1 Introduction

Language acquisition is the growth of language – and, more specifically, growth of a grammatical and communicative system – in the mind of a speaker. Human beings are biologically programmed with a faculty for language, but a key ingredient for language to develop or grow is input. Input consists of actual samples of language use or naturally occurring written/oral discourse, preferably experienced in the context of social interaction.

As children move spontaneously from babbling to first words, phrases, and sentences in what many consider a relatively short time, the study of language acquisition by monolingual children has fascinated many parents and scholars for years. Because learning the grammar of a language is a process with a beginning followed by a period of development that spans several years, the study of language acquisition is concerned with describing the typical courses of development of different aspects of vocabulary and grammar, and explaining why they follow the sequence they do and not any other logically possible ones. Another concern of the study of language acquisition is the outcome of the process – what the end state looks like – and identifying the cognitive, social, and environmental factors that contribute to reaching and shaping the linguistic properties of the end state. The typical, normal outcome of first language acquisition is reaching adult native speaker knowledge and use of language within their speech community. Although it seems trivially true that the more you hear a language the better you learn it, how input and experience relate to the development and outcome of the language acquisition process is still very poorly understood.

If two or more languages are part of the linguistic and socialization environment of the child, then we can talk about bilingual first language acquisition (De Houwer 2009; Meisel 1994, 2001). Amazingly, young children are able to comfortably handle and develop two grammatical systems simultaneously and to different degrees if they are exposed to two languages in the environment. But children and adults can also acquire another, second, language after the core structural foundations of the first language are relatively set. The acquisition of a second language can start at different times in life: it can take place in infancy, after infancy, in later childhood, adolescence, and in adulthood.

First language acquisition, bilingual first language acquisition (the simultaneous acquisition of two languages), and second language acquisition are all established disciplinary fields with specific theoretical and methodological traditions and clear implications for clinical interventions and education.

What is, then, the acquisition of heritage languages, and why do we need a book about it? Heritage language acquisition is a type of early bilingual acquisition that takes place in a specific sociolinguistic environment. The acquisition of heritage languages deals with the study of the developmental stages and outcome of learning a heritage language from childhood and into adulthood, as well as the wax and wane of the heritage language in response to input factors. Broadly defined, heritage languages are culturally or ethnolinguistically minority languages that develop in a bilingual setting where another sociopolitically majority language is spoken. Heritage languages are commonly spoken by immigrants and their children, but they can also be spoken in their own territories when national or regional languages and indigenous languages share space with a majority language. Heritage speakers are child and adult members of a linguistic minority who grow up exposed to their home language – the heritage language – and the majority official language spoken and used in the broader speech community. From a psycholinguistic, individual perspective, the group of heritage speakers encompasses different types of early bilingual learners, exposed to the heritage language and the majority language in childhood before puberty, as we will see in Chapter 4.

As the product of a language contact situation, the study of heritage languages and heritage speakers – although not always called this way – has been around since the existence of linguistics as a science. Sociolinguists and historical linguists have long been interested in issues related to language change and emergence of new language varieties (Weinrich 1953), including the creation of creole languages from pidgin situations, and the demise of languages and their speech communities, as with endangered languages and situations of language death (Dorian 1989). Since the 2000s, the study of heritage speakers as bilingual language learners has taken on unprecedented prominence for both theoretical and practical reasons, attracting keen interest from fields such as theoretical linguistics, psycholinguistics and language acquisition, applied linguistics, and education, among others.

Why are heritage speakers suddenly so interesting or relevant for the language sciences? The modern era of globalization has brought about several far-reaching economic and geopolitical changes, and this special group of bilinguals speaks to the daily challenges faced by educators and clinicians in many parts of the world. Nearly all the high-income countries of the world are experiencing substantial growth in their immigrant-origin student populations. Concurrently, globalization is placing new demands on education systems the world over. As a consequence, school systems are facing the

challenge of educating large and growing numbers of recently immigrated children of increasingly diverse origins to greater levels of competence and skill. Schooling systems worldwide are concerned about the full development of the second language (or the language of the host country) in immigrant children. At the same time, the field of heritage language acquisition makes its focus the development, stagnation, regression, and reacquisition of the family language. While school systems strongly emphasize the development of immigrants' competence in the majority language of the society, adolescent and young adult heritage speakers may become interested in further developing their skills in the heritage language for potential career advantages.

