From Silence to Voice: Empowering Heritage Language Speakers in the 21 Century

1

Erin Boon and Maria Polinsky

Topic: Heritage Speakers of Spanish as a part of the bilingual American community.

Abstract: This report present and discuss some salient properties of heritage languages. A heritage language is an ethnic or immigrant minority language which is the weaker of a bilingual speaker's two languages. Heritage speakers feel a cultural or family connection to their heritage language, but their most proficient language is the one that is dominant in their community. In the case of American heritage speakers of Spanish that language is English.

Keywords: Spanish, heritage language, bilingualism, teaching

Meet Robert, Samantha, Margot, Alexandra, and Juan.
Robert is an engineer; he graduated from a prestigious American university before returning to his home town of Atlanta. He works in a large firm, travels a great deal, and enjoys spending time with his family, including his

parents and his older siblings Jenny and Lewis. At home, they all speak English with a typical Southern drawl. Robert also speaks and understands Spanish, because when he was growing up in a gated community outside Atlanta, he had an Argentinian nanny, Rosana. Rosana went back to Argentina when Robert grew up, and he's never studied Spanish in school or in college, but he still talks to Rosana in Spanish on the phone from time to time.

Samantha grew up in south-central Los Angeles. Her family is from Oaxaca; she herself was born in L.A. and has never been to Mexico, but she grew up eating Oaxacan food and listening to her large family speaking of their days in their homeland. Samantha now works as a receptionist in a medical office close to USC, where she gets to use both English and Spanish; sometimes she calls her mother to ask what a given Spanish word means, and she easily switches between English and Spanish when she talks to her friends.

Margot lives only a hundred or so miles south of Samantha, in a secluded area in La Jolla, California. Her family moved there from Mexico City when Margot was a baby, and her younger siblings were all born in La Jolla. Her father owns a number of factories in Tijuana, Mexico, just across the border from San Diego, but Margot and her siblings rarely go there. They prefer traveling to Europe; everybody speaks English there and it is much easier to get by.

Alexandra grew up in the Bronx, and although her family was Jewish, all her friends were Dominican and Puerto Rican immigrants; she still keeps in touch with some of them, and readily goes back and forth between English and Spanish when they chat on the phone. Alexandra took Spanish in high school and quickly discovered that the language she learned from her friends was vastly different from the language in her textbook; she recalls her experience in Spanish class as a nightmare. "Every time I spoke, my teacher mocked and belittled me for saying everything wrong. Apparently what was right for my friends was not right for the Anglo woman who was teaching me…"

Juan grew up in rural Guatemala; his parents spoke a Mayan language and knew very little Spanish. They encouraged him to learn Spanish when he was little because having a working knowledge of the dominant political language of the region can open a lot of doors in Guatemalan society. When his family relocated to New York in the 1990s, Juan was genuinely surprised to find that knowing Spanish was not important after all—it was English that really mattered. He was lucky to have arrived in the USA as a teenager, where he quickly learned enough English to serve as a translator for his parents who speak only halting English and Spanish.

What do all these people, with such different life stories, have in common? They all share some knowledge of Spanish: from the ability to understand it a little, like Robert or Margot, to a quite robust grasp of the language, like Juan. For all of them, Spanish co-exists with English, the language they are generally more comfortable speaking. They all underwent their principle schooling in English and either had no formal education at all in Spanish (like Robert, Margot, or

2

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

OBSERVATORIO
de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

Samantha) or had some educational experience (like Juan), which was not always positive (like Alexandra in her high school Spanish class).

All these people, and millions like them with equally diverse life stories, are known as *heritage speakers* of Spanish. According to the US Census Bureau, Spanish is spoken at home by over 37.5 million Americans today, and that number is projected to become even larger as the twenty-first century progresses (Ryan 2013). Despite this enormous population, the status of Spanish in the United States is less solid than it may seem. Why? Well, what usually happens is that the second and third generations of people who identify as Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino are typically dominant in English, and oftentimes their Spanish is less "complete" and functional than it might seem. Rather than being true native speakers of Spanish, the children of Hispanophone households are likely to become *heritage speakers* of Spanish, joining what is already among the largest heritage language community in the US. The daily immigration that brings new native speakers of Spanish into the US may obscure this trend, but there is no denying it: just like most of the other languages brought to this country by immigrants, Spanish is subject to the famous "three generation" rule: the first generation (those actually born in the home country) are dominant in Spanish; the second generation (those born in the U.S. of immigrant parents) speak Spanish but are more dominant in English; the third generation (those whose grandparents were the original immigrants) are pretty much monolingual in English (Haugen 1953; Fishman 1966). They may have Spanish-sounding names, love listening to hot Latin songs, and enjoy the cuisine of their homeland, from paella to tamales, but their command of the language is reduced to a few set phrases used to greet their *abuela* or *tio*.

