

The Acquisition of Heritage Languages

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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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of tables</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
1 Introduction	1
2 Heritage languages and heritage speakers	13
2.1 What is a heritage language?	13
2.2 Who is a heritage speaker?	15
2.3 Heritage language communities	23
2.4 Other heritage speakers	34
2.5 Summary	40
3 The language of heritage speakers	41
3.1 Bilingual competence in heritage speakers	42
3.2 The grammar of heritage speakers	48
3.3 Natural linguistic processes at work	85
3.4 Summary	88
4 The bilingual development of heritage speakers	90
4.1 Bilingual acquisition	91
4.2 Acquisition and mastery of a language	99
4.3 Language development and age	109
4.4 Factors affecting the language development of heritage speakers	117
4.5 Implications	128
5 Theoretical approaches	131
5.1 Theories of native language acquisition	132
5.2 Some theoretical perspectives on second language acquisition	143

vi	Contents	
	5.3 Theoretical approaches to heritage language acquisition	149
	5.4 Summary	164
6	Methodological considerations	165
	6.1 Research methods	165
	6.2 What is the baseline?	168
	6.3 Unilingual versus bilingual approach	175
	6.4 Defining and describing the population of heritage speakers	179
	6.5 Experimental data and types of tasks	188
	6.6 Group versus individual results in experimental studies	203
	6.7 Summary	207
7	How native are heritage speakers?	208
	7.1 Native-like ability in some heritage speakers	208
	7.2 Non-native ability in most heritage speakers	215
	7.3 Heritage speakers and child L1 learners	226
	7.4 Child and adult heritage speakers	231
	7.5 Different input?	237
	7.6 Summary	248
8	Are heritage speakers like second language learners?	249
	8.1 Differences and similarities between heritage speakers and second language learners	250
	8.2 Heritage speakers and second language research	252
	8.3 The role of experience in heritage and second language development	277
	8.4 Classroom research	288
	8.5 Summary	296
9	Some implications	298
	9.1 Language sciences	299
	9.2 Language education	303
	9.3 Language policies	307
	9.4 Conclusion	309
	<i>References</i>	311
	<i>Index</i>	349
	<i>Author index</i>	358

Figures

1.1. Heritage language acquisition as another instance of multilingual language acquisition.	<i>page 7</i>
1.2. Multidisciplinary approach to the study of heritage speakers.	8
1.3. Factors affecting specific linguistic features in heritage language competence and use.	9
3.1. Same pattern of dominance but different levels of proficiency in the heritage language.	43
3.2. Relationship between dominance and proficiency (Montrul 2016, p. 17).	44
3.3. US-born Romanian heritage speakers' self-assessments of their English and Romanian abilities by skill (Montrul, Bhatt, and Girju 2015).	46
3.4. Romania-born Romanian heritage speakers' self-assessments of their English and Romanian abilities by skill (Montrul, Bhatt, and Girju 2015).	47
3.5. US-born Hindi heritage speakers' self-assessments of their English and Hindi abilities by skill (Montrul, Bhatt, and Girju 2015).	47
4.1. Idealized longitudinal development throughout the lifespan of two languages acquired since childhood in simultaneous bilinguals.	91
4.2. Most common profiles of bilingual heritage speakers based on age of onset of bilingualism.	94
4.3. Idealized development of the first and second languages in late, sequential bilinguals (adult L2 learners).	97
4.4. Idealized bilingual development of an adult undergoing first language attrition in the context of second language acquisition.	98
4.5. Idealized bilingual development of a simultaneous and a sequential bilingual undergoing minority language decline.	100
4.6. Percentage distribution of passive constructions in spoken and written expository texts in French monolinguals (adapted from Jisa 2004).	108

