

**Introduction: Spanish Heritage Speakers: Bridging Formal Linguistics,
Psycholinguistics and Pedagogy**

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The study of heritage speakers in general and of the linguistic knowledge of Spanish heritage speakers from sociolinguistic and educational perspectives in particular dates back from the 1960s and 1970s. However, it is only recently that heritage speakers have been noticed and valued by other fields with a longstanding interest in the nature of human language use and native speaker competence: formal linguistics, child language acquisition, adult second language acquisition, bilingual acquisition, psycholinguistics and neurolinguistics (see Benmamoun, Montrul and Polinsky, 2010, and the forthcoming 2011 special issue of *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* edited by S. Montrul). This special issue of *The Heritage Language Journal* is devoted to Spanish as a heritage language, and to understanding the linguistic and psycholinguistic dimension, and the potential pedagogical implications, of heritage speakers' knowledge. Studies of this sort, which focus on heritage speakers as individuals rather than as part of a social group, are still in their infancy but have much to add to our current understanding of heritage speakers' linguistic development, and they complement and illuminate the characterization of heritage speakers within the sociolinguistic and educational traditions.

Many sociolinguistic studies have focused on describing the language of heritage speakers as examples of different emerging regional and community varieties of Spanish in the United States (e.g., the Spanish of Los Angeles, the Spanish of New York, the Spanish of Miami, the Spanish of the Southwest) and most frequently address theoretical issues in language contact and change as a sociohistorical phenomenon (Lynch, 1999; Silva-Corvalán, 1994; Otheguy, Zentella & Livert, 2007; Zentella, 1997), as well as issues of language and identity (Potowski, in press). By contrast the formal linguistic and psycholinguistic perspectives regard language change in heritage speakers as an individual phenomenon in the mind, at the level of knowledge, representation and use, and avail themselves of a variety of experimental methods to investigate the nature of these individual grammars. Three of the five articles in this special issue (Bowles, Cuza and Frank, and Montrul and Perpiñán) make use of different off-line experimental methods to understand the linguistic competence of different groups of Spanish heritage speakers. In their article, Bolger and Zapata discuss in great detail all the possibilities that different types of psycholinguistic research methods have to offer to investigate the implicit linguistic knowledge and psycholinguistic processing of Spanish heritage speakers, ranging from off-line methods as used in many contributions up to the present time to online measures of reaction times and neurolinguistic imaging techniques like Event Related Potential (ERPs). Bolger and Zapata seek to inform and educate researchers about the potential of psycholinguistic approaches to heritage language acquisition and therefore review various available techniques that should be within the reach of most researchers. Studies of this sort, Bolger and Zapata argue, may be able to elucidate

more clearly the challenges Spanish heritage speakers face when processing their first language online, in real time. As we know, language processing is deeply related to language acquisition and language use, two goals of linguistic theory. And heritage speakers are very relevant to our understanding of language and language acquisition as studied by linguists.

It is widely assumed in the generative linguistics tradition, for example, that any normally developing child brought up in a predominantly monolingual speech community eventually acquires the language of the environment completely at age-appropriate levels and, once acquired, the mature linguistic competence remains relatively stable throughout the lifespan (Crain & Lillo-Martin, 1999, Chomsky, 1981). Yet, successful and complete language acquisition depends on receiving a minimum threshold of input that will trigger the full development (i.e., age appropriate) of language abilities and grammatical proficiency. Full development also means that most morphological and phonological errors common to normal language development before age five are overcome by the time the child is ready to begin school. Changes observed in bilingual grammars are seen as a result of the process of acquiring two grammars in response to differential amounts of input.

Even though complete acquisition of the phonology, morphology, syntax and discourse properties of the language is the most natural outcome of monolingual acquisition in childhood (vocabulary keeps growing throughout life), the same is not necessarily true in bilingual acquisition, where one of the languages may lag behind in development and end up incompletely acquired at the levels of phonology, morphology, syntax and discourse pragmatics, especially if it is a minority language as with heritage speakers. Incomplete acquisition is also a term used to describe grammatical competence and accuracy and not communicative competence. That is, a bilingual child may be delayed in their language development (and therefore produce errors with the articulation of sounds or morphological endings in nouns and verbs, for instance), but still be highly competent when interacting with speakers of the language and communicating with them in a particular register.