Heritage Spanish is just one of many heritage languages spoken in the USA. In what follows, we will present and discuss some salient properties of heritage languages. Research into heritage languages is an emerging field, but heritage languages themselves have existed throughout human history. There have been heritage speakers as long as the process of immigration has moved families across language borders, dividing bilingual communities into *dominant* and *minority* language settings. Technically speaking, a heritage language (HL) is an ethnic or immigrant minority language which is the weaker of a bilingual speaker's two languages. HL speakers feel a cultural or family connection to their home language, but their most effective and frequently-used language is the one that is dominant in their community (in the case of American heritage speakers of Spanish, of course, that language is English). Despite heritage speakers' childhood exposure to the language of their ancestors, their mastery of that language typically does not reach their parents' or grandparents' level of fluency. In fact, under some broad definitions of the term, a "heritage speaker" might have no language ability at all in the HL, in which case that language is a "heritage language" primarily in a cultural rather than a linguistic sense (Fishman 2001; Van Deusen-School 2003). In the classroom, heritage speakers of this type

OBSERVATORIO de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

may be equipped with family or cultural motivation to learn the HL, but they will have no particular language skills that set them apart from their peers. Linguistically speaking, they are essentially indistinguishable from other second language learners. These "cultural" heritage speakers are not the speakers of interest in HL research.

The true heritage speaker, from a linguistic perspective, is one whose personal experience with the HL has led to a real amount of proficiency in that language. Under this narrower definition, heritage speakers are individuals who were raised in a home where a language other than the dominant community language was spoken, resulting in some degree of bilingualism in the HL and the dominant language (Valdés 2000). A heritage speaker may also be the child of recent immigrant parents, who abruptly shifted from his or her first language to the dominant language of his/her new community when the family immigrated. Crucially, in order to meet the linguistic definition of the term, this "heritage speaker" must have begun learning his or her HL before, or concurrently with, the language which eventually became his/her stronger, dominant, language. The bilingualism that ultimately results from this situation may be biased, or even heavily imbalanced, in favor of the dominant community language, but some HL abilities will nevertheless persist as a result of that early exposure to the heritage language. In the context of the United States, the dominant language is American English, and any one of the hundreds of immigrant and Native American languages which are still spoken in homes and local communities is a potential HL.

Heritage speakers have been called semi-speakers (Dorian 1981), incomplete acquirers (Montrul 2002; Polinsky 2006), early bilinguals (Kim et al. 2006), and unbalanced, dominant, or pseudo-bilinguals (Baker and Jones 1998) The unification of these several ill-defined categories under a single term "heritage speaker" (first used in Canada; see Cummins 2005, p. 585), has focused the efforts of linguists and educators and set in motion a research agenda with far-reaching implications. The central goals in the study of HL can be broken down as follows: (i) describing precisely what it means to be a heritage speaker and identifying the range of variation among different HLs and their speakers; (ii) using patterns in the structure of HLs to inform our understanding of the uniquely human ability to create and use languages in general; (iii) testing the possibility of predicting the degree of HL maintenance or loss for a particular individual or community; and (iv) determining the particular pedagogical challenges presented by heritage speakers in the classroom.

Before a researcher can address any of these questions, he or she must determine the language which will serve as the *baseline* for comparison with the HL. The *baseline language* must be the precise variety of the language that the heritage speaker was exposed to during childhood, as spoken by native speakers in natural situations. Importantly, this will not necessarily be the standard language variety spoken the native population, nor is it likely to be an exact

4

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

match for the variety that is taught in the language classroom. The home language of heritage speakers is usually a regional dialect, and exposure to other dialects or a formal standard is unusual. For example, it is only reasonable to expect that a child raised by Mexican Spanish-speaking parents will learn Mexican Spanish, and will have no particular affinity for any other Spanish dialect or variety. Very often, the only exposure the heritage speaker has to his or her HL is through the speech of a particular small group of close relatives during childhood. The speech of this small group is highly unlikely to be representative of the entire native-speaking population, nor will it necessarily expose the child to all the possible contexts in which the language can be used. These limitations inevitably shape the version of the HL that heritage speaker learn. Establishing the baseline language in HL studies is not always obvious or easy, but understanding precisely what form of the language was the actual target language for the child learner is essential for determining how close that child has come to achieving complete acquisition. Using the standard of the language rather than a relevant baseline for comparative purposes would be counterproductive.

At this stage, a fundamental refinement of our definition of the heritage speaker is in order. Heritage speakers may show similarities in their personal language history, within and across HLs, but they do not all show equivalent abilities in their respective HLs. Individual speakers will vary in how close their mental representation of the HL comes to that of a native speaker. This variation is reminiscent of a concept developed in the study of creole languages—the "continuum" model. Proponents of this model suggests that, rather than imagining the same level of proficiency for all heritage speakers with a common profile, we should expect each speaker to fall somewhere along a continuum of ability, which stretches from those who can almost pass as native speakers to those who can barely string a few words together in the HL. Those on the higher end of this continuum are highly proficient speakers with only slight deviations from the norms set by fully native speakers; those on the lower end of the continuum may have had only very limited exposure to the language during childhood and perhaps never spoke it themselves. Heritage speakers will differ in where they fall along this continuum, and there are many factors at play in determining the abilities of a bilingual.

