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HERITAGE LANGUAGES AND THEIR SPEAKERS

This book provides a pioneering introduction to heritage languages and their speakers, written by one of the founders of this new field. Using examples from a wide range of languages, it covers all the main components of grammar, including phonetics and phonology, morphology and morphosyntax, semantics and pragmatics, and shows easy familiarity with approaches ranging from formal grammar to typology, sociolinguistics to child language acquisition, and other relevant aspects of psycholinguistics. This book offers an analysis of resilient and vulnerable domains in heritage languages, with a special emphasis on recurrent structural properties that occur across multiple heritage languages. It is explicit about instances where, based on our current knowledge, we are unable to reach a clear decision on a particular claim or analytical point and therefore provides a much-needed resource for future research.

Maria Polinsky is Professor of Linguistics and Associate Director of the Language Science Center at the University of Maryland.

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MARIA POLINSKY

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Maria Polinsky
Frontmatter
More Information

Contents

Preface *Page* xiii
Acknowledgments xix
List of Abbreviations xxi

1 Who Are These Speakers, Where Do They Come From, and How Did They Get to Be the Way They Are? 1
1.1 Setting the Stage 1
1.2 The Main Players 9
1.2.1 Heritage Language Speakers 9
1.2.2 Baseline Speakers 10
1.2.3 Homeland Speakers 13
1.3 Main Outcomes in Heritage Grammars 17
1.3.1 Transfer from the Dominant Language 18
1.3.2 Attrition 22
1.3.3 Divergent Attainment 24
1.4 Main Sources of Divergence in Heritage Grammars 28
1.4.1 Amount and Type of Input 29
1.4.2 Incipient Changes in the Input 33
1.4.3 Resource Constraints 35
1.4.4 Universal Principles of Language Structure 36

2 Heritage English 38
2.1 Prologue 38
2.2 Heritage English: Historical Records 43
2.3 Heritage English: Current Production Data 46
2.3.1 Some Statistics 47
2.3.2 Changes in Morphology 49
2.3.3 Fillers 50
2.3.4 Verb–Particle Combinations 52
2.3.5 Relative Clauses 58
2.3.6 What They Get Right 60

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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04764-8 — Heritage Languages and Their Speakers
Maria Polinsky
Frontmatter
More Information

2.4	Linguistic Properties of Heritage English: Comprehension Data	65
	2.4.1 Processing Limitations	66
	2.4.2 Beyond Processing Limitations	69
2.5	Summary	73
3	**How to Study Heritage Speakers: Observations on Methodologies and Approaches**	76
3.1	General Remarks	76
3.2	Methodological Considerations Specific to Heritage Populations	78
	3.2.1 Choice of Production Tasks	78
	3.2.2 The Production–Comprehension Divide	86
	3.2.3 Use of Grammaticality Judgment Tasks	95
3.3	Assessment Methodologies	101
	3.3.1 Biographic and Demographic Questionnaires	102
	3.3.2 Linguistic Assessment of Heritage Speakers	105
4	**Phonetics and Phonology**	114
4.1	"Heritage Accent"	116
4.2	Production in the Heritage Language: Segments	123
4.3	Production in the Dominant Language: Segments	138
4.4	Production: Tone, Stress, and Prosody	147
4.5	Perception: Segmental Phonology	153
4.6	Perception: Tone, Stress, and Prosody	158
4.7	Summary	162
5	**Morphology and Morphosyntax**	164
5.1	The Fate of Paradigms	165
	5.1.1 Salience	165
	5.1.2 Overregularization and Overmarking	173
	5.1.3 Increased Analyticity	183
5.2	Structural Indeterminacy and Ambiguity	184
	5.2.1 Production Data	184
	5.2.2 Restructuring of Featural Oppositions	187
5.3	Morphology Encoding Relationships between Two Constituents	197
	5.3.1 Case Marking	197
	5.3.2 Agreement	204
	5.3.3 What About Isolating Languages?	215
5.4	Summary	219
6	**Syntax**	222
6.1	Some Things Never Change? Parts of Speech	223
6.2	A-Dependencies	230
	6.2.1 Unaccusativity	230
	6.2.2 Other A-Dependencies	236
6.3	Beyond A-Dependency: Other Valency Alternations	238

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CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-04764-8 — Heritage Languages and Their Speakers
Maria Polinsky
Frontmatter
More Information

