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INTRODUCTION

The Linguistic Competence of Heritage Speakers

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This special issue is devoted to the linguistic knowledge of heritage language speakers, a bilingual population that has been receiving increasing attention in the linguistic and second language (L2) teaching fields in recent years. Although interest in the political, linguistic, and educational situation of heritage language speakers dates back several years (e.g., work by Dorian, 1981, on semispeakers of Gaelic), the topic of heritage speakers has been approached predominantly from the perspectives of language policy and identity (see the special section of *The Modern Language Journal*, 2005), education (Valdés, Fishman, Chávez, & Pérez, 2006), sociolinguistics (Silva-Corvalán, 1994) and, most recently, linguistics (Polinsky, 2007) and pedagogy (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007). Two recent publications that bring together the multiplicity of perspectives are Kondo-Brown (2006) and Brinton, Kagan, and Bauckus (2008). A section of the 2010 issue of the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* was also devoted to heritage language speakers. Interest in this population from a linguistic and L2 perspective is more recent, and the time is ripe for a major journal like *SSLA* to publish a special issue on this important topic. Following a thematic issue on language attrition (the loss of first-language [L1] and L2 skills) published in *SSLA* in 1989, the publication of a thematic issue on heritage language speakers offers an opportunity to bring the issue of language loss (broadly defined) in a L2 environment back to the attention of the *SSLA* readership.

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WHAT ARE HERITAGE LANGUAGES AND WHO ARE HERITAGE SPEAKERS?

Broadly defined, heritage languages are ethnic minority languages spoken around the world. In North America, Europe, and Australia, there are at least two types of minority languages. One type includes indigenous languages of a group of speakers who have always inhabited the region where the majority language is now spoken: for example, Welsh in Wales, Catalan in Catalonia, Quechua in Peru. The second type includes languages spoken by groups of immigrants who move to a host country where another majority language is spoken: Arabs and Turks in Germany and The Netherlands, Punjabi speakers in the United Kingdom; Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, Hindi, Russian, and many other immigrant groups in the United States and Canada (Cummins, 1995; de Bot & Gorter, 1995; Fishman, 1991).

This special issue only deals with immigrant languages as heritage languages. Although heritage languages have been part of the linguistic landscape of many nations around the world for many years, what is new is the growing sense that minority languages are worth preserving and maintaining, rather than suppressing or ignoring. It is also no accident that academic and political interest in heritage language speakers has been increasing dramatically since September 11, 2001, particularly in the United States. Indeed, about 30% of undergraduate students in American colleges and universities are heritage speakers of an immigrant language; in California, this percentage is even higher, at around 40% (Carreira & Kagan, 2011).

Definitions of heritage language speakers vary from very broad to very narrow (Hornberger & Wang, 2008). Broad definitions may consider anybody with a distant cultural and affective connection to a language minority group to be a heritage speaker, even if the person has no proficiency in the language; in contrast, narrower definitions may be as restrictive as to include only highly proficient users of the minority language. Those interested in understanding the nature of heritage speakers' proficiency and competence in the heritage language tend to adopt Valdés's (2000) definition of a heritage speaker: "a student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language" (p. 1).

In the context of the United States, heritage speakers are individuals who immigrated in early childhood with their parents and other family members, or children of immigrants. Whereas the parents are either monolingual or dominant in the family language—speaking a full variety of the language—the children grow up speaking English as well as the family language. In the sociolinguistics literature (Silva-Corvalán, 1994),

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the parents are the first-generation immigrants, the children are the second-generation immigrants, and the grandchildren are the third-generation immigrants. First-generation immigrants tend to preserve full command of their native language as they learn the majority language (although there may be borrowings and other lexical changes as discussed by Polinsky, 2000, for Emigré Russian).[1] At the other extreme is the third generation, who grew up speaking English as a L1 and may have very little, if any, productive knowledge of the heritage language. Those who exhibit most variability in bilingual ability are the second generation—the group most often discussed in studies of incomplete acquisition in heritage language speakers (Montrul, 2008). This group is heterogeneous and may include children of first-generation immigrants born in the host country to at least one first-generation parent. It also includes immigrant children who come to the host country before the age of 5. In terms of types of bilingual profiles, this group may include (a) simultaneous bilinguals, those exposed to the heritage and the majority language before the age of 3–4; (b) sequential bilinguals or child L2 learners, those exposed to the heritage language at home until age 4–5 and to the majority language once they start preschool; and (c) late child L2 learners, children monolingual in the heritage language, who received some elementary schooling in their home country and immigrated around ages 7–8.

