the baseline; age-matched peers in Poland mark verbs for gender in the past tense.
- And yet, this reduced grammatical system is a perfectly logical outcome of the input the HS has been exposed to.

Is there hope?

- Will the HS eventually acquire this feature of the grammar?
- It depends on a 'critical mass' of input and the complexity of the structure.
- Initial differences across groups (bilingual versus monolingual children) may be neutralized as children get older (Gathercole, 2007).
  - Miami bilingual children in grades 2 and 5 compared to monolinguals in Lima.
  - See also Gathercole & Thomas (2009)

Is there hope?

- For simpler structures→ bilinguals will take longer but eventually catch up to monolinguals

- For more complex (opaque) structures→ bilinguals may not catch up

- "It may thus be the case that for some of these structures acquisition will be incomplete—'timed off the map', so to speak" (Gathercole 2007: 241-242).

Incomplete acquisition

- "Developmental delays that start in childhood never catch up, and as the heritage child becomes an adult, the eventual adult grammar does not reach native-like development" (Benmamoun, Montrul, & Polinsky, 2013: 166-167).

- Incomplete acquisition, broadly speaking, refers to differences in ultimate attainment that include grammatical reductions, simplifications, and reanalyses.

A key clarification

- Incomplete acquisition is not an indictment of the individual!

- Montrul (and others) have maintained that incomplete acquisition occurs as a result of insufficient input in childhood.
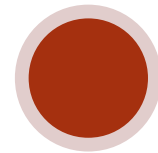
The critiques

- Pascual y Cabo and Rothman (2012)
- Kupisch and Rothman (2018)
- Otheguy (2016)

- den Dikken (2018), Otheguy and Zentella (2012), Putnam and Sánchez (2013), Viner (2018), among others.

Incomplete = a value judgment?

- Pascual y Cabo & Rothman (2012) and Kupisch & Rothman (2018).

- The term "incomplete acquisition" may reflect a negative evaluation of the linguistic abilities of the bilingual speaker (even if unintended).
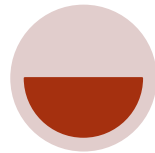
Incomplete =Deficient?   Complete

The critique, in more detail

- Pacual y Cabo & Rothman (2012) argue that the term is **imprecise** and **misleading**.

1. It is "virtually impossible" to tease apart incomplete acquisition from attrition.

- When studying adults, we cannot go back in time to determine if something did not develop (incomplete acquisition) or if it was acquired and then eroded (attrition).

The critique, in more detail

- Pacual y Cabo & Rothman (2012) continued:

2) The input that HS receive may be qualitatively different from the input in monolingual environments.

- Heritage speakers receive input from native speakers who may already be undergoing attrition themselves.

The default expectation

- "The monolingual and bilingual realities are distinctive, and so the default expectation, should be that HSs would demonstrate discrete paths and ultimate attainments."

- Pascual y Cabo & Rothman (2012: 454).

Kupisch & Rothman (2018)

HL as the medium of instruction, not the target

- Schooling and literacy give individuals a very different experience with the heritage language, both qualitatively and quantitatively.
- "Extra high quality input" in formal schooling
  - Wider range of grammatical constructions and vocabulary
  - Properties of the standard language
  - Exposure to instructions in the heritage language

Kupisch & Rothman (2018)

- "Linguistic completeness of any grammar, heritage or otherwise, cannot be determined by comparison to another grammar" (pg. 10).

- Analogy: English is not "incomplete" in comparison to German.

- So is it fair to expect HSs to wind up with grammars like native monolinguals?

Theoretically flawed

Potentially harmful

Otheguy (2016)

- Otheguy (2016) argues against incompleteness and in favor of dialectal difference.

- "What we are faced with is not unsuccessfuly acquired languages, but rather normal, successfully acquired versions of Russian and Turkish that are **simply different** from what the parents brought to their new settings from Russia and Turkey" (p. 1).

Otheguy (2016): Simply different

- Otheguy: example of the Spanish subjunctive.
- Interviews with first- and second-generation Latin Americans in NYC (Bookhamer, 2013); see also Viner (2018).
- 1st generation speakers displayed **categorical** or near categorical use of the subjunctive in five of the ten contexts.
- For 2nd generation speakers there was only one categorical contexts; the rest were **variable**.

Simply different?

- Subjunctive in future reference context
- *When they come...* (future reference):
- 97% subjunctive in 1st generation (*Cuando vengan...*)
- 76% subjunctive in 2nd generation (*Cuando vengan... / cuando vienen...*)

How do we interpret this difference?