By definition, a heritage speaker's exposure to the HL is based around the home and family. Within this family context, there is often a great deal of variation among the language experiences of different heritage speakers. Both the length and manner of a child's exposure to her HL can have a large impact on how well she ultimately masters that language. Let's illustrate this idea with a couple of examples:

First, imagine a scenario in which a five-year-old girl moves with her family from Mexico City to Los Angeles. Let's call her Anna. Prior to the move, Anna was immersed in Mexican culture and the Spanish language not only at home, with

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

OBSERVATORIO de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

her parents and older siblings, but also in the wider community. Once she and her family arrive in California, Anna continues to use Spanish with her family, and also has the opportunity to keep practicing her language skills in an extensive local Spanish-speaking community. It's true that the language she uses in school is English, and she speaks English more and more with her friends as she grows up, but Anna's parents choose to continue using Spanish at home and consider knowing the language to be an asset to their children's future career prospects.

Now, imagine another child, who we'll call Ricky. Ricky was born and raised in rural Maine, and exposed to English (and a little French) in the wider community. Ricky's mother, however, is from Argentina, and moved to Maine only a couple of years before Ricky was born. She speaks some Spanish with her son at home, and also uses it when she talks on the phone with her family back in South America. Ricky has no siblings, and uses only English with friends, so his mother is his only source of Spanish input.

For these two hypothetical children, the manner and length of their exposure to Spanish is clearly not equivalent. The differences in these two children's linguistic upbringing will inevitably have an effect on their eventual abilities with their shared heritage language, Spanish. For Anna, Spanish has been an active and encouraged presence throughout her life, whereas Ricky has been exposed to Spanish only incidentally. Differences like these, as well as differences in family attitudes toward the heritage language and culture, have been found to correlate with children's ultimate success in learning the HL (Au and Oh 2005).

The continuum model we mentioned above is a tool that can help us formalize the variation we see among heritage speakers, but ultimately, it is the characteristics that these speakers have in common that allow us to categorize them as a unified group of bilinguals. These similarities have to do with the personal language history of heritage speakers, which, as we mentioned earlier, must include home exposure to the language during childhood. Because the primary language exposure these children receive is informal and based on conversation with family and community, we generally find that heritage speakers' strongest heritage language skills lie in the area of aural comprehension. Stories abound about children who belong to the second or third generation of an immigrant family, who understand their grandparents when they speak to them in Spanish but choose to—or have to—respond in English. This scenario is extremely common across heritage speakers from all different languages. Especially for those speakers who grow up overhearing the HL but rarely speaking it themselves, it is natural that their greatest linguistic strength will be in understanding others rather than in producing any language themselves. What is interesting, however, is that even aural exposure alone has been found to confer some amount of language ability on heritage learners (Au and Romo 1997).

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

OBSERVATORIO de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

Once we look beyond comprehension skills, we find that the ability of heritage speakers to successfully reply to those Spanish-monolingual grandparents will vary greatly from person to person, and will largely depend on the child's access to a larger heritage language community. Again, this makes some intuitive sense; consider once more the two prototypical heritage speakers we introduced a few paragraphs above. Anna, who grew up in a community of Spanish-speaking immigrants in L.A., will have had ample opportunity to hear and use Spanish in her daily life. For Ricky, on the other hand, whose Spanish exposure is limited to the occasional conversation with his mother at home, the opportunity to practice speaking Spanish in everyday contexts has been much more limited. Given the different circumstances in which these two children grew up, it will come as no surprise to us that Anna's ability to comfortably speak and use Spanish is much stronger than Ricky's.

Unfortunately, it seems that a heritage speakers' confidence in their own HL skills is primarily determined by their ability to speak the language, and much less dependent on their comprehension skills. Often, a cycle will develop where the heritage speaker will try to say something in Spanish but fail to sound quite like a native speaker, thus reinforcing his/her already low confidence in his or her language abilities and ultimately discouraging him or her from using the language again in the future. The stability of the heritage speakers' confidence and positive attitude toward their heritage language are fundamental to buoying their proficiency in the HL—without confidence and a positive attitude, the speaker finds little motivation to maintain the language. If this goes on for long enough, ultimately the speaker's skills in the language may stagnate.