It is in the second generation when language shift in the home typically occurs, due to the fact that children are schooled in English and have a strong desire to fit in with the new society. Even when the parents may speak the family language at home with each other and with the children, a very common pattern in these immigrant households is that the children speak English to the parents and their siblings; they do not often use their heritage language with other children who speak the same heritage language (Anderson, 1999; Bolonyai, 2007; Moag, 1995). With language shift, there are concomitant changes in the bilingual balance of second-generation children until adulthood. As the majority language begins to be used more than the home language, the heritage language lags behind in development. If many of these children are minority-language-dominant in early childhood, they can be balanced bilinguals during the school-age period but eventually become dominant in the majority language when they reach adolescence. By college age, the majority language is both stronger and dominant in proficiency and domains of use. Due to this rapid shift, which is very common in the United States as a result of its covert English-only language policies, heritage speakers are native speakers of the majority language by the third generation. Some may have partial knowledge of the heritage language (if a grandparent or other relative lives in the home), whereas most do not. By the fourth and subsequent generations,

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the language is no longer used in the family. This pattern of declining bilingualism shows how heritage languages do not survive intergenerational transmission, not only in the United States but also in many other countries, even when they are supported by continuous immigration.

ON THE LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE OF HERITAGE SPEAKERS

There are both theoretical and practical reasons for why heritage language speakers are relevant to both linguistics and SLA. Normally developing monolingual children eventually attain full command of their native language and, from a purely linguistic perspective (leaving aside dialectal differences), there is little variation in the nature of linguistic knowledge among adult native speakers (Chomsky, 1986). However, despite having been exposed to the heritage language early in childhood like monolingual children, heritage speakers do not form a homogeneous group. In fact, unlike monolingual children, the range of linguistic ability and proficiencies reached by heritage language speakers in adulthood varies considerably—from minimal aural comprehension ability to full fluency in written and spoken registers, and everything else in between, as aptly captured by Valdés's (2000) definition of a heritage speaker. For this reason, it has been claimed that many heritage language speakers do not completely acquire their family language in childhood (incomplete acquisition) or may have acquired and later lost parts of their language in childhood (attrition; Montrul, 2008; Polinsky, 2007). As adults, these children of immigrant families wish to learn, relearn, or improve their current level of linguistic proficiency in their family language and they seek to reacquaint themselves with the language in college classes.

Recent research has uncovered that adult heritage language speakers display significant gaps in their linguistic knowledge when compared with age-matched peers who possess full command of the language. In fact, to illustrate this phenomenon, three of the articles in this special issue present original empirical data and discuss some characteristics of heritage language linguistic competence: Albirini, Benmamoun, and Saddah introduce the complex linguistic situation of Arabic heritage speakers; Polinsky discusses Russian heritage speakers, whereas O'Grady, Kwak, Lee, and Lee present Korean heritage speakers. These three articles show that heritage language grammars display simplification and erosion of morphosyntactic features, which are typically controlled by monolingual children at an early age. The fact that these speakers have incomplete or partial knowledge of their L1 raises several fundamental theoretical questions, such as (a) the time it takes for a native language to be acquired and solidified so that it does not go away with fluctuations in input, (b) the stability of linguistic knowledge in early childhood, (c) the significant role of input required to develop and maintain language skills, (d) the role of universal

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linguistic mechanisms that drive linguistic knowledge and restructuring under reduced input conditions, and (e) the role of age and cognitive development in language acquisition and loss, among others. Many of these questions are intrinsically difficult to tease apart in monolingual acquisition when all factors work in tandem, but the study of heritage speaker populations may offer a unique perspective on the relative influence of these factors in the language learning process and outcome. These three articles touch on the relevance of their findings for some of these questions for both theoretical linguistics and language acquisition.