viii	List of figures	
4.7.	Nature, nurture, and age: factors affecting native language acquisition and entrenchment.	109
4.8.	Positive correlation between age and proficiency for L1 loss (Montrul 2008, p. 266).	115
4.9.	Interrelated factors that play a role in heritage language acquisition and proficiency.	123
6.1.	Mean percentage of errors with gender agreement in Spanish noun phrases in two Spanish-English bilingual children followed longitudinally (adapted from Anderson 1999).	169
6.2.	Mean percentage accuracy on overt subjects, third person singular, and past tense in English over time in an adult second language speaker (adapted from Lardiere 2007).	170
6.3.	English L2 acquisition and Spanish L1 decline in Mexican-American children (n = 32): longitudinal study (adapted from Merino 1983).	173
6.4.	The Complementarity Principle (Grosjean 2008, p. 23).	176
6.5.	Example of pictures and sentences used in a Picture Matching Task (Sánchez-Walker 2013).	192
6.6.	The two types of scenes compared in Experiment 1 (Monolinguals) and 2 (Bilingual HL Russian). (A) The 1-Contrast scene: Target red star (position 6), Color Competitor red bird (position 7), Target's contrast object yellow star (position 1), two distracters, blue frog and green frog (positions 2 and 8). (B) The 2-Contrast scene is the same except that the blue frog (position 2) has been replaced by a blue bird that serves as the contrast object for the Color Competitor (position 7) (Figure 1 from Sekerina and Trueswell 2011).	194
6.7.	Eye-tracking system used in Sekerina and Trueswell (2011).	195
6.8.	Number of heritage speakers who showed a tendency to accept ungrammatical sentences with omission of case markers (Montrul, Bhatt, and Bhatia 2012).	205
6.9.	Story retelling task. Individual variation in accuracy at producing DOM with animate direct objects by the monolingual and bilingual children (Montrul and Sánchez-Walker 2013).	206
7.1.	Estimated percentage of daily input in Spanish and English in the language development of two simultaneous bilingual siblings (adapted from Silva-Corvalán 2014).	224
7.2.	Accuracy on DOM with animate direct objects in the Story Retelling Task performed by the child (Study 1) and the adult heritage speakers (Study 2) (Montrul and Sánchez-Walker 2013).	237

List of figures	ix
7.3. Accuracy on DOM in an oral narrative task by participants (Montrul and Sánchez-Walker 2013).	246
8.1. Patterns of language dominance in L2 learners and heritage speakers.	251
8.2. Accuracy rate of stress placement in native speakers (NS), heritage speakers (HS), and L2 learners (L2) of Spanish (Kim 2013).	258
8.3. Production of Arabic vowels /a, a:, i, i:, u, u:/ by Palestinian native speakers, heritage speakers of Arabic, and L2 learners of Arabic (adapted from Saadah 2011).	260
8.4. Mean acceptability ratings on topic and nominative markers in Japanese and Korean L2 learners and heritage speakers (adapted from Laleko and Polinsky 2013).	267
8.5. Specific responses with demonstrative plurals and definite articles in a TVJT in Italian (adapted from Kupisch 2012).	272
8.6. Boxplot of *Foc on Affectee Theme sentences (adjunct focus, all groups) (Mai 2012).	276
8.7. Percentage of individuals with an overall preference for CE or CM in subjects (left) and in objects (right) (Chung 2013).	278
8.8. Accuracy on canonical and noncanonical ending nouns by group (adapted from Montrul <i>et al.</i> 2013).	287
8.9. Mean percentage accuracy for instructed and noninstructed Spanish heritage speakers in Swedish High School in the two tests (adapted from Bylund and Díaz 2012).	295