Otheguy (2016)

- The notion of 'incomplete acquisition' would require us to articulate a counterpart notion of 'completeness'.
- "Strictly speaking, no grammar can ever be said to be completely acquired" (Otheguy & Zentella 2012: 202).

Support for the concept of incomplete acquisition: Silva-Corvalán (2018)

- Silva-Corvalán (2018) defends the concept of incomplete acquisition, with emphasis on two points:

1. Incompleteness is not a mechanism but rather an outcome or stage of development (incompleteness is not a causal factor).

2. Incompleteness does not affect the entire system, but rather certain grammatical domains.

Silva-Corvalán (2018)

- If only two sides of the triangle were copied, it would be difficult to consider it a complete triangle.

Silva-Corvalán (2018)

- Crucially, any claims of incomplete acquisition must be done with reference to the grammar of the input (and the "input providers")
- Silva-Corvalán emphasizes that acquisition has not been completed when a grammatical domain lacks elements or features *present in the learner's input*. (emphasis added)

Silva-Corvalán (2018)

- Examples from Spanish:
- Subject pronoun realization
- Verbal morphology (including perfective-imperfective contrast, subjunctive forms)
- But **not**: Placement of clitic pronouns

So where are we now?

- Montrul (2016) acknowledges that the term can "unintentionally lead to a negative interpretation and portrayl of the ethnic minorities who speak these languages" (p. 225).

- Many authors are now opting to use the term "divergent grammar" or "divergent attainment" (Scontras et al., 2015)

- Montrul (2016) has also used the term "acquisition without mastery."

So where are we now?

- As a result, we have a more nuanced understanding of L1 acquisition→ that language acquisition does not stop at age 5.

- Montrul (2014): "Although pre-school children have sophisticated knowledge of the basic structure of their language, this does not mean that language development is complete by age 5 or 6" (pg. 182).

- Researchers are now asking: What happens in language development during the school age period (i.e., age 6-10)?

My recent research

- I've chosen to deliberately target an area of language that undergoes significant growth in the school-age period: Derivational morphology (narrowly) and morphological awareness (broadly).

Word families

formal (adj)

formalidad (n)

formalizar (v)

formalmente (adv)