Whether heritage speakers possess any reading and writing abilities will depend on the amount of formal instruction they have received in their HL. As we mentioned above, a heritage speaker's exposure to the HL is unlikely to have included formal instruction. Since most heritage speakers are either home learners or young immigrants, formal schooling in the HL is rarely a component of their personal history. Very often, heritage speakers only achieve literacy in their dominant language, and those literacy skills are not always transferable to the HL, especially if the heritage language uses a different writing system or requires knowledge of a formal written register. (Imagine, for instance, a child of immigrant parents who speaks Russian at home but learns English in school. Even if she's perfectly comfortable with spoken Russian, her ability to read and write in English is certainly not going to be much help in deciphering Cyrillic!) Children who have already received some amount of formal schooling before they immigrate will have an advantage in this regard, but adult-level literacy does not simply follow from learning the connections between sounds and symbols on the page. Exposure to literary composition comes gradually, and one's own literary style continues to develop into adulthood. It is unreasonable to expect a speaker with elementary level literacy to understand the language of their heritage culture's literature. Generally speaking, though, if a heritage speaker possesses

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

literacy skills at all, she is likely to be better at reading than writing. This observation lines up with what we saw for spoken language ability: in both cases comprehension (passive knowledge of the language) is stronger than production (active knowledge of the language).

Now that we have established a precise description of what constitutes an HL, it is possible to look for patterns across different HLs and their speakers. Heritage speakers who are capable of speaking at least a bit of their heritage language often show similar strengths and weaknesses. In particular, they generally give the impression of fluency (often more fluency than they actually have), because their accent is close to that of a native speaker (Au and Romo 1997). For reasons that are still unknown, even speakers on the low end of the heritage speaker continuum sound native-like. Unfortunately, in the context of a formal language classroom, this misperception of fluency can result in the heritage speaker being placed in a class that is too advanced, where the language instructor has unreasonable expectations of his or her abilities (Peyton et al. 2001). The seemingly near-native pronunciation of heritage speakers often belies an incomplete or divergent underlying grammatical knowledge. The strengths and skill gaps of such speakers will not necessarily match those of their classroom peers, most of whom will be "typical" second language learners with an entirely classroom-based knowledge of the language. Heritage speakers in formal language classrooms tend to excel at pronunciation and aural comprehension, but without previous formal instruction, their overt knowledge of grammar may lag behind that of traditional language students considered to be at the same level.

Another feature that recurs across different HLs is simplification of the grammatical system. Adjustments that reduce the complexity of the baseline grammar can manifest in many ways; heritage speakers may make changes to the expected word order of a sentence (Sanchez 1983; Silva-Corvalán 1994; Halmari 1997), use a reduced set of grammatical cases for nouns (Seliger and Vago 1991; Polinsky 1996; Halmari 1998), or eliminate ambiguity in other ways. Speakers of heritage Spanish, for example, have been known to avoid using verbs of achievement in the imperfect tense. The imperfect tense is generally associated with a sense that an action is *ongoing* in the past (like English "he *was walking*"), while achievement verbs typically describe an event with a *clear endpoint* (like "enter" or "catch"). Often, heritage Spanish speakers seem to overgeneralize the meaning of the imperfect tense so that it cannot be used to indicate a completed action. Thus, they will never use it with a verb of achievement, even though native speakers find such constructions perfectly acceptable (Montrul 2002).

Native speakers of Spanish also allow the subject and verb to be flipped in some situations, resulting in an optional verb-initial sentence structure, for example, as in *Siempre hablan los niños.* Heritage speakers, however, avoid this word order; in the example above they are likely to use the subject-verb order:

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

OBSERVATORIO
de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

Los niños hablan siempre. That suggests that their Heritage Spanish is restricted to a more rigid sentence structure than the baseline language (Sanchez 1983; Silva-Corvalán 1994; Halmari 1997; Isurin and Ivanova-Sullivan 2008). On the other hand, heritage speakers of many languages are apparently quite native-like in their treatment of high-frequency fossilized forms. A *fossilized form* is a set phrase or "frozen" expression in a language—examples from English include expressions like "be that as it may" and phrases that refer to specific times or locations such as "at home" or "on Tuesday", and examples from Spanish include such expressions as "con razón" or "en fin", or "ni modo que". It turns out that heritage speakers are quite good at maintaining these sorts of fossilized forms in their HL, at least for frozen expressions that occur frequently in the day-to-day language. The ease with which they use these frozen phrases—and with native-like pronunciation, no less—tends to add to the impression that heritage speakers are more fluent than they really are, especially when these phrases are actually somewhat grammatically complex. But despite this outward impressions, the language as they know it is really more like a simplified variant of the baseline than a full-fledged language.