6.4	A-Bar Dependencies	241
	6.4.1 Relative Clauses: Production	241
	6.4.2 Relative Clauses: Comprehension	244
	6.4.3 Other A-Bar Dependencies	248
6.5	The Silent Problem	253
	6.5.1 Referential Pronouns: General Remarks	253
	6.5.2 Referential Pronouns: An Example	260
	6.5.3 Bound Variables	261
	6.5.4 Ellipsis	263
6.6	Binding	270
6.7	Word Order	273
	6.7.1 General Considerations	273
	6.7.2 Ignore Morphology, Alter Your Word Order	275
	6.7.3 Discontinuous Relationships between Elements of Structure	277
	6.7.4 Germanic Languages in Contact: Changes in V2	281
6.8	Transfer Effects?	286
6.9	Summary	288
7	**Semantics and Pragmatics**	291
7.1	Lexical Systems and Word Meaning	292
7.2	Propositional Semantics	298
	7.2.1 Genericity, Specificity, Definiteness	298
	7.2.2 Scope	304
7.3	Information Structure and Pragmatics	310
	7.3.1 Topic	310
	7.3.2 Focus	316
7.4	Social Pragmatics	323
7.5	Summary	327
8	**Heritage Languages and Their Speakers in Unexpected Places**	329
8.1	Preliminary Remarks	329
8.2	Heritage Speakers among Endangered Language Speakers?	333
	8.2.1 Biographical Data	333
	8.2.2 Structural Signs of Endangerment	334
	8.2.3 Variation in Judgments	345
8.3	Coping Strategies	346
	Conclusions	349
	References	354
	General Index	405
	Language Index	408

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Cambridge University Press
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Frontmatter
More Information

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Maria Polinsky
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Preface

When I started this book about three years ago, I was motivated by an intellectual goal: to describe and analyze a phenomenon that I had been studying for two decades. As this phenomenon – language gained, language lost – gradually became clearer to me, I wanted to showcase all that had been discovered as well as draw attention to that which still needed to be understood – nothing but an academic's typical academic motivation for an academic book.

Yet, as I was working on this project, I realized that its core theme had been with me much longer; it had just taken me a while to appreciate what a wonderful set of problems had been handed to me. And so this book was equally driven by an objective scholarly question and by subjective bafflement. At the risk of offering too much information, I decided to talk about both of these in this Preface.

Let me start with the one that is easier to explain, the academic motivation. This book is about understanding those who speak more than one language but who may not speak one of them so well – a special type of bilinguals known as *heritage speakers*, people who learned a given language from birth only to later become more conversant in a different language, the dominant language of their society.

While the term *heritage speaker* is new, the phenomenon of unbalanced bilingualism has been around for a long time. Einar Haugen's prescient observation attests to that: "[t]he fact is that some degree of bilingualism is now and has always been a part of the experience of most human beings who have not remained rooted to the spot of their birth" (Haugen 1987: 13).

Definitions of heritage speakers and their languages differ; linguists wage debates as to whether such speakers count as native or not; whether they are competent, fully native, or somehow "imperfect" in their home language; and how they can be compared with each other in the face of bewildering variation. While these academic battles are fought in virtual space, language users on the ground have no problem recognizing someone as a heritage speaker, often in

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Maria Polinsky
Frontmatter
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the time it takes such a person to finish one sentence, and that alone adds validity to the *Gestalt* of someone who is like a native speaker but not quite. However narrowly or broadly linguists may try to define them, heritage speakers are real, and this reality is ever increasing in a world where moving from one country to another is becoming more and more common.

As speakers leave their original community, new cultural and linguistic identities are born, and it is our responsibility as scholars to study them, no matter what terminology we use. The questions are many: Are heritage speakers blessed with two or more languages, extra-rich consciousness, and multiple cultural identities, or are they cursed by a deficient knowledge of the language they left behind as they became socialized in a different language, usually the main language of their society? How much of a childhood language do people still remember when everything seems to be forgotten? And are those minimal childhood language memories thrown out for good, or are they filed away somewhere where they can be recovered with some effort? All these issues matter to any of us as long as we try to understand other people and figure out what makes humans function, what contributes to happiness and to sadness, what makes us learn, and what leads us to abandon memories.

Linguists are among those who try to answer all these questions, not least because language is central to human consciousness and cognition, and understanding how language works allows us to better understand psychology, development, and literacy. But, of course, along with these general questions, linguists also have more specific but no less important queries: what is it in language that one gets to keep, and what gets forgotten? This question matters most to a linguist who wants to know which parts of language structure are universal, or resilient, and which ones fall off easily. If we come to understand what components of language withstand the destructive forces of time and disuse, we can get closer to distinguishing between the load-bearing walls of language and the items that more closely resemble interior decoration and design – the ones that enrich language but could be left out under desperate need.