informal (adj)
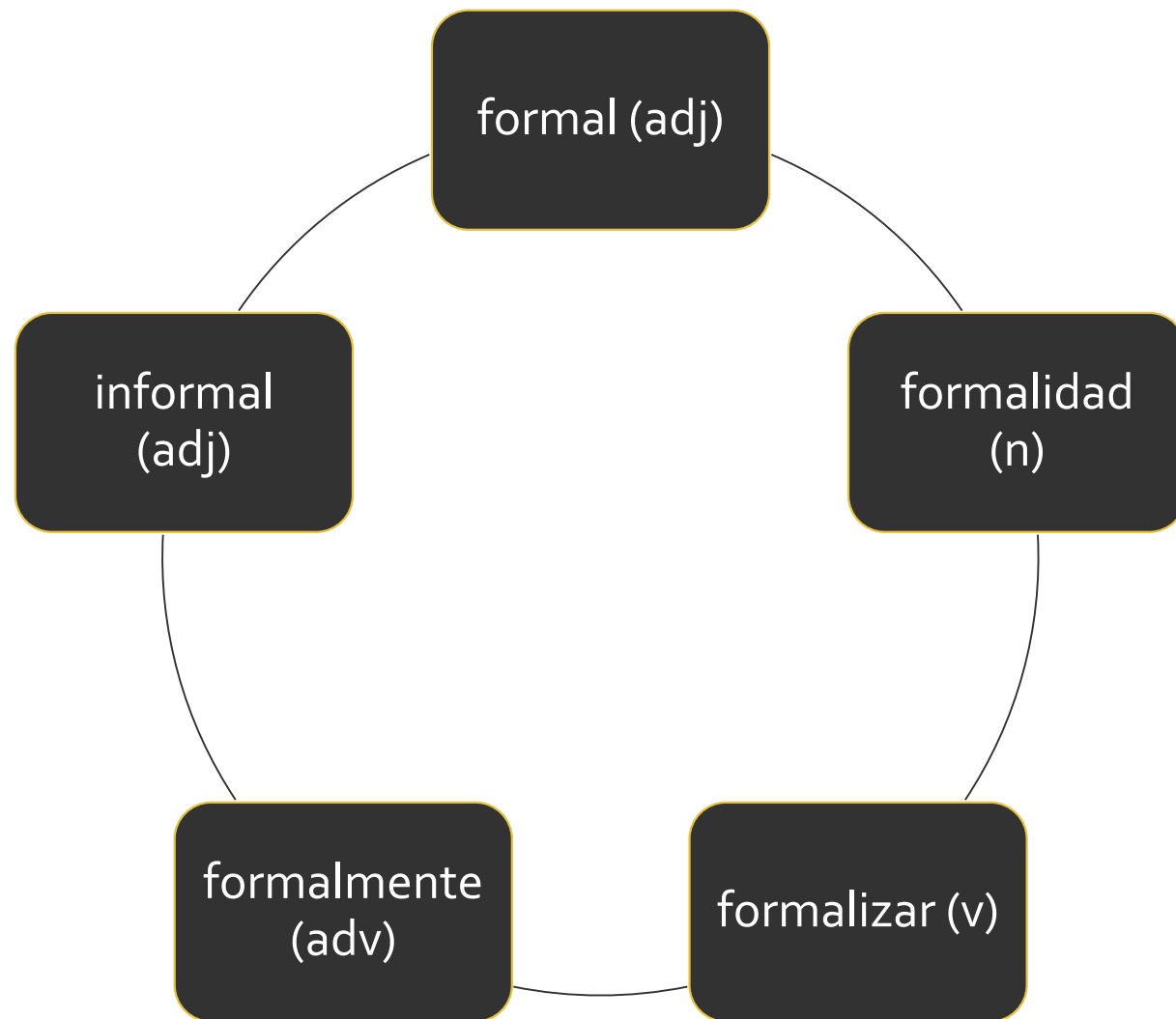
The study

- Linguistic target: Spanish complex words with derivational suffixes.

- Some of the words were **conventional** (existing) and some were **creative** (innovative).

- The creative words all came from heritage speakers themselves in a pilot study involving elicited production.

The study

- Production data, while interesting, is limited because:

- We don't know if these are idiosyncratic forms, i.e., limited to one or two individuals.

- It doesn't tell us anything about knowledge of the conventional form.
    - Example: Participant produced AMARGUEZ (*bitterness-creative*)
    - Do they also know AMARGURA? (*conventional*)

Stimuli (examples)

- Conventional items
- Formalidad ("reliability")
- Escasez ("shortage")
- Amargura ("bitterness")

