

HERITAGE LANGUAGES AND THEIR SPEAKERS

Maria Polinsky and Jason Rothman
University of Maryland and Reading University

General remarks

What constitutes the knowledge of a language? This question has been at the core of linguistic theorizing for the last forty years. The main emphasis over these years has been on delineating particular linguistic phenomena in terms of primary data (linguistic description) and accounting for these phenomena in a principled manner (theory construction). The data for such theory construction were mainly drawn from introspection by trained linguists or informal elicitations from native speakers of various languages.

Over the past few decades, as linguistics has gotten closer to cognitive science, new experimental approaches to language has become increasingly available; the results of experimental studies of language phenomena provide new valuable information which can be used in theory construction. At the same time, researchers have started paying more attention to linguistic populations that somehow deviate from the Platonic golden standard of what a language should be; such populations have included people with speech disorders, brain injury, or special language impairment. In the work with those populations, linguists have tried to identify what aspects of language structure are robust and what can be more subject to change. Recently, another special population has come to the attention of theoretical and experimental linguists: heritage speakers.

Course Description

This course is about heritage languages and their speakers—individuals who are raised speaking a minority language at home but are exposed to a dominant, majority language outside the home. This dominant language becomes their main language in adolescence and adulthood. The minority or heritage language, despite being first in the order of acquisition, winds up being differentially represented, processed and used as compared to monolinguals of the same language. The world is full of heritage speaker bilinguals and in certain geographical contexts they constitute a significant percentage of pupils who populate language classes. For example, about one third of all American college students come from homes where a language other than English is spoken, and in the last 15-20 years, there has been a growing interest on the part of young adults in re-learning their heritage language during college years or after that.

The study of heritage languages provide researchers with a novel tool for understanding how a grammar can be acquired under minimal input: what constitutes bare grammar, what constitutes sufficient if minimal input, and what are the areas of strength and vulnerability in language?

We will examine heritage languages from two main perspectives:

1. SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE: What cultural and social factors give rise to the phenomenon of heritage language? How does being a heritage language speaker compare to being bilingual or multilingual? What is the connection between the rise of heritage languages and language death? How can a heritage language be revitalized?

2. LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE: How do the linguistic properties of heritage languages differ from the linguistic properties of their fully acquired counterparts? What do these differences tell us about the universal principles of language structure, the relationship between language and thought (linguistic relativity), and the nature of language acquisition?

Outcomes

The goal is for the students to learn how to work with heritage language speakers, how to collect new data, and how to analyze the existing data.

Here are the core research issues in heritage language study:

- i. The relevance of heritage languages: what aspects of language structure and linguistic theory can be informed by our study of heritage languages?
- ii. Addressing the Heritage Bilingual Paradox, that is, uncovering the set of variables (and their interactions) that contribute to/account for the typical “different” outcomes of heritage language acquisition. Why are HS so different from monolingual grammatical outcomes?
- iii. The role of the dominant language: comparison between existing accounts of English-dominant with heritage language speakers and their German-dominant counterparts
- iv. The developmental trajectory: comparison between adult heritage language speakers and child bilinguals (“future heritage speakers”)
- v. Heritage language and L2: similarities and differences between heritage language speakers and proficiency-matched L2 speakers.

Syllabus

As you study the readings listed below, please keep notes on how these readings can inform the core research issues (i-v) listed above.

If more than one reading per day is assigned please follow the order in which they are given below

Day 1. Introducing heritage languages. What makes them special and why we should study them.

Readings:

- Benmamoun, E., Montrul, S. & Polinsky, M. (2013). Heritage languages and their speakers: Opportunities and challenges for linguistics. *Theoretical Linguistics* 39.129-181.
- Hornberger, N. and Wang, S. 2008. Who are our heritage language learners? In Brinton, D., Kagan, O. & Bauckus, S. (eds.), *Heritage Language Education: A New Field Emerging*. New York: Routledge, pp. 3-35.
- Valdés, G. et al. 2008. Heritage languages and ideologies of language: Unexamined challenges. In Brinton, D., Kagan, O. & Bauckus, S. (eds.), *Heritage Language Education: A New Field Emerging*. New York: Routledge, pp. 107-130.

- Polinsky, M. & O. Kagan. 2007. Heritage languages in the wild and in the classroom. *Language and Linguistics Compass* 1, 368-395.
- Rothman, J., & Treffers-Daller, J. 2014. A Prolegomenon to the Construct of the *Native Speaker*: Heritage Speaker Bilinguals are Natives Too!. *Applied Linguistics*, 35, 93-98
- Scontras, G., Z. Fuchs, and M. Polinsky. 2015. Heritage Language and Linguistic Theory. *Frontiers in Psychology* 6, 1545.
- Montrul, S. A. 2012. Is the heritage language like a second language? *EuroSLA Yearbook*, 12(1): 1-29.

Day 2. Methodology and research on heritage languages

A. Discussion of the readings.

We will be focusing on the following issues:

- (a) What makes HL special and why should they be studied (answer this based on your own ideas and the material in the readings)
- (b) What areas of HL structure are relatively well understood?
- (c) What possible research projects can you propose based on your own experience and the readings?

B. Methodology

- Garrod, S. 2006. Psycholinguistic research methods. In Traxler, M.J. and Gernsbacher, M.A. (eds.) *Handbook of Psycholinguistics*. Amsterdam: Elsevier/Academic Press.
- Orfitelli and Polinsky (in press) When performance masquerades as comprehension: Grammaticality judgments in non-native speakers
- Pascual y Cabo, D. 2016. Syntactic Reflexes of Emerging Optionality in Spanish as a Heritage Language: The Case of Dative-experiencer Verbs. *Hispania* 99 (1), 34-50.

Day 3. Our own work

- Polinsky, M. 2016. Structure vs, use in heritage language. *Linguistic Vanguard*.
- Rothman, J. 2007. Heritage Speaker Competence Differences, Language Change and Input Type: Inflected Infinitives in Heritage Brazilian Portuguese. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 11(4), 359-389.
- Pires, A., & Rothman, J. 2009. Disentangling sources of incomplete acquisition: An explanation for competence divergence across heritage grammars. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 13(2) 211-238.