Montrul (2008) defines an individual's grammar as "incomplete" when it fails to reach age-appropriate linguistic levels of proficiency as compared with the grammar of monolingual or fluent bilingual speakers of the same age, cognitive development, and social group. Incomplete, partial, or interrupted acquisition (Montrul, 2002, 2008; Polinsky, 2007; Silva-Corvalán, 1994, 2003) is a specific case of language loss that differs from L1 attrition, in both the time in life when the language is affected and the extent of the loss. Attrition implies that a grammatical system had a chance to develop completely into adolescence and remained stable for a while before some grammatical aspects eroded later on. Incomplete acquisition, on the other hand, occurs primarily in childhood due to input and use that is insufficient to develop the full system.

Distinguishing whether the linguistic outcome of heritage language acquisition is due to attrition, incomplete acquisition, or both can be teased apart only with longitudinal studies or by well-designed experimental studies. (For more discussion, see Montrul, 2008). When we are dealing with stable but incompletely acquired systems in adults, as in the young, college-age adult heritage speakers who have been the focus of most of the existing studies, it is hard to

reconstruct the processes that may have led to their present grammatical knowledge in the heritage language. For lack of a better term, the term *incomplete acquisition* has been frequently used to refer to the ultimate non-target like attainment of adult heritage language speakers whose first and primary language became secondary in domains of use and grammatical ability.

Some scholars object to the use of the term *incomplete acquisition* to describe the resulting grammatical behavior of adult heritage speakers (e.g., Carreira and Potowski, this issue, footnote 1) preferring instead the sociolinguistic view that heritage speakers' language is "different." Their view is that incompleteness may imply deficiency of some sort and that heritage speakers should not be regarded as linguistically "deficient" but as speaking a different regional variety altogether. These claims are based on the structural characteristics of the Spanish spoken by millions of heritage speakers in the United States. However, from the perspective of language acquisition, there is a beginning and an end in the process of language development at the level of grammatical structures, and it is possible for a bilingual child not to reach full development in one of the languages in some linguistic areas (morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics). What makes it difficult to consider the language of heritage speakers as a variety of its own from an acquisition perspective is that there are clear proficiency effects, at least in heritage speakers of the second generation of immigration. That is, second generation heritage speakers with the lowest levels of proficiency in the language are often the ones who have reduced vocabularies, are limited to basic word order and make morphosyntactic errors with case, gender agreement, and other morphology. Their language differs markedly from the language spoken by their parents. A widely discussed example is Russian (Polinsky, 2007). While most Russian parents produce case markers in Russian, their heritage Russian-speaking children make numerous case errors. Furthermore, speaking of a "variety" assumes that a group of people communicate and use this specific variety of language and that they have converged on these patterns as a society. But this may not be the case. Most heritage speakers speak the heritage language with their parents or some other elderly family member; the children typically use the majority language with each other, and even with siblings, regardless of the language that the parents speak. Thus, individually, heritage speakers do not reach all the structural milestones in their language because they do not use the language as often as needed for them to reach those milestones (some of which are reached at age 10 or beyond, such as the subjunctive) and, individually, they present certain features and "errors." Finally, although varieties of languages differ on morphosyntactic features, such variation is fully systematic. For example, accusative clitic-doubling is very common in Argentine Spanish, but is disallowed in Mexican Spanish. In Iberian Spanish, the second person plural is *vosotros*, while it is *ustedes* in all other varieties. Fluent speakers of these varieties do not produce *vosotros* or *ustedes* inconsistently, in the same sentence or conversation. But low and intermediate proficiency heritage speakers are quite inconsistent in their use of inflectional morphology (see Montrul, in press). Like second language learners, they make gender errors and verb agreement errors that are not found in any variety. For example, they may use the same noun with one gender in one sentence and another gender two sentences later (**la perro, el perro* "the dog", *la abuelita, *el abuelita* "the granny"), which is usually termed morphological variability. Thus, we can speak about heritage language grammars in general as having certain structural characteristics that differ from those of fully fluent bilinguals and monolinguals of the same variety. But these characteristics are most likely

due to an interruption in the normal transmission of the language in childhood, rather than to exposure to a different language variety spoken by parents and siblings or their immediate network of heritage speakers.