Formaleza

Escasidad

Amarguez

Hypothesis

- Knowledge of the conventional form should block or pre-empt the creative form.
- Principle of Contrast (Clark, 1987)
  - Established forms take priority over innovative ones provided that they convey the same meaning.
  - *longness
    - length
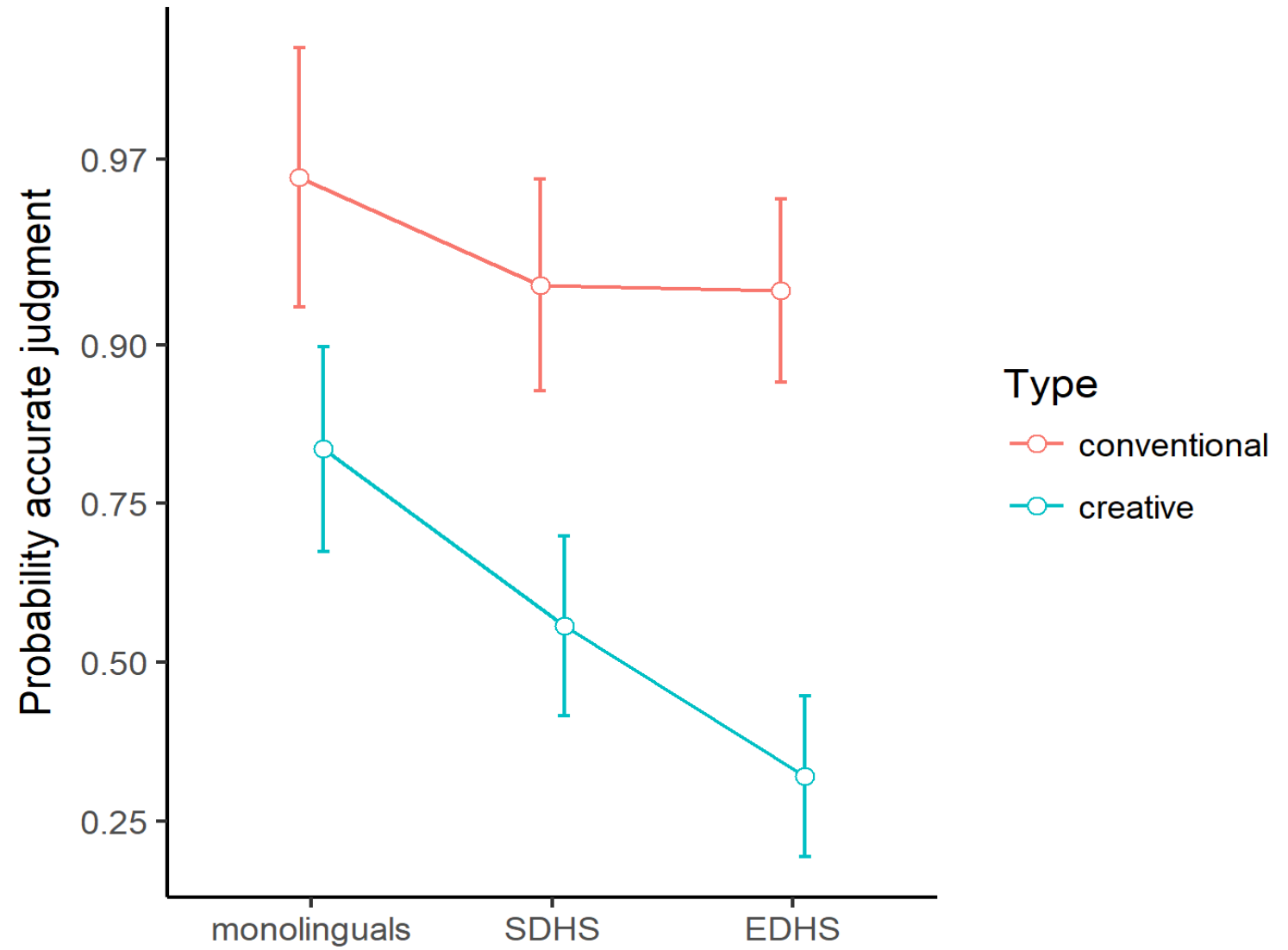 - *furiosity
    - fury

Participants

- Three groups
- Monolingual native speakers in Mexico (n=18)
- Spanish-dominant heritage speakers (n=21)
- English-dominant heritage speakers (n=36)

Experiment

- Speeded acceptability judgment task (AJT)
- Words embedded in sentences that made sense.
- Yes/No judgment followed by confidence rating.

Results

Summary of the results

- Both groups of heritage speakers accepted the **conventional** words with a high degree of accuracy; the mean scores were approaching 90% for both groups.

- Both groups of heritage speakers also accepted the **creative** words to some degree (they were significantly less likely to reject creative words than monolingual Spanish speakers).

- The English-dominant HS group is the most accepting of the creative forms.

A possible explanation

- Heritage speakers seem to be operating under looser restrictions on synonymy, such that two forms with the same meaning are not necessarily ruled out.

- This may be a general consequence of a bilingual reality in which English borrowings express meanings for which Spanish conventional forms already exist.

solicitud

aplicación

Coming full circle

- The heritage speaker grammar is less constrained—productivity goes unchecked and potential forms don't get discarded.

- A creative word like **formaleza** (based on analogy to *naturaleza, pobreza, riqueza, destreza, delicadeza,* etc.) is allowed, and co-exists with **formalidad**.

Is this incompleteness?

There is probably more than one outcome of reduced input during L1 acquisition.