These days, for example, in many colleges and universities in North America, heritage speakers of many languages turn to second/foreign language classes originally developed for second language learners with no previous knowledge of the language to learn, relearn, or develop their heritage language. Realizing that these speakers are very different in many ways from traditional second language learners who initiate their acquisition of a second/foreign language in adulthood, teachers, language practitioners, and language program administrators have been pondering and debating how to best deal with this educational challenge, and in many institutions special language programs or curricular tracks have been developed for these students. If heritage speakers already know the language because they speak it at home, an obvious question is why they seek language instruction in a formal setting. Heritage speakers of Spanish and of Hindi in the United States (all university students in their twenties) that I have tested in my research over the past 6 years have provided reasons such as the following:[1]

> "I want to be just as comfortable writing, speaking, reading, and listening in Spanish as I am in English."
> "I would like to improve my writing skills as well as reading. Also, my speech needs work and my vocabulary is very limited."
> "I want to be grammatically correct."
> "I want to embrace my culture as much as possible and I feel that I lost a vital part of speaking it while I was growing up."
> "Because I am weaker at my native language."
> "I don't want to start talking in English when speaking in Hindi."
> "I don't know how to read or write so I would like to improve that. I also want to improve my speaking abilities so that I can be confident if I ever have to speak with a stranger in India."

[1] This research was funded by a National Science Foundation Grant ARRA 09175939 (2009–2013) to Silvina Montrul, Rakesh Bhatt, and Roxana Girju.

As these responses indicate, these speakers consider the heritage language a *native language* and part of their *cultural heritage*, but it is also a *weaker language* when compared with English because some speakers feel *they have lost parts of it as they were growing up*. A central issue in the study of heritage speakers and heritage language acquisition is what specifically gives credence to these self-reflections. What, specifically, has been lost or changed in comparison to adult speakers like their parents who were raised in a predominantly monolingual context where the heritage language is the majority language of society? These comments portray an undeniable awareness of weaknesses in their grammatical competence, and their collective voices call for expanding vocabulary, learning the grammar, and improving their speaking and fluency so that they can feel comfortable and confident speaking the heritage language without resorting to code-switching in English. Still, the most common answer is that they want to learn how to read and write or develop their vocabulary and grammatical skills further.

These personal accounts challenge at least two common myths about language and language learning. The first one is that the acquisition of a language since childhood uniformly and universally results in native-like command of the language in adulthood (Chomsky 1981; Crain and Thornton 1998). The second one is that once acquired by the end of the preschool period, the structural integrity of the native language is stable. Naturally, these assumptions take for granted the linguistic environment and the conditions of language use because they have been formulated on the basis of an "ideal" monolingual speaker who has not been raised in a language contact situation, or whose native language is not a minority language.

This book focuses on the grammatical development of the heritage language and the language learning trajectory of heritage speakers, and synthesizes the research of the last 20 years. It is intended for professionals, students, and researchers interested in understanding the factors that play a role in the acquisition of heritage languages. Readers with a background in linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, education, language policies, and language teaching who have little background in the field of language acquisition, will find this book most useful. The book should also be of interest to those already familiar with first and second language acquisition who want to further their knowledge of heritage languages.

The main argument I advance in this book is that heritage languages are native languages even though they may not always look that way. This is because the process of language acquisition and mastery is long and not all native languages acquired in a bilingual context develop in the same way into adolescence and beyond. Without proper environmental support, the heritage language remains unstable after the age of basic grammatical development, leading to incomplete acquisition or attrition of different aspects of the

grammatical system. By the time many heritage speakers reach early adulthood, their heritage language displays many characteristics typical of adult second language acquisition in some modules of the grammar, but they maintain native-like mastery in other grammatical modules. The sociopolitical status of the heritage language as a minority language plays a fundamental role in the degree of language acquisition, maintenance, and loss of the heritage language throughout early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence; that is, the entire span of the language learning period. Furthermore, for languages that have a written and literary tradition, academic support of the language and development of literacy skills during the school-age period can contribute significantly to language maintenance and the degree of linguistic competence acquired in the heritage language in early adulthood.