Tables

2.1.	Examples of heritage languages.	<i>page</i> 15
2.2.	Characteristics of a heritage speaker.	18
2.3.	Characteristics of heritage speakers and heritage language learners.	21
2.4.	Four groups of students of Japanese with or without heritage language background (adapted from Kondo-Brown 2005).	22
2.5.	Scores on the Japanese proficiency test by group (adapted from Kondo-Brown 2005).	22
2.6.	Patterns of language dominance and proficiency of heritage speakers and the parental generation.	24
2.7.	Examples of heritage speakers.	40
3.1.	Language used most at different periods in life (adapted from Carreira and Kagan 2011).	45
3.2.	Respondents' ratings of their abilities in English and the heritage language (adapted from Carreira and Kagan 2011).	46
3.3.	Average frequency for five word formation devices in Hungarian heritage speakers in Austria (adapted from Gal 1989, p. 321).	50
3.4.	Russian heritage speakers' naming (in ms) and translation accuracy for the three word classes (adapted from Polinsky 2004).	51
3.5.	Summary of findings on the lexicon.	53
3.6.	Mean percentage accuracy, omission, and overgeneralization of ergative <i>-ne</i> marking (adapted from Montrul, Bhatt, and Bhatia 2012).	61
3.7.	Overall error rates with preterit and imperfect, subjunctive, and indicative by Spanish heritage speakers in two oral elicitation tasks (adapted from Montrul 2009).	68
3.8.	General trends observed with the morphological competence of heritage speakers.	71
3.9.	Changes observed in heritage language grammars with core syntax and other interfaces.	82
4.1.	Dimensions along which the languages of a bilingual may vary.	92
4.2.	Developmental milestones in early language development.	103
4.3.	Mean accuracy percentages on an oral real-word plural task in Jordanian Arabic (adapted from Albirini 2014a, p. 13).	104

List of tables	xi
4.4 Structural and pragmatic development in 6- to 8-year-old children (adapted from Menyuk and Brisk 2005).	106
5.1. Main features of nativism, emergentism, and variationist sociolinguistics as theories of L1 and L2 acquisition.	149
5.2. Observable facts to be explained about the acquisition of heritage languages.	150
5.3. Interpretative scope preferences for Koreans in Korea and Korean heritage speakers in the United States (adapted from O'Grady <i>et al.</i> 2011).	161
5.4. Processing procedures in Processability Theory corresponding to Turkish structures (adapted from Bayram 2013).	163
6.1. Mean accuracy scores on overall measures of production and comprehension in L2 English and L1 Spanish by Mexican-American children (adapted from Merino 1983).	172
6.2. Examples of different proficiency tests and measures.	188
6.3. Examples of some experimental tasks.	203
6.4. Mean percentage accuracy, omission, and overgeneralization of ergative <i>-ne</i> marking (adapted from Montrul, Bhatt, and Bhatia 2012).	205
7.1. Mean percentages of object and verb placement constructions in German (adapted from Flores 2012).	220
7.2. Mean accuracy on comprehension of Russian relative clauses (Polinsky 2011).	235
7.3. Pragmatic distribution of subjects by context (# = pragmatically infelicitous) (Montrul and Sánchez-Walker 2015).	244
7.4. Number and percentage of individuals in each group whose mean acceptability ratings for ungrammatical unmarked DOM in animate, specific direct objects was above the highest individual mean acceptability rating for native speakers of the languages in each country (Montrul, Bhatt, and Girju 2015).	248
8.1. Profile of low to intermediate proficiency heritage speakers and L2 learners of Korean in the United States.	251
8.2. Input differences between heritage speakers and L2 learners.	252
8.3. Learning mechanisms available to children and adults.	255
8.4. Mean percentage accuracy scores in the morphology recognition tasks (Montrul and Perpiñán 2011).	264
8.5. Accuracy scores in the five tasks by groups (adapted from Bowles 2011).	282
8.6. Gender agreement with canonical and non canonical masculine and feminine nouns in simplex and diminutive forms (D stands for diminutive affix) (Montrul <i>et al.</i> 2013).	286

Acknowledgments

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

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv Acknowledgments

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, Archana Bhatia, Abdulkafi Albirini, Noelia Sánchez-Walker, 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 Mikhaylova, Agnes He, Maria Luisa Parra, Cecilia Colombi, Carmen Silva-Corvalán, Gabriela Zapata, Carol Klee, Irina Sekerina, Tom Roeper, Luiz Amaral, Barbara Pearson, Conchúr Ó Giollagáin, Raket Österberg, Lars Fant, Kenneth Hyltenstam, Pieter Muysken, Shanley Allen, Sharon Unsworth, Elma Blom, Tanja Kupisch, Bernhard Brehmer, 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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