Reduced input

Incompleteness

Innovation

Variability
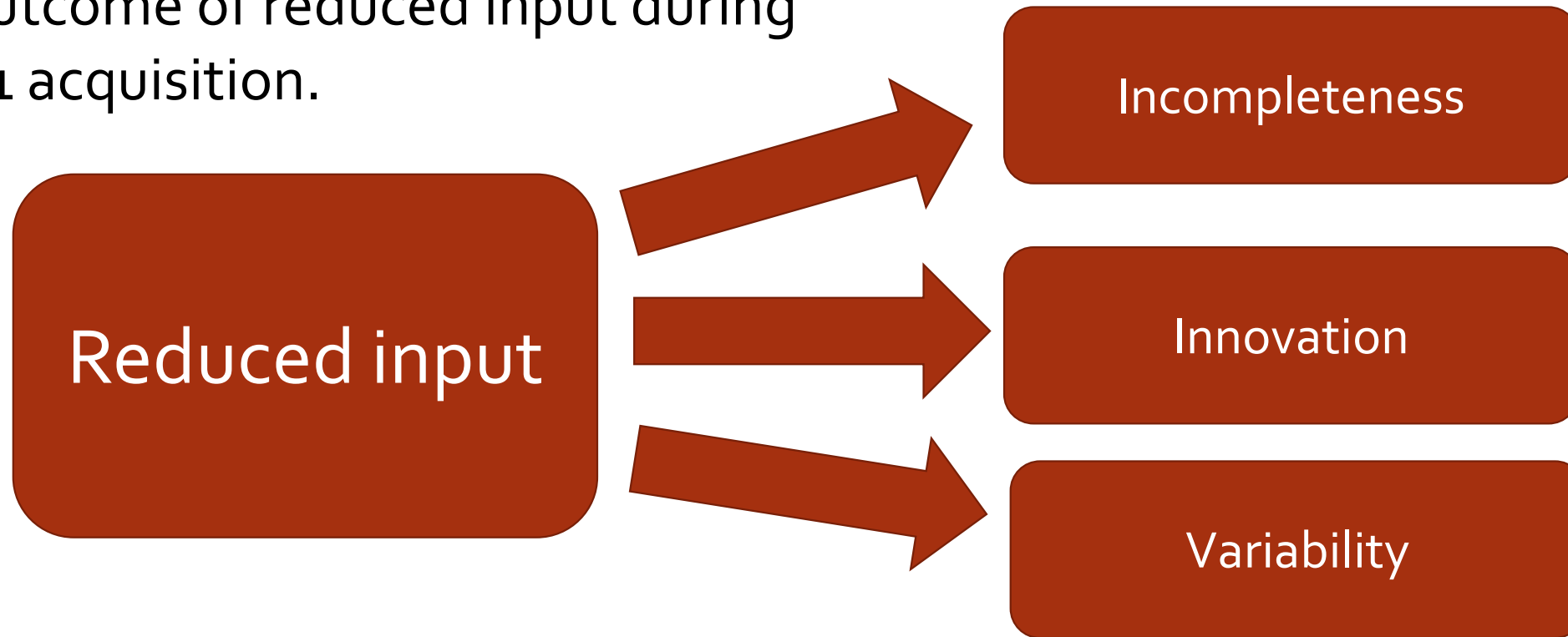
What does all this mean for pedagogy?

- In principle, the term 'incomplete acquisition' should have no bearing on matters of pedagogical importance.
- Theoretical term with limited scope (morphosyntax); heritage language pedagogy is necessarily much broader.
- But inevitably, theoretical terms can (and do) impact public perceptions and pedagogical discussions.

Relevance to pedagogy

- Another question to ask is, "What would heritage speakers themselves think of this term?"

- Kupisch and Rothman (2018) argue that, "We cannot imagine that any HS appreciates being told that their grammar is incomplete…" (p. 15).

Heritage speakers who become heritage learners

- Heritage learners know that their language is not the same as monolinguals.
- They know they have "gaps" in their ability to use the language (although they generally cannot diagnose them in the same way as researchers would).

In his own words: Daniel Alarcón, Radio Ambulante (NPR)

1. "Mi vocabulario empezó a desaparecer. Mi gramática, siempre intuitiva, se podría por el desuso."

2. "Me miraron con caras perplejas y yo me sonrojé. Sabía que había dicho algo mal, pero no tenía muy claro cómo arreglarlo, porque no tenía las palabras."

3. "Tenía la sensación constante de estar quedando mal. Era una sensación de impotencia, de no tener las herramientas necesarias para demostrar que no era un imbécil."

http://radioambulante.org/audio/escuchadme-terraqueos

Concluding thoughts

- There is general consensus that HS adults display linguistic abilities that are different from their parents (G1) and also from monolingual age-matched peers.

- I have argued that incompleteness is not the only possible outcome of reduced input.

- In any case, I would caution against the use of term in HL pedagogy (not its original domain).

More to come

- The debate is likely to continue!
- See Domínguez, Hicks, and Slabakova (forthcoming) in *Studies in Second Language Acquisition.*
- Position paper followed by responses.

Questions and/or comments? Thank you!

- The full study, including confidence data, is forthcoming in *Applied Psycholinguistics*.

- The study on creative words is forthcoming in a special volume of *Language Learning*.