The attraction of the "imperfect" language spoken by heritage speakers lies in the things that remain and still make it a language in its own right. No matter how rusty, heritage speakers are impressive language users and creators, and it is good to think of their language as a window on language as a system rather than as something that is lacking or deficient. It behooves us to find out what they are missing, but that does not take away from our ability to marvel at what they know and are able to do: language ability par excellence – a phenomenon that has long enticed researchers.

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Frontmatter
More Information

In developing this book, I had the advantage of relying on a wealth of recent publications on heritage languages, including a book by Silvina Montrul (2016), a collection on Spanish as a heritage language (Pascual y Cabo 2016), and several handbooks (Bhatia and Ritchie 2013; Brinton et al. 2008; Kagan et al. 2017; Potowski in press; Wiley et al. 2014). The outlook I take in this book is complementary to the well-developed experimental and pedagogical perspectives adopted in most of the books cited herein.

Mine is the view of a theoretical linguist who would like to foreground facts and phenomena from a rather neglected set of languages and bring these facts to bear on theoretical linguistics. If this book manages to convince some readers to look at heritage languages differently – as valid and sometimes unfamiliar grammatical systems – and if it can show that heritage languages offer important data for theory construction, I will consider my job done. Of course, most overviews have to prune information and data – this book is no exception. Due to the groundwork laid in the publications mentioned earlier, I had the luxury of choosing certain experimental results that shed light on theoretical issues while devoting less time to the particulars of experimental design or statistical analyses, which can be explored in the work surveyed here. One of the main themes that I would like to underscore here is that in the current state of our knowledge, we are sometimes unable to reach a clear decision on a particular claim or analytical point, and in this sense, this book is not only a synthesis of what we have learned so far but also a pointer to exciting areas of research for the future.

***

And now to the personal journey, a small part of which is reflected in this book. In 1988, I arrived in the United States from a country that no longer exists: the Soviet Union. It was, in retrospect, a transition from one empire to another, but I was too traumatized by the experience to think about that at the time. In the Soviet Empire, everyone was supposed to speak Russian, but there was "speaking Russian" and *speaking Russian*. Everybody was equally poor and miserable, and material wealth was minimal, but the way people spoke Russian set them apart. Speaking Russian the right way was akin to living in an affluent ZIP code or driving a fancy car in twenty-first-century America. Missing a beat in that linguistic performance meant immediate exile to the cultural equivalent of the outskirts of town or the Ford Pinto. Russians – the *right* Russians – are not a forgiving crowd.

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Frontmatter
More Information

In my old country, only linguists cared about the hundred-odd other languages spoken in the Soviet Empire, but even linguists could not be free of the cultural snobbery that called for a particular pronunciation of reduced vowels, use of gerunds and participles, extensive word play, and covert citations, all in Russian, of course. People who spoke Russian and some other language were primarily judged by the way they spoke Russian; nobody worried about the state of their home languages, tongues such as Uzbek or Abkhaz. By assumption, that language was fine; what damage could speaking Russian possibly inflict on it? (That would be akin to worrying that learning to drive a car would impair your ability to ride a tricycle.) Speaking Russian represented a ticket to the top; the language could make people appear more cultured, more chic, more modern.

My first stop in the United States was in Los Angeles, at the home of relatives who had left Moscow about ten years earlier. Everything was new to me: the endless supply of bananas, free bags in grocery stores, large apartments, dishwashers – yet the most surprising thing of all was the Russian these people spoke. The cultural currency of my homeland had been replaced by an off-putting mix of Russian and English. Gone was the aristocratic pronunciation, the elaborate turn of phrase, the delicate cultural reference.

The bilingual offspring of the first-generation immigrants clearly preferred English. Their Russian had a slight accent. They could not understand jokes in Russian. They chose not to use their parents' language to talk about daily life. My communication with them was limited, reduced to discussing only the most basic of topics.

My first reaction was immense shock: How can these people talk like this? What they speak is not a language; it is the mere shadow of a language! How could they forget? It turns out that my reaction was nothing new. Einar Haugen comes to the rescue again; he cites several Norwegians who visited America in the 1850s and observed back then: "Such Norwegian as they talk here! It is so mixed with English phrases that I was quite annoyed when I first arrived" (Haugen 1953: 54). I am sure similar quotes can be found elsewhere; languages vary, but the reaction of a newcomer from the homeland is remarkably predictable.

It took me several months to realize that I had simply switched from one empire to another. Russian had become Uzbek; in my new homeland, English was the superior language, and it, like Russian in my old country, was used as cultural currency. This made me question what would happen to the Russian of first-generation immigrants like myself. And then I got to thinking that it would be important to document this type of Russian. However, there were people

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before me, such as Morton Benson (1960), who had similar realizations and did a fantastic job documenting American Russian. Although the Russian of first-generation immigrants had already been explored, I started wondering about the language of second-generation Russian speakers. That was my first step toward discovering heritage speakers.

