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Author

Kirschen, Bryan

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The *vaivén* of Spanish Heritage Speakers in the United States

Bryan Kirschen
UCLA

ABSTRACT

While there are many heritage languages spoken within the United States, Spanish is the language that is of particular interest in this study due to the fact that it is the predominant of the group. This study will present an introduction to the field of heritage linguistics and explore ways in which the divide between heritage language and second language learners can be remedied within the language classroom. Furthermore, I review future implications for the Spanish heritage speaking population.

KEY TERMS: *heritage speakers, bilingual education*

Within the realm of Heritage Linguistics there are two significant definitions, those of broad and narrow. The broad definition refers to those heritage learners or speakers who have been raised with a strong cultural component attached to a given language. As Polinsky (2010) stated at the First International Conference on Heritage/Community Languages, ‘[we] are all heritage learners in a way,’ bound by familial ties and emotional connections from our family history. The narrow definition of the heritage speaker, however, is the one that is resulting in copious amounts of studies under one of the many subcategories of bilingualism.

In the narrow definition, heritage speakers, according to Guadalupe Valdés (2000), are ‘individuals raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken and who are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language’ (381). To better understand and adapt this definition to outside of the United States, it is helpful to consider what Polinsky, Montrul and Benmamoun (2010) state is a prominent feature of a heritage language, as seen in their paper “Prolegomena to Heritage Linguistics.” Such a distinction is between the majority language and

the minority one, the former being “typically the language spoken by an ethno-linguistically dominant group in a country or region, and the latter being the language ‘spoken by ethno-linguistic minority groups’ (10). These two definitions seem to complement one another since the majority language will need to be substituted outside of the United States due to the fact that it will not always be English as in Valdés’ definition. Heritage speakers, representing a number of minority languages, can be found worldwide.

Given the increasing figures of Spanish speakers in the United States over the past several decades and the fact that many of these speakers are in fact heritage speakers, it should be unquestionably understood why Spanish matters in the United States today (Shin and Kominski 2010). Understanding exactly where heritage speakers fit into the Spanish-English bilingual continuum in the United States proves useful in order to assess what future implications may exist for these speakers.

The *vai vén* for Spanish heritage speakers in the United States suggests a toing and froing movement among and between the use of Spanish and English. Whether the heritage speaker is an impartial representative between the two languages is unlikely; however, there are certain characteristics that pertain to most heritage speakers that oscillate between the two languages called into question. Despite the variety of theories on what a heritage speaker is or is not, what can be certain is that at an early state one’s home language(s) is/are replaced by that of another. In many cases, this language quickly ceases to be, for an extended period of time, the dominant language of that person.

Another question that one may further analyze and discuss is that of the difference between acquiring a language and learning one. Spanish is most taught second language in the United States today, and students are **LEARNING** the language as their L2 (Furman et. al 2009). However, **ACQUIRING** has been used to describe the innate ability that one possesses at a young age to become proficient in a language without paying any metalinguistic attention to this process. When a Spanish heritage speaker enters the Spanish language classroom and is exposed to linguistic elements not yet acquired we may ask if, in fact, that person is relearning these elements or learning them for the first time. Exploration into such a study helps to better understand how heritage Spanish speakers differ from native Spanish speakers and those learning Spanish as a second language.

Heritage language speakers are often not included in studies related to language acquisition or the learning of a second language. Kushner-Bishop (2004) notes the large reluctance decades ago of the linguist or anthropologist to work with *imperfect* speakers of a given language due to the fact that they were *imperfect* representatives of the given group being studied (82). This idea has been widely rejected in recent years, especially in correlating heritage speakers to speakers with an underdeveloped linguistic system. The field of Heritage Linguistics is receiving much attention by scholars, noting that heritage language studies offers a great deal of valuable information not only of a given language, but of languages in contact and of the overall acquisition of language.