HERITAGE LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND L2 LEARNERS

Heritage language speakers are also relevant for SLA, for both theoretical and pedagogical reasons. An increasing trend in many foreign language classes, originally conceived and developed for L2 learners, is the presence of heritage language speakers; this holds especially for Spanish, Russian, and East Asian languages as well as the less commonly taught languages (Farsi, Hindi, Arabic, Turkish, and Modern Greek). Among language teachers and program directors, there is growing recognition that heritage language learners are a different breed whose partial knowledge of the language presents a unique set of challenges to language teaching practices. Indeed, among certain political circles, heritage language learners represent a valuable national resource, as they can potentially fulfill the need for advanced and competent speakers of critical languages (Campbell & Rosenthal, 2000). Thus, it is fundamental to understand how and how fast heritage language learners can learn their heritage language in a classroom setting and whether it is realistic to expect them to become full native speakers.

If the same or different teaching methods and materials utilized in L2 classes are to be used with heritage speakers, any pedagogical practice must be informed by a deep understanding of what L2 learners and heritage speakers have or do not have in common. On the one hand, heritage language and L2 learners differ in the age of acquisition of the target language, the type of exposure (input), and the context of acquisition (naturalistic vs. instructed). For some theoretical accounts, the learning mechanisms deployed in childhood and adulthood are very different and, therefore, the outcome of L1 and L2 acquisition is also different (see Slabakova, 2009). In general, adult heritage speakers have good or better aural comprehension skills than oral production and written skills. By contrast, L2 learners have better written skills than oral skills, by virtue of having learned the language primarily in a formal setting with limited opportunity for interaction with native speakers. Thus, their language learning experience may play a role in how they process and learn the language in the classroom.

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However, heritage speakers also share some characteristics with L2 learners, including nonnativelike attainment and transfer errors from the dominant language (Montrul, 2008). In fact, recent research has revealed that many of the problem areas typical of L2 learners, like inflectional morphology for example, seem to be problem areas for heritage speakers as well (Au, Knightly, Jun, & Oh, 2002). Given these findings, it is crucial to carry out systematic comparisons of L2 learners and heritage speakers to understand the linguistic ability of the two types of learners as well as areas of differences and similarities. What has occupied the emerging field of heritage language education so far has been what to teach (content and materials) and how to best organize programs that address the linguistic and affective needs of the growing and changing heritage language speaker population (see Brinton et al., 2008). Therefore, pinpointing specific areas of linguistic knowledge in which the heritage language speakers and L2 learners may differ or not is an important first step in informing any type of classroom-based instructional intervention, materials development, or language program direction. However, most importantly for the field of SLA, the study of heritage language learners can also inform classic theoretical debates on the nature of linguistic knowledge as a function of age and experience in L2 learners. The other three articles in this special issue contribute to these important questions. Bowles focuses on Spanish heritage language learners' degree of implicit and explicit knowledge of the language as revealed by different types of tasks, whereas Montrul discusses how data on different aspects of morphosyntax in Spanish L2 learners and heritage speakers inform debates on the nature of morphological variability in L2 learners and the role of experience in language processing. Finally, Keating, VanPatten, and Jegerski compare Spanish L2 learners' and heritage speakers' processing of overt pronouns and discuss how the interface vulnerability hypothesis applies to the two groups.

CONTRIBUTION

By bringing the importance of the heritage speaker population to the attention of SLA researchers, this special issue will hopefully stimulate more empirical research on these language learners. Theory-based empirical research can then be used to inform pedagogical practices and to help us gain a better understanding of the process, mechanisms, and factors that underlie successful and unsuccessful L1 and L2 learning as a function of a different or changing linguistic environment.

NOTE

1. First-generation immigrants are the typical case studies of language attrition studies because they are assumed to have completed the process of L1 acquisition.

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