The most fruitful application of HL research is within the domain of language teaching. At a time when the US is turning outward more and more, economically, politically, and culturally, the integration of our own population of bilinguals is essential. Heritage speakers are an untapped resource in America, and, especially in today's globalized state, they should be encouraged to develop their language skills. Their advantages over second language learners, particularly in pronunciation and cultural insight, give them a clear leg up in eventually achieving native-like fluency. The children of those 37.5 million Spanish speakers in America have a far better chance than adult second language learners of reaching a functional proficiency in Spanish, even if their childhood exposure was as minimal as simply overhearing the language spoken by a couple of relatives at home. However, finding pedagogical solutions to the challenges faced by heritage language learners in the classroom is difficult unless the classroom language instructor is familiar with the nature of HL. Without some sensitivity on the instructor's part to the heritage speaker profile, the HL learner may fall through the proverbial cracks and miss out on the opportunity to regain proficiency in his or her home language.

As we mentioned above, the home language of heritage speakers, which we have also called their *baseline language*, is often not the same variant of the language as what is being taught in the classroom. Recall the plight of Alexandra, the girl from the Bronx who learned Spanish from her Puerto Rican friends and neighbors, but found herself lost and stigmatized in a formal classroom setting. Her complaint that "apparently what was right for my friends was not right for the Anglo woman who was teaching me…" is a commonly-encountered issue in language classrooms across America. If the instructor is not sensitive to the particular needs and abilities of HL speakers, those learners may wind up feeling

9

harshly judged because of their dialect-heavy language skills. If their efforts at language mastery are continually undermined by this disconnect between their heritage intuitions about the language and the prestige variety being taught in class, eventually they will lose their motivation to continue with formal language learning (Wiley 2008).

This situation is made even worse in cases where the instructor is biased in favor of one dialect over another, whether consciously or unconsciously. Such "instructor bias" has been discovered in the attitudes held by members of university Spanish departments in the US toward academic Spanish as it is spoken by Spaniards, Mexicans, Latin Americans, and Chicanos. A study found that the educators' views on literacy and prestige dialects resulted in prejudices that favored certain varieties of academic Spanish and disfavored others (Valdés et al. 2008). It is, of course, unreasonable to expect that every variety or dialect be given its own course materials, but language instructors can better accommodate HL learners simply by recognizing that they sometimes use non-standard language because it is their dialect, and not a learner error. A mix of HL learners and traditional language learners in the same classroom can even be considered an asset. Understanding the culture attached to a language community is one of the primary goals of a language course. HL learners are able to contribute their own cultural insight into that language community, and in return, the interest of their classroom peers encourages them to maintain a positive attitude toward their HL.

The pedagogical challenges posed by heritage speakers are not always easily solved, however. The first step in addressing the particular needs of the HL learner in the classroom is finding a reliable evaluation method for their abilities. As we discussed above, with a heritage speaker, impressions of language competency can be misleading—their accent and comfort with set phrases are not representative of their overall fluency. Like native speakers, heritage speakers speak a dialect rather than the standard language, and speaking casually may even seem to come naturally to a highly proficient heritage speaker. Heritage speakers may also share a certain cultural fluency because of their family connection to the HL. These advantages can be intimidating to their classroom peers, who generally have a different set of strengths and weaknesses. Because of their classroom-based exposure, second language learners are more likely to perform well on written tasks than on aural reception tasks, for example; by contrast, the strengths of heritage speakers are the exact opposite. With their exposure to the language mostly confined to its spoken form, heritage speakers excel at aural reception and struggle with written tasks. The identification of fundamental differences like these in the needs of HL learners has led in recent years to the rapid development of dedicated HL learner classes—in course catalogues across the country, you can see classes like "Spanish for heritage speakers" popping up more and more. Generally, these classes are adapted from traditional courses designed for the teaching of foreign

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

languages, but with a more learner-centered approach overlaid on the standard curriculum (Carreira 2004). The goals of HL learners are primarily related to maintaining the language abilities they already have, expanding those abilities, developing literacy skills, and learning the standard or prestige variety of their HL (Valdés 2000, p. 390). There is clearly some overlap between these goals and those of traditional language learners, but a dedicated HL class might achieve those goals more effectively.

Although there are certainly benefits to HL-specific language classrooms, there are nevertheless enough similarities in the skills sets of HL and traditional second language learners to make a successful shared classroom possible in cases where there is no dedicated HL track available. Both HL learners and traditional learners tend to prefer simpler grammatical structures, such as those without subordinate clauses, which require less sentence planning, and they tend to avoid using structures which require the speaker to remember and connect words across distances within a sentence (such as pronouns or reflexives referring back to a previous noun). For example, in tasks where learners are asked to judge how acceptable a given sentence or phrase is in the language they are learning, both heritage speakers and traditional language learners are reluctant to reject ungrammatical options. Both kinds of learners share an uncertainty about their own intuition of the language's grammar and are shaky on what may or may not be permissible. On the lower end of the heritage speaker fluency continuum, the advantage of a good accent may be the only characteristic differentiating the HL learner from her peers. But even speakers higher on the continuum will have learning objectives in common with traditional students. Both kinds of students will benefit from more and varied contact with the language, classroom conversational practice, the development of literacy and exposure to literature, the mastery of a written register, and discussion of complex grammar. The HL learner is certainly a different sort of learner, just as the heritage speaker is a different sort of bilingual, but those differences are not necessarily an obstacle to achieving their learning objectives in a shared classroom.