Just as the impetus that gave rise to the field of second language acquisition originated from pedagogical concerns (Thomas 2013), the field of heritage language acquisition is also driven by:

- a need to understand the nature of linguistic knowledge of the heritage language that heritage language learners bring to the classroom as young adults;
- how their linguistic knowledge has been acquired and forgotten or actually never acquired throughout their childhood;
- how it is represented, accessed, and processed when used in comprehension and production;
- how it is affected by literacy;
- how it differs from that of other speaker groups, such as the parents, native speakers who do not grow up or live in a language contact situation, children acquiring the language as a first and only language, and adult second language learners with whom they may share the classroom.

Some of these questions are eminently practical, whereas others are theoretically profound and at the core of several disciplines within the language sciences, especially bilingualism.

Heritage languages and their acquisition exist in a natural language contact environment and although sociolinguists have led the way in the study of bilingual societies and the language varieties that emerge from these situations, the focus in the last 20 years has shifted to the study of heritage languages as an individual phenomenon in the minds of speakers. Naturally, issues related to language development, linguistic knowledge, and language use interact with social variables. Among heritage speakers, we find simultaneous and sequential acquisition of a variety of pairs of languages that may be more or less typologically and genetically similar to each other, and this situation allows us to tease apart universal versus language-specific aspects of language and language development. The linguistic effects of the quantity, quality, and type of input from native speakers and from bilinguals with different degrees of

proficiency in the two languages are other enduring questions that the study of heritage languages can help inform. Even more intractable but no less important is how the changing nature of input throughout the lifespan of heritage speakers contributes to the acquisition, maintenance, and loss of the heritage language at the individual level and across generations. The interaction of type and amount of input with age of onset of bilingualism in heritage speakers has opened new ways to investigate the nature of the linguistic systems that develop in heritage speakers.

Embedded in this context, heritage language education has found a place and a voice of its own within theoretical, experimental, and applied linguistics. As a field that emerged out of necessity, driven primarily by demographic changes, heritage language education has been strongly concerned with issues of cultural identity (i.e., who exactly are heritage speakers?) as well as pedagogical and practical questions, including *what* to teach and *how* to best instruct heritage language learners so that their personal, cultural, and linguistic needs can be properly met (Brinton, Kagan, and Bauckus 2008). In countries where heritage languages are national languages, such as in Ireland or in the Basque country, the realization that children may not develop their native language at age-appropriate levels under pressure from the majority language (English, Spanish) has led to substantial national efforts being invested to reintroduce the minority languages in the education system and to educate children bilingually or monolingually in these languages (Cenoz and Gorter 2008). But in countries where the heritage languages come and go with the waves of immigration, as in the United States, some schools in areas with a high concentration of speakers have developed special classes and programs for heritage languages, such as Spanish, Russian, Asian languages, and many others. Nonetheless, Valdés (1995, 2005) and Lynch (2003) have raised concerns about the atheoretical character of the field of heritage language education that emerged from this situation and its "blind appropriation and adaptation of foreign language methods" (Valdés *et al.* 2006, p. 235). The implication of such claim seems to be that if the heritage language education wants to move forward as a field of inquiry, it must develop a theory of heritage language acquisition.

In the last decade, the acquisition of heritage languages has moved from the margins to become a central focus of study within linguistics and applied linguistics. Another argument I advance in this book, therefore, is that the study of heritage languages and the acquisition of heritage languages can be profitably embraced by existing theoretical approaches to language and language acquisition within linguistics and applied linguistics. Because heritage language acquisition is another instance of multilingual language acquisition (see Figure 1.1), extending mainstream approaches and methods to this particular acquisition situation allows comparability of results of heritage languages with data from first language learners, second language learners, simultaneous

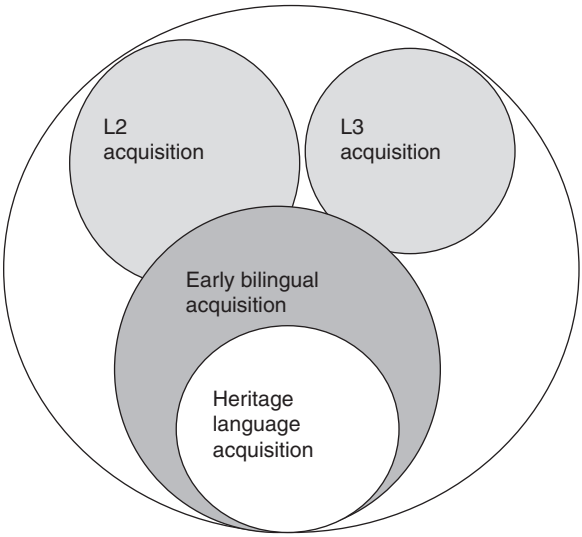

Figure 1.1. Heritage language acquisition as another instance of multilingual language acquisition.

bilinguals, and child second language learners. Through these comparisons we can identify the need to develop new methodological and data analyses methods to study aspects of heritage language acquisition that may not lend themselves to be easily investigated with the methods and tools we already have from sister disciplines.