The next step, and one that took a long time, was realizing that different heritage languages were quite alike, sharing a number of recurrent properties. They all had a grammar, one that was sometimes different from that of their parents' language, but a well-formed and fully functioning grammar that needed to be explained.

The name *heritage speaker* had not yet been coined; it came into use in the late 1990s, and it took a while for it to be accepted. In 2001, while I was teaching at the University of California San Diego, I founded the Heritage Language Program, and my time was equally split between raising funds for that nascent program and arguing with the university's Education Board that the term *heritage* was not ethnically derogatory. It is comforting to know that that battle is behind us, although new skirmishes over different terminology are bound to happen. People no longer cringe at the use of the term *heritage* to describe at least some bilinguals around us. The expression *heritage language* has become standard; it now has its own Wikipedia page and has been translated into several European languages, replacing the innocent *minority language* (Spanish now has *lengua herencia*, French has *langue d'héritage*, German has *Erbsprache*, and the Russian linguists are still sorting out competing terms).

Heritage languages have become an integral part of my life, helping me to become a more accepting speaker and a more knowledgeable linguist. My own children have grown up to be heritage speakers of Russian and have on occasion been participants in heritage language research. And my own uppity Russian has grown rusty, much less agile than when I was using it in Moscow many years ago – a telling sign that an individual's language constantly changes under the influence of social circumstances.

I did not speak about the two empires in jest. Most of the work discussed in this book is based on bilingual speakers in the United States, an empire that still has to come to grips with genuine, active bilingualism. Researchers working on heritage languages in Europe often comment that they cannot replicate some of the patterns observed in the American context; their bilinguals are more fluent, more balanced, and more literate than ours. The differences are in geography and size. Geographically, Turkish speakers in Amsterdam are closer to their homeland than Turkish speakers in Orlando, Florida. The geographic

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Frontmatter
More Information

separation of numerous minority languages in the United States from their homeland is partly responsible for the difference between American heritage speakers and minority speakers in places such as Western Europe and India. American English speakers are as magnanimously indifferent to the fate of Tongan in California or Chickasaw in Oklahoma as the Russians were to the fate of Uzbek or Abkhaz. Granted, not all empires work this way, but many do, as demonstrated by the development of the Romance languages after the spread of Vulgar Latin.

The United States is often thought of as a "language graveyard" (Rumbaut 2009): an empire imposing extreme constraints on bilingualism. Because of geography, land mass, cultural dominance, or lack of resources allocated to language maintenance, some languages can fall behind in bilingual use. Just as heritage languages in general can tell us what is resilient and what is vulnerable with regard to language design, so too can heritage languages in an empire tell us what aspects of language can or cannot be maintained under disadvantageous conditions. Creating a more favorable setting for keeping languages alive is up to all of us as members of a globalized society.

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Heritage speakers who shared both their stories and their language with me are the true heroes of this book. Thank you for letting me learn from you. This work is a small step toward understanding the rich universe behind your language.

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Abbreviations

ABS	absolutive
ACC	accusative
ADN	adnominal
ADV	adverbial
AOR	aorist
AP	antipassive
AUG	augmentative
AUX	auxiliary
CAUS	causative
CL	clitic
CLF	classifier
COMP	complementizer
COP	copula
DAT	dative
DECL	declarative
DEF	definite
DEL	delimiter
DEM	demonstrative
DET	determiner
DM	discourse marker
DOM	differential object marking
ERG	ergative
EV	epenthetic vowel
F	feminine
FUT	future
GEN	genitive
GJT	grammaticality judgment task
GN	genitive of negation
HAB	habitual
HON	honorific

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More Information

IMP	imperative
IND	indicative
INF	infinitive
INS	instrumental
IPFV	imperfective
IRR	irrealis
LOC	locative
M	masculine
MGT	matched-guise technique
MLU	mean length of utterance
NEG	negation
NOM	nominative
OBJ	object
OBL	oblique
OPC	overt pronoun constraint
PAS	position of antecedent strategy
PASS	passive
PFV	perfective
PL	plural
POSS	possessive
PRET	preterite
PRF	perfect
PRP	preposition
PRS	present
PRV	preverb
PST	past
PTC	particle
PTCP	participle
Q	question
REFL	reflexive
SBJV	subjunctive
SFP	sentence-final particle
SG	singular
SUBJ	subject
TOP	topic
VERS	versionizer
VOT	voice onset time

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