Many errors made by heritage language speakers resemble the errors made by second language learners, an issue that has received considerable attention in recent years and that is specifically addressed in the contributions by Montrul and Perpiñán and by Bowles in this issue. Moreover, many heritage language speakers take classes in their heritage language and an important debate, discussed by Carreira and Potowski in this issue and elsewhere, is whether heritage speakers belong in special programs geared exclusively toward them. That is why investigating the ways in which L2 and HL learners differ, and do not differ, has profound pedagogical ramifications. Montrul and Perpiñán's study investigates knowledge of tense/aspect and mood morphology in Spanish using four written tasks. They found that the Spanish HL learners were more target-like than L2 learners with early acquired aspects of language, in this case grammatical aspect. But HL learners were not necessarily more native like than L2 learners with structures acquired during later language development, in this case mood. The fact that the subjunctive is acquired much later than tense and aspect in general, including in L1 acquisition, and the fact that a lot of its acquisition may be related to schooling are two of the factors discussed by Montrul and Perpiñán that may explain these trends. In general, HL learners tended to be more accurate than L2 learners in linguistic tasks that minimize metalinguistic knowledge, in this case the sentence conjunction judgment task used to test both types of verbal morphology. By contrast, L2 learners seemed to perform more accurately on written tasks and tasks that tap metalinguistic knowledge, as with the morphology recognition task. Although not conceived as a pedagogical study, this contribution has clear pedagogical implications, which Carreira and Potowski consider in more detail in their discussion.

Can some of the structural characteristics of heritage speakers be due to influence from English, the dominant language? This is the question addressed by Cuza and Frank in their study of the role of transfer from English in the acquisition of double-*que* questions in Spanish among heritage speakers in the U.S. In Spanish, there is a difference in the interpretation of indirect questions. In some constructions, the indirect question is a statement, when it has only one complementizer, as in *María le dijo a Juan a dónde fueron los niños* (statement). But it is possible in Spanish to add *que* before *a dónde* if the intended meaning is an indirect question: *María le dijo a Juan que a dónde fueron los niños* (indirect question). In English, indirect questions only have one complementizer position, not two. Cuza and Frank present results from three written untimed tasks, revealing significant difficulties in the production and acceptability of double-*que* questions. The heritage speakers showed a decreased level of use of double-*que* structures and no distinction in their acceptability of statements versus questions. Only when the two structures were presented together, as in the preference task, the heritage speakers were able to perceive the semantic shift introduced by the double-*que*. The results suggest that transfer from the other language prevents the complete acquisition of these properties, or perhaps their attrition, even at high levels of bilingual proficiency. Although the types of structures discussed in this study may not often be described in classroom settings, the fact that their interpretation is

affected by transfer from English provides an opportunity to draw classroom instructed heritage speakers' attention to these tendencies and how Spanish and English differ in this respect.

Carreira and Potowski remind us that the field of heritage language acquisition is in urgent need of more pedagogical research, and they assess the value of what linguistic and psycholinguistic studies, like the ones portrayed in this special issue, have been able to uncover so far about grammatical knowledge and use. Carreira and Potowski remind us that other basic questions still do not have answers, including questions related to how discursive, pragmatic, and register features are acquired through formal study by heritage speakers, as well as how affective factors and Spanish language maintenance are affected by instruction. Some of these issues are addressed in Bowles's contribution, since this is the article most directly related to what goes on in mixed classrooms, both at the grammatical and at the socioaffective level. Bowles also compared the linguistic performance of pairs of HL-learners and L2 learners as they completed oral and written communicative activities in Spanish. Of special interest was how the two types of learners initiated language related episodes (LREs), or moments when the learners may have been actively engaged in actual language acquisition. Bowles found that the interactions were beneficial for both types of learners, although in different ways: while the HL learners helped L2 learners with vocabulary during the oral task, the L2 learners assisted the HL with orthography in the written tasks. The socioaffective questionnaire Bowles used to assess the learners' level of comfort working with each other yielded highly significant responses from both groups as they indicated the mutual benefits of working together in the classroom. Bowles concluded that in a shared classroom environment both groups of learners can learn from and with each other.

In conclusion, linguistic and psycholinguistically informed empirical research like the one portrayed in this special issue can 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 heritage language acquisition as a function of a different or changing linguistic environment. Although there is still much to learn about heritage language speakers' linguistic knowledge and how they learn in the classroom, this special issue will hopefully generate more stimulating research on these and other important topics, and will also promote research and evidence-based pedagogical practices, not only in Spanish but in other heritage languages.

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