Heritage speakers are native speakers of a minority language they learn at home, but, due to socio-political pressure from the majority language spoken in their community, their heritage language does not fully develop. In the last decade, the acquisition of heritage languages has become a central focus of study within linguistics and applied linguistics. This work centers on the grammatical development of the heritage language and the language learning trajectory of heritage speakers, synthesizing recent experimental research. *The Acquisition of Heritage Languages* offers a global perspective, with a wealth of examples from heritage languages around the world. Written in an accessible style, this authoritative and up-to-date text is essential reading for professionals, students, and researchers of all levels working in the fields of sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, education, language policies, and language teaching.

- Discusses examples and studies from heritage languages all over the world
- Provides accessible explanations of linguistic terms
- Explores the theories and research methods applied to heritage language acquisition

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The Acquisition of Heritage Languages

Silvina Montrul
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I want to start by thanking deeply all the heritage speakers who have participated in my classes and in my studies, and who continue to inspire my work. My interest and amazement with heritage language acquisition dates back to 1998, when I took a position as Assistant Professor of Spanish at the University at Albany, SUNY. Although my stay at Albany was brief, the experience made an indelible mark on my research. The opportunity to work with a large number of Hispanic students in my classes redirected and expanded the thinking about second language acquisition and bilingualism that I had developed as a PhD student at McGill University in Montreal. When I left Canada, I was convinced that native language ability was achievable by any typically developing individual, that bilingual children are not cognitively confused when they learn two languages at the same time, and that growing up bilingually from childhood leads to highly proficient command of the two languages. But the Hispanic students I had the privilege to work with in the United States and their Spanish language abilities told me a very different story. By learning more about these students’ personal histories as language learners in the United States and observing their uneven command of Spanish, I realized that the high level of achievement in the two languages obtained by many French-English Canadians in Quebec was not generalizable to Hispanic students in the United States. I became convinced that attitudinal and political factors were related to the overall lack of educational support heritage languages receive in the United States, which prevented these bilingual speakers from reaching their full potential in their native language.

The language of Hispanic children and the Hispanic population has been widely studied in education and sociolinguistics, but had not been approached from the psycholinguistic and theoretical linguistic perspective in which I had been trained. It was my sense at that time that this population could contribute powerful data to theories of language in general, as well as to theories of language acquisition and our notions of bilingualism. As I was developing studies on tense and aspect in the second language acquisition of Spanish in collaboration with Roumyana Slabakova, I decided to also collect data with bilingual Spanish speakers in the United States. In 2002 and 2004 I had my first
two articles on language loss and incomplete acquisition among these bilingual heritage speakers published in Bilingualism: Language and Cognition. Around the same time I came across Masha Polinsky’s writings on American Russian and William O’Grady’s studies on Korean in America, which have since inspired me and convinced me of the urgency of unraveling the linguistic systems of heritage speakers.

Determined to pursue this goal, in 2004 I launched a major-scale research program to investigate key linguistic differences between second language learners and heritage speakers so that we would be better able to inform pedagogical practices that address their different linguistic and cultural needs. The project also tackled issues of theoretical significance. The “critical period hypothesis” had long been invoked to explain why postpuberty second language learners rarely reach the level of linguistic ability of native speakers. I put this hypothesis to the test by looking at the flip side of second language acquisition: bilinguals who had been exposed to two languages early in childhood or later and were losing their first language. The main results of this research project and the ideas I uncovered about age effects in language loss were published in Incomplete Acquisition in Bilingualism: Reexamining the Age Factor (2008), my first book on heritage speakers.

Even before I published Incomplete Acquisition in Bilingualism, interest in heritage languages and heritage speakers from different perspectives was already soaring in North America and other parts of the world, and the last two decades has seen a voluminous spurt of research using different methodologies. From 2007 and until 2013, I had the honor and pleasure to participate in the seven Heritage Language Summer Institutes organized by Olga Kagan, Director of the National Heritage Language Resource Center at UCLA, and Masha Polinsky (Director of Research). These week-long institutes were aimed at fostering and stimulating discussion of theoretical and practical issues dealing with heritage language and heritage language education, and brought together teachers, researchers, administrators, students, and community organizers of all types of heritage languages from the United States and other parts of the world. I have also had the honor and opportunity to share my work with colleagues and students in different parts of the United States and the world, all of whom share similar concerns about the education of heritage speakers. I learned a lot about the heritage speakers and minority language speakers in Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan, and Australia. Many of the ideas and the extensive body of work I cover in this book found inspiration in all these meetings and interactions with colleagues around the world. For that reason, the target audience I had in mind when writing this book is students, researchers, and heritage language educators from different academic backgrounds and disciplinary orientations. The book focuses on the grammatical development of heritage languages, and is intended for readers
with an introductory background in linguistics, or language acquisition, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, education, language policies, and language teaching who have little background in the field of language acquisition.

In the present book heritage speakers and the heritage language acquisition process take center stage. The main ideas on incomplete acquisition and attrition in heritage speakers that I advanced in Incomplete Acquisition in Bilingualism are present in this book as well, but these have evolved with new findings and have been refined since then. Not only does the present book represent my own thinking on heritage languages and their acquisition, but it does so in the context of the copious research that has appeared in the last two decades. Because heritage languages include indigenous languages, national/regional minority languages, and immigrant languages, I made every effort to cover representative classic and current research from different parts of the world, such as North America, Europe, and Australia.

I would like to thank all the people who have inspired me and helped me in bringing this work to completion. Chief among them are my colleagues from Illinois, graduate students, and co-authors in many of the studies cited in this book: James Yoon, Rakesh Bhatt, Elabbas Benmamoun, Roxana Girju, Tania Ionin, Melissa Bowles, Rebecca Foote, Jill Jegerski, Pam Hadley, Matt Rispoli, Eman Saadah, Archna Bhatia, Abdulkafi Albirini, Noelia Sánchez-Valcalá, Eunice Chung, Elias Shakkour, and Itxaso Rodríguez. I want to thank Masha Polinsky and Olga Kagan in particular, for inviting me to be part of the seven Heritage Language Summer Institutes they organized from 2007 to 2013. Their outstanding leadership, dedication, inclusiveness, and enthusiasm to promote heritage languages are a blessing and an inspiration for all of us working in this field. During these years, I have had stimulating dialogue with several colleagues who have challenged me and, undeniably, enriched me and my work. They are: William O’Grady, Maria Carreira, Kim Potowski, Julio Torres, Cristina Sanz, Oksana Laleko, Anna Mikhailova, Agnes He, Maria Luisa Parra, Cecilia Colombi, Carmen Silva-Corvalán, Gabriela Zapata, Carol Klee, Irina Sekerina, Tom Roeper, Luiz Amaral, Barbara Pearson, Conchur Ó Giollagáin, Rakel Österberg, Lars Fant, Kenneth Hyltenstam, Pieter Muysken, Shanley Allen, Sharon Unsworth, Elma Blom, Tanja Kupisch, Bernhard Breher, Jason Rothman, Diego Pascual y Cabo, Virginia Valian, Ricardo Otheguy, and Janet Fodor, among many others. Without the enthusiasm from Cambridge University Press, this project would not have been possible and I am grateful to Helen Barton for encouraging me to pursue it. I am most grateful to the readers who evaluated the proposal and the manuscript for their useful feedback and suggestions. Writing can be a lonely pursuit, and can only be improved with the help of attentive readers. I owe a huge thank you to Sara Mason, Abdulkafi Albirini, Roumyana Slabakova, Jill Jegerski, and Masha Polinsky.
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