Two conflicting viewpoints are noted by Polinsky (2010) in regards to heritage speakers in the L2 classroom. On one hand, heritage speakers are often mocked and frequently made aware of the fact that they do not speak a standard variety of the language. With this stance, educators are less inclined to work with these speakers and, therefore, focus efforts on L2 learners. On the other hand, however, is the viewpoint that heritage speakers have the fundamental base of their language, and are more proficient, than L2 learners. In the latter case, the focus is often still given to L2 learners since the heritage speakers possess greater proficiency in the language. This predicament unfairly places heritage speakers as a low priority in the language classroom. For this reason, schools nationwide are implementing special courses and appropriate curricula for their heritage speaking students.

In the article “Stigmatized Spanish Inside the Classroom and Out,” Parodi (2008) focuses on the stigmas associated with heritage language Spanish vernacular, particularly that of Los Angeles. She suggests ways that educational institutions can face these issues to provide a welcoming and conducive environment for their heritage learners. In regards to the Los Angeles Spanish Vernacular, (discussed in detail in Villarreal’s article of this edition of *Voices*), lexical as well as phonological features differentiate this dialect of Spanish from what is considered to be the Mexican standard. As can be observed with most dialects of Spanish in the United States, Los Angeles Spanish Vernacular is in constant contact with English. This contact affects the language of these heritage speakers greatly. Parodi notes, ‘contact with English, in addition to affecting the vocabulary, has triggered grammatical and sociolinguistic changes in the Spanish spoken in the United States’ (203). Therefore, the ways in which Spanish and

English interact within the heritage speaker vernacular reflect individual experiences of the speaker.

In regards to the teaching profession, it is essential that educators be familiar with the characteristics that pertain to heritage speakers, as well as strategies that they can implement in their classrooms to provide for the most effective learning. In the case of the Los Angeles Spanish, Parodi states that the role of the Spanish instructor is crucial so as to preserve this vernacular 'which, likewise is threatened by English only policies' (204). Although Spanish heritage speakers have already internalized their phonological system, the core grammar of their language and have advanced listening skills when arriving to the classroom, outside factors still intervene and make many of these speakers uncomfortable with their language proficiency. It is for this reason that many choose to avoid Spanish completely at an early age and choose to accommodate to English, the language that other children are using in the playground and social settings. However, when the heritage language student enters the classroom it is crucial that the teacher discuss sociolinguistic factors so the students understand basic ideas behind regional and social variation as well as what the difference is between the standard language and a given vernacular of the language. It is also pivotal for heritage language students to understand that learning standard Spanish will not compete with their vernacular, yet greatly complement it.

Two of the most salient issues that affect the heritage speaker are that of the insecurity they may experience upon using their language in a domain that they are not familiar with and that of the stigmatization they feel towards their vernacular (Parodi 2008: 210). For these reasons, Maria Carreira, one of the leading researchers of Spanish Heritage Linguistics, in her presentation at the January 2011 MLA Convention, "Narratives as a Diagnostic and Teaching Tool in the Heritage Language Classroom," focuses on what the young heritage students are consciously aware of regarding their heritage language. In order to take on such research, Carreira requested that her Spanish heritage students to write a linguistic autobiography describing their identity via their use of language in society. These narratives, she says, were used to build resilience and empower students to move past discrimination. Such an activity works well in the classroom primarily because of the authenticity of the students drawing on their personal experiences and relating their stories with their classmates. Furthermore, this helps the instructor because it is not he or she

that needs to preach sociolinguistic differences to a young audience; the students are ultimately teaching themselves such complex lessons. The teacher benefits greatly by learning about the individual experiences of his/her students and is then able to plan subsequent lessons based on student interest and experience.

In providing students with the time and space to discuss their language background, their linguistic autobiography, we understand the fundamental role of the educator. The responsibility of the educator of heritage language students and learners is to help them take control of their language and empower them to embrace their linguistic abilities and not deter from them. The heritage speaker is often questioned about what many presume to be their incomplete acquisition of their language. Yet, what needs to be understood is that it is not any more imperfect than the standard language. Speakers of any variety of language can always learn more about their language and build higher degrees of proficiency in it. By having heritage speakers, an overwhelming proportion of the Spanish speakers within the country, become empowered by their language, we can ensure that Spanish continues to thrive in the United States and that the feelings of insecurity and stigmatization diminish.

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