One of the biggest challenges encountered with heritage speakers as language students is found in the initial assessment of their abilities. Heritage speakers' peculiar strengths in certain areas of the language often show up on these assessments, but the gaps in their language knowledge are less obvious at the beginning of a language course. A good accent and a sprinkling of regional vocabulary indicate a very proficient traditional second language learner, but these qualities are just par for the course for heritage speakers. In order to consistently assess the appropriate level of classroom placement for HL learners, it is necessary that a quick, yet reliable, method be developed to test language skills in a different, deeper way than traditional placement exams. Typically, classroom placement exams rely on textbook-based language knowledge, but this is clearly unsuitable for someone like a heritage speaker, who has probably never been exposed to such textbook language. Given the HL learner profile, a three-

11

OBSERVATORIO
de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

component testing procedure has been suggested, consisting of (i) an oral test, (ii) a short essay, and (iii) a biographical questionnaire (Kagan 2005). A test comprising all these components could potentially be very time-consuming, however, and will also be impractical for testing heritage speakers whose abilities are on the lower end of the fluency continuum. Methods for a quick, reliable test of both high- and low-level heritage speakers are still being investigated, and a couple of avenues look promising. For instance, a measure of the speech rate of a heritage speaker—i.e. his words-per-minute output—has been found to correlate with the deeper grammatical abilities of the speaker, making it a good indicator of overall language level (Kagan and Friedman 2004; Polinsky 2008). Additionally, a simple vocabulary test of about 200 words has been found to be a similarly helpful and easily measurable test of HL ability (Polinsky 1997; 2000; 2006). For the purposes of placement in a language class, these tests are extremely helpful. Even so, once they are placed in a classroom, heritage speakers will be best served if researchers are able to establish the nature of their knowledge—i.e. the grammar of the HL itself—more precisely. To do so, we need to develop methods that are capable of testing the bounds of a heritage speaker's language knowledge. With this goal in mind, the Language Sciences Lab at Harvard University (also known as the Polinsky Lab) has been conducting research designed to evaluate the relative worth of different investigative methodologies.

A common testing method in linguistic research is the so-called "grammaticality judgment task," in which the participant is asked to decide whether or not she finds a given bit of language grammatically acceptable. This task may be fine-grained beyond a simple yes/no option; a particularly widely used variant of the task allows the participant to use a scale from one to five to rate the acceptability of the language sample. Regardless of the feedback format used, however, this task can be difficult to use well in HL studies, since heritage speakers are known to be reluctant to form such judgments at all. This is not surprising: this kind of task demands some amount of critical thinking about the language, which in turn requires the sort of higher-order awareness of one's language that usually only develops through exposure to formal education or with the onset of literacy. In fact, this kind of language awareness is effectively the opposite of a native speaker's natural intuition about language usage, and we have seen that a heritage speaker's sense of his/her HL is more like the native speaker's intuition than a critical understanding of the grammar. In short, heritage speakers are hesitant to form opinions about language samples or to reject a linguistic structure as ungrammatical because the task itself feels utterly foreign to them. They are not used to thinking critically about their HL, and their hesitation and lack of faith in their own intuition gets in the way of establishing their real sense of the grammar. Grammaticality judgment tasks have been criticized as an inappropriate evaluation method for second language learners, and for the same reasons, they are inadvisable as an evaluation tool for heritage

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

speakers: the anxiety of the testing context will not produce results that are representative of either speaker's true language knowledge (McDonald 2006).

Recent studies into effective testing of heritage speakers recommend the use of testing methods designed for other populations with limited language abilities, such as child speakers (Polinsky 2006; Potowski et al. 2009). Tasks designed to test comprehension ability rather than grammatical judgment is also proving to be a viable alternative to more traditional experimental tasks. An example of such a test is the truth-value judgment task, in which the participant sees a short story and is afterwards asked to judge whether a sentence is true or false within the context of that story. Sentence-picture matching, in which the participant is asked to match a picture with a sentence that he just heard, has proven to be quite useful as an evaluation tool as well. The first-ever direct comparisons between grammaticality judgment tasks and picture-matching sentence comprehension tasks in Spanish and Russian were recently conducted in the Polinsky Lab. The results of this study confirm that heritage speakers, like second language learners, are poorly evaluated by grammaticality judgment tasks. This follows from (1) their reluctance to reject or rate forms that are ungrammatical in the baseline, and (2) the fact that thinking critically about their HL does not come naturally to heritage speakers in the first place. Direct testing of HL knowledge in the form of comprehension tasks avoids the complications introduced by unnatural testing situations such as the grammaticality judgment task.