Perhaps a particular attraction of the study of heritage speakers and heritage languages for theoretical linguistics is its focus on real, contemporary, bilingual native speakers. Generative linguistic theorizing (Chomsky 1981) in particular has been based on the study of "idealized" monolingual native speakers. When theories of language abstract away from the actual contexts of language learners and real speakers, they risk becoming weaker in real-world relevance, psychological validity and, ultimately, explanatory power (Jackendoff 2002). Given the complex nature of heritage language acquisition, where cognitive, social, cultural, and biological factors interact, another important appeal of heritage speakers is that their study invites a multidisciplinary approach within linguistics, especially bridging sociolinguistics, theoretical linguistics, and psycholinguistics, as shown in Figure 1.2. This kind of interdisciplinary collaboration also has real implications for education, clinical practices, and language policies.

A positive development in the last two decades has been the surge in descriptive studies (both large scale and single case studies) of heritage speakers'

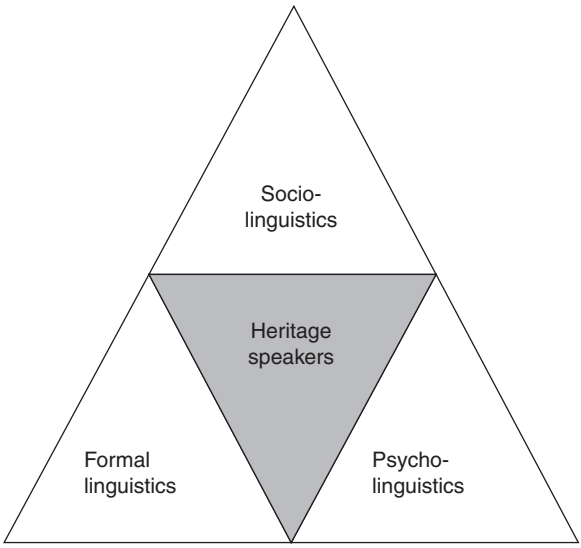

Figure 1.2. Multidisciplinary approach to the study of heritage speakers.

linguistic profiles of different heritage languages. In addition, we have increasingly seen more theoretically oriented research on heritage speakers of different ages, heritage language acquisition, and the psycholinguistic processes involved in this type of learning at the individual level. Existing theories of acquisition from related fields in linguistics have so far proved to be eminently appropriate to use with heritage languages and heritage speakers, as we will see in Chapters 5, 7, and 8.

Given the current interest in heritage speakers from all these theoretical perspectives, the objective of this book is to present a comprehensive overview and critical synthesis of the state of this field. Examining the vast body of theoretically oriented research that has accumulated over the last two decades allows us to assess how our knowledge has advanced in the last few years and predict what lies ahead, so that we can articulate clearer implications for advancing research, instructional practices, and language policies on heritage languages.

The book, therefore, discusses the development of linguistic, grammatical knowledge of heritage language speakers from childhood to adulthood, and the political, educational, social, cognitive, and affective conditions under which language learning does or does not occur in these minority-language-speaking populations. Placing heritage language acquisition as central to current and viable cognitive and linguistic theories of acquisition, the book showcases what research has uncovered so far about heritage speakers of different languages

