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Grammatical gender (hereafter gender) – especially in systems (like Romance languages) that typically have a relatively transparent system – is acquired early by monolingual children (e.g., Kupisch, Müller & Cantone, 2002). Yet gender shows variability in (some) heritage speaker bilinguals (HSs). In a HS context, it is vulnerable for low proficiency speakers generally and especially when the majority language lacks gender (e.g., Polinsky, 2008). Conversely, gender seems to be on target when acquired in HS individuals with high proficiency, especially when the majority language has gender (e.g., Bianchi, 2013). Herein, we examined sources of potential morphological variability in Italian HSs living in Germany (a language pairing where both have gender, albeit with important differences), with a focus on morphological markedness (masculine as the default) and task type (explicit vs. implicit knowledge).

Fifty-four adult Italian HSs living in Germany and 40 homeland Italian speakers completed an online Self-Paced Reading Task and an offline Grammaticality Judgment Task. Both tasks involved sentences with grammatical and ungrammatical noun-adjective agreement, manipulating markedness. In grammatical sentences, both groups showed a markedness effect: shorter reading times (RTs) and higher accuracy for sentences containing masculine nouns as compared to sentences with feminine nouns. In ungrammatical sentences, although both groups were sensitive to ungrammaticality, only HSs showed a markedness effect, that is, they had significantly longer RTs and higher accuracy when violations were realized on feminine adjectives. Proficiency in the HL was a significant predictor of accuracy and RTs at the individual level. Taken together, results indicate that HSs acquire and process gender in a qualitatively similar way to homeland native speakers. However, RT evidence seems to suggest that at least under particular experimental methods, markedness considerations are more prevalent for HSs resulting in a speed-accuracy tradeoff.