Comprehension tasks can test heritage speakers' understanding of their HL grammar, but it is also important to develop tasks which elicit HL speech from the heritage speaker. In order to look for patterns in heritage speech, we need to collect large bodies of language samples for comparison. To this end, researchers at the Polinsky Lab have been amassing samples of different HLs and making these samples publicly available to other researchers and educators. Language samples can be elicited in a number of different ways. Sometimes what is collected is a narrative, in which the participant tells the story of a short video clip that they have just seen. In other cases, the heritage speaker is asked to direct a native speaker to move figures around on a map, and the resulting speech is recorded. The transcriptions of these language samples are being made publically available on the Polinsky Lab Dataverse website, http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/polinsky.

A guide to the HL transcriptions has been developed in the Lab to standardize the annotations used, and this guide is also available on the Dataverse site. The sound files of the samples are available on Dataverse as well, but access is password-restricted. The multimodal nature of these corpora makes them especially attractive as a source for further research. Corpora for several HLs have already been collected, digitized, and transcribed, but the process is ongoing.

13

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

OBSERVATORIO de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

Collecting speech samples is always a laborious task, and it is made more difficult by heritage speakers' characteristic hesitation to use their HL. Not only does the context of the sample collection need to be managed by someone properly trained, but the transcriptions of the collected samples also need to be as accurate as possible so that they are useful to other researchers. In order to facilitate the transcription of the collected HL samples, the Polinsky lab has developed a mobile application that can record and prompt heritage speakers to re-iterate certain aspects of their speech. This application, eScribe, has been built on the Android platform, and is available as freeware. eScribe allows untrained researchers and transcribers to easily and accurately reproduce the language samples they have collected in a form that will be helpful to others who are working with HL. Users can record one another while speaking, then transcribe the recorded speech using either the internal keypad or an external keyboard. There is also a built-in feature to manage slow re-speaking, a process where speakers slowly repeat what was said in order to facilitate the later transcription process.

Along with collecting speech samples from volunteer participants, Polinsky Lab researchers have been instrumental in advocating for "Spanish for Heritage Speakers" class at Harvard University. This class was offered for the first time during the Fall of 2013, and the Lab monitored it closely. The students' progress in language learning was tracked through speech samples taken from each student at the beginning and the end of the course. Student successes, failures, and level of engagement have been noted in connection with the teaching strategies used in the classroom. The value of such a meticulously conducted case study in the ongoing search for improved HL teaching methods is considerable.

Once the collection of language samples for a given HL is complete, the next step is to analyze the resulting language corpora in order to identify interesting speech patterns and areas of further grammatical interest. Researchers then take a closer look at these interesting patterns in a controlled environment. There are several such projects ongoing in the Polinsky Lab. One project relates to the phenomenon of gender and number agreement in Spanish. Linguists are interested in the fact that Spanish grammatical gender/number agreement holds even when the agreeing elements within a sentence are separated by a distance of several words; for instance, in the following example, the noun *las cartas* is separated from the adjective *escritas,* but the adjective still has to match the noun in number (plural) and gender (feminine) : *Considero las cartas en el tablero excelentemente <u>escritas</u>*. An experimental study conducted in the Polinsky Lab showed that native speakers are sensitive to violations in number agreement, and are equally sensitive to the violation of gender agreement when the noun is feminine (*la carta*) or masculine (*el libro*). Heritage speakers, on the other hand, only notice agreement errors when the noun is feminine; it is as if they ignore the masculine gender. In that regard, they are

14

similar to second language learners of Spanish, who also pay greater attention to the feminine and make more errors with masculine nouns. It might seem like this is an indication that heritage speakers and second language learners are similar, but studies of other grammatical phenomena show that that's not the case at all. For example, Spanish second language learners have a great deal of trouble learning to use the particle *se*, as in *¿Cómo se llama usted?*. Often, they simply leave this particle out, producing sentences like *¿Cómo llama usted?* instead. Heritage speakers, by contrast, tend to overuse *se,* putting it in contexts where it is absolutely impossible, as in *El conejito* **se** *vio el lobo.* Understanding the similarities and differences among native speakers, heritage speakers, and second language learners is a labor-intensive and demanding task, but knowing what these three groups have or do not have in common is important both for linguistic theory and for educational policy.

The in-depth investigation of HL outlined above is part of a broader research agenda that aims to produce an understanding of heritage linguistics that goes beyond the anecdotal suggestions of the language teacher and really gets at the underlying workings of the HL grammar. Once that kind of detailed understanding is in place, it is our hope that efficient classroom methodologies will naturally follow. Why is it necessary to adapt classroom methodologies for heritage speakers? As we saw in the first part of this article, these speakers typically grow up surrounded by their heritage language, but rarely receive formal instruction in that language. When they attempt to start re-learning their home language in college—as a growing number of heritage speakers in America are doing—it will often be the first time they have ever been exposed to literacy in their HL. The unique language history of heritage speakers creates significant pedagogical challenges. In addressing these challenges, it is important to educate both heritage speakers-turned-learners, who must adapt to a new, formal approach to learning their informal home language, and their teachers, who are used to dealing with traditional second language learners, an entirely different population.