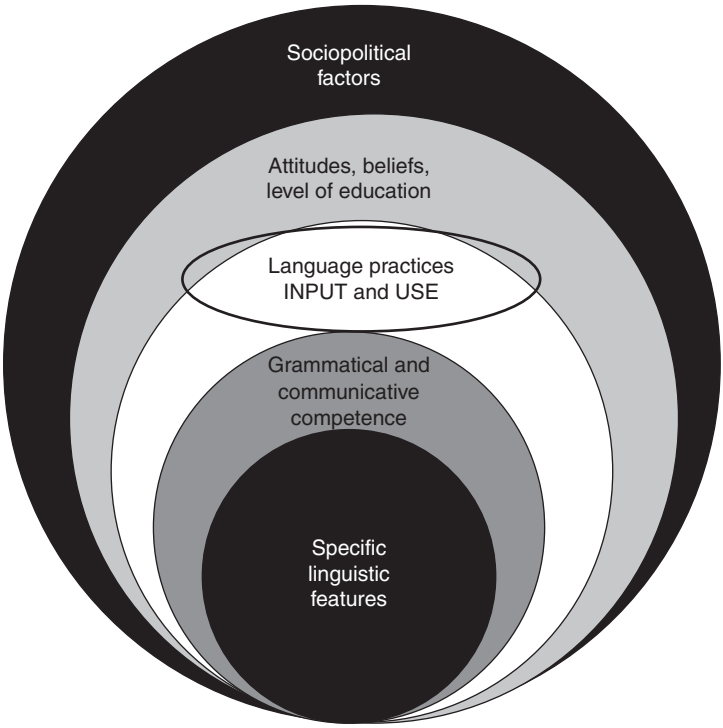

Figure 1.3. Factors affecting specific linguistic features in heritage language competence and use.

and their language learning process, offering crucial information for pedagogical practices, curricular development, and language policies. Ultimately, this work attempts to be a landmark in the field of heritage language acquisition, both as a reference source and as a catalyst for further research and discussion in expanding the field.

Although the main focus of this book is on the advances in our understanding of the linguistic and psycholinguistic nature of heritage language acquisition, the development and linguistic outcome of heritage language acquisition cannot be understood in isolation from its socio-affective context. Therefore, sociolinguistic and attitudinal factors are taken into account to some extent as well. There is no doubt that the study of heritage speakers encourages us to examine in more depth the indirect relationship between the individual psycholinguistic level and language change at the sociohistorical level by way of the development of the language, conceptualized in Figure 1.3.

Figure 1.3 attempts to capture the fact that language is both a sociopolitical and a grammatical construct represented in the individual minds of speakers: in

fact, language as a grammatical and psycholinguistic construct is embedded within language as a sociopolitical construct. If linguists and psycholinguists are interested in investigating specific linguistic features of heritage speakers, as the inner circle in Figure 1.3 shows, these cannot be properly understood without consideration of how the status of the language indirectly affects knowledge, acquisition, processing, and use of those features in communicative situations.

Furthermore, the sociopolitical status of the language (majority versus minority status) affects the attitudes and beliefs of its speakers toward the language, as well as the availability of the education in that language, and its degree of public use, for example. Language attitudes, in turn, affect language practices and patterns of language use: if a language is not used in education and outside of the home, it will not be heard and used as much by its speakers because they may not see its value. Input and use affect, in turn, grammatical and communicative competence, as manifested in particular linguistic features that are now part of the psycholinguistic representation of the speaker. In sum, as depicted in Figure 1.3, input seems to be the key ingredient that links psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic factors in heritage language acquisition. Understanding proximal and distal aspects of input in heritage speakers is crucial (Armon-Lotem *et al.* 2014). Proximal factors refer to basic input quantity, such as length of exposure and proportion of daily input in a given language. Distal factors are the broader environmental influences that contribute to a child's language development in qualitative ways, such as socioeconomic status, sociopolitical status of the language, language attitudes, and vitality of the language in the broader speech community.

To elucidate the interrelationship between macro-sociopolitical factors, micro-sociopsychological attitudes and practices as they bear on language acquisition, retention, and loss, the study of heritage languages and their acquisition necessitates a multidisciplinary approach where sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, theoretical linguistics, and applied linguistics among other disciplines come together. In this book I show that while purely linguistic factors play a major role in determining the specific linguistic structures and constraints that arise under language contact at the psycholinguistic level, the effects of the social and ideological contexts are also relevant, although sometimes more indirectly and less immediately apparent. Questions that arise, but which are not answered in the book are, how can these be linked more directly? How can sociopolitical factors affect attitudes and language practices, which in turn affect the quantity and quality of input that forms the raw material for language acquisition? I hope that these questions can be taken up for further research.

The study of heritage languages and heritage speakers has significant implications for language policies and education, especially for second and third