Structural Innovation in Heritage Odia Adjectives under Telugu Contact: From Atomic aPs to CPs

Adjectives constitute a structurally and semantically complex category, often ranking among the most vulnerable lexical classes in heritage grammars (Polinsky, 2005). Given their status as syntactic adjuncts, adjectives tend to be structurally peripheral and thus more prone to variability and reanalysis. This study investigates adjectival restructuring in Heritage Odia (HO), an Eastern Indo-Aryan language, spoken in the Telugu-dominant context of Hyderabad. Telugu, a Dravidian language, exhibits typologically distinct adjectival strategies, providing a contact environment rich in structural contrast. Despite sustained exposure to atomic adjectival forms in the home domain, **HO** speakers exhibit systematic reanalysis of both attributive and predicative adjectives. These patterns suggest that adjectival domains in **HO** are not merely sites of simplification, but loci of contact-induced syntactic innovation.

Against this backdrop, the study addresses the core question of how susceptible adjectival structure is to heritage-induced change. Specifically, it asks how typological contrasts between Odia's aP-based modifiers and Telugu's CP-based Reduced Relative Clauses(RRC) (cf. Cinque, 2010) shape the restructuring of adjectives in Heritage Odia. This study challenges the assumption that syntactic change in heritage languages is limited to simplification, showing instead that contact can also give rise to systematic complexification through reanalysis.

Methodology Data were collected from 16 speakers of Heritage Odia through a multi-stage process: semi-structured elicitation tasks involving translation prompts and visual stimuli; a 15-item acceptability judgment task (rated from least to most acceptable); and follow-up metalinguistic probing to assess intuitions about the naturalness and completeness of adjectival constructions.

Findings from Heritage Odia

1. Attributive Adjectives: From aPs to CPs In Baseline Odia(BO), attributive adjectives are typically aPs within the DP, optionally marked by the suffixal adjectivizer *-ia* (cf. (1)). In contrast, **HO** displays the usage of periphrastic participial constructions resembling RRCs in addition to **BO** structures (cf. (2)).

(1) dardh-**ia**   loka
    beard-ADJZ person

    'Bearded person.' (Baseline Odia)

(2) dardhi-th-iba   loka
    beard-be-INFV person

    'The man who has a beard.' (Heritage Odia)

This shift reflects a reanalysis where adjectival modification is increasingly mapped onto relativizing templates, indicating an *incipient* CP-ization of aPs. This reanalysis could possibly be driven by: (i)Telugu contact, where adjectival modifiers often involve overt relativizers (e.g., *-ayina* structures) (cf. (3)) or (ii) the need for more input for *-ia* to be overtly marked in a^0.

(3) aa   teliv-**ay-in-a**   ammayi na celli
    That smart-(to)become-PERF-RELZ girl   my sister

    'That smart girl is my sister.' (Baseline Telugu)

2. Predicative Adjectives: Phantom Copula Expectation In contrast to the structural reanalysis observed in attributive adjectival domains, predicative adjectives in **HO**

show signs of grammatical instability not in form, but in *perceived acceptability*. In **BO**, predicative adjectives regularly appear without overt copular support, particularly in the present tense as seen in (4). These structures, though morphosyntactically simple and grammatical in **BO**, are frequently judged 'incomplete or deficient' by **HO** speakers citing the absence of: (i) the classifier *-ta* and (ii) an overt copula *acch-i 'be.PRES-3SG'*. HO speakers prefer the structure (5) with an overt copula.

(4) Se   jhia sundara
    That girl pretty
    'That girl is pretty.'   (Baseline Odia)

(5) Se   jhia-ta sundara
    That girl-CLF pretty
    acch-i
    be.PRES-3SG
    'That girl is pretty.'   (Hertiage Odia)

Given this structural pattern, an important question arises: Is the overt copula in predicative adjectival constructions in Heritage Odia the result of reduced input in the heritage setting, or does it reflect transfer from the L2-dominant language, Telugu, which systematically employs an overt copula in such contexts (see (6))?

(6) aa   aamayi andam-**ay-in-a-di**
    that girl   beauty-(to)become-PERF-REL-3FSG
    'That girl is pretty.' (Baseline Telugu)

Discussion Polinsky (2005) identifies adjectives as the weakest among contentive word classes in heritage grammars, often undergoing attrition in comprehension and simplification in production. In Heritage Odia (HO), however, I observe the opposite trend: structural enrichment, where simple aPs are reanalyzed as CPs resembling RRCs, as in (8). This structural shift occurs despite consistent input of atomic adjective forms in the home domain, pointing to contact-induced restructuring under L2 dominance from Telugu. These CPs (such as (8)) frequently co-occur with degree modifiers like *besi* 'very', a canonical diagnostic of adjectival projection (Baker 2003).

(7) besi/ati budhimaan jhia
    very   intelligent girl
    'The very intelligent girl.' (BO)

(8) besi/ati budhimaan-th-iba jhia
    very   intelligent-be-INFV girl
    'The very intelligent girl.' (HO)

I propose that such reanalysis reflects not attrition but innovation under contact, where the grammar accommodates increased structural complexity. These findings challenge the assumption that heritage grammars prioritize economy, highlighting instead how contact and internal grammatical dynamics jointly drive syntactic reconfiguration.

Selected References Baker, Mark C. 2003. *Lexical Categories: Verbs, Nouns and Adjectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ‖ Cinque, Guglielmo. 2010. *The Syntax of Adjectives: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. ‖ Polinsky, Maria. 2005. Word class distinctions in an incomplete grammar. In *Perspectives on Language and Language Development*, ed. Dorit Diskin Ravid and Hava Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot, 419–436. Boston, MA: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-7911-7_30. ‖Polinsky, Maria, and Gregory Scontras. 2020. Understanding heritage languages. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 23(1): 4–20.