Although the language they set out to learn in the classroom is a dialect of their home language, heritage re-learners are constantly reminded by their instructors of the differences between the way they speak and the way they *should* be speaking. An emphasis on the standard, or "prestige", variety of the language is still prevalent in many heritage classrooms. Consider, in this context, the following remarks made by a heritage speaker of Spanish who was enrolled in re-learning classes while in high school (interview reported in Leslie 2012, pp. 16-17): "[W]e all got the idea that Spanish was this very formal thing that we learned and that we presented on, but we liked to relax and enjoy ourselves with our friends and speak English." As long as teachers' attitudes to non-standard varieties remain dismissive, heritage speakers will continue to feel discouraged in their attempts to re-learn their HLs. We see it as an important mission of our lab to promote more inclusive and positive attitudes among educators and to

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

OBSERVATORIO
de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

broaden the perspectives of language instructors concerning the needs of heritage speakers. To provide just one example, studies have clearly shown that heritage speakers benefit from context-based instruction, in which speakers are encouraged to build on their pre-existing strengths and engage in a process of discovery where they themselves formulate hypotheses about their language, involve their family members in the learning process, and compare the language variety presented in class and in their textbooks with the language they were exposed to at home. The first ever Heritage Spanish class offered at Harvard in the fall of 2013 was designed with these factors in mind, and constitutes an important step in the right direction.

The dissemination of knowledge on heritage languages is not limited to the classroom, but is also conducted through multiple workshops and Heritage Language Institutes that take place annually around the country. These Institutes, which meet on different campuses every year, have been attracting researchers and educators of heritage languages alike, and the number of attendees has been steadily growing, from a couple of dozen participants at the first Institute held at UC Davis in 2007, to over two hundred participants at the Institute in 2013.

Spanish in the United States today is being increasingly recognized as more than just a language of immigrants. It is the home language of millions of Americans and a vibrant minority language in communities across the country. Heritage speakers of Spanish, the children of Hispanophone households, and young immigrants themselves, must be recognized as part of that bilingual, American community. Fluency in Spanish, therefore, is an increasingly desirable skill. As heritage speakers continue to seek formal language instruction in ever greater numbers, more effective methods of evaluating and addressing their strengths and weaknesses are critically needed. Heritage language research may be a relatively new field, but it is also one which is extremely relevant in modern America. Many different disciplines contribute to inquiry into heritage languages; the ultimate outcome of that inquiry is a set of tools needed to cover the distance from silence to voice. Heritage language research gives heritage speakers, who are used to being silent in their first language, a new voice, one that can make them truly bilingual and bicultural.

References

Au, Terry and Janet Oh. 2005. "Korean as a heritage language." In *Handbook of East Asian Psycholinguistics, Part III: Korean Psycholinguistics*, edited by Ping Li. Cambridge: CUP.

de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos
OBSERVATORIO

Au, Terry and Laura Romo. 1997. "Does childhood language experience help adult learners?" In *The Cognitive Processing of Chinese and Related Asian Languages,* edited by H.-C. Chen, 417-441. Beijing: Chinese University Press.

Baker, Colin and Sylvia Prys Jones. 1998. *Encyclopedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education.* Philadelphia: Clevedon Multilingual Matters.

Carreira, Maria. 2004. "Seeking explanatory adequacy: a dual approach to understanding the term 'heritage language learner.'" *Heritage Language Journal* 2:1.

Cummins, James. 2005. "A proposal for action: Strategies for recognizing heritage language competence as a learning resource within the mainstream classroom." *The Modern Language Journal* 89: 585-92.

Dorian, Nancy. 1981. *Language Death: the Life Cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect.* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Fishman, Joshua. 1966. *Language loyalty in the United States*. The Hague: Mouton.

Fishman, Joshua. 2001. "300-plus years of heritage language education in the United States." In *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource,* edited by J. K. Peyton, et al., 81-98. Washington, D.C.: Delta Systems, and McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Halmari, Helena. 1997. *Government and Codeswitching: Explaining American Finnish.* Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Halmari, Helena. 1998. "Case-assignment and adverbials in Finnish-English bilingual sentences." In *Language Contact, Variation, and Change,* edited by Jussi Niemi, et al. Joensuu, Finland: University of Joensuu.

Haugen, Einar. 1953. *The Norwegian language in America*. Vol. 1: *The Bilingual community.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Isurin and Ivanova-Sullivan. 2008. "Lost in between: the case of heritage Russian speakers." *Heritage Language Journal* 6: 1.

Kagan, Olga. 2005. "In support of a proficiency-based definition of heritage language learners: The case of Russian." *International Journal of Bilingual Education* 8: 213-221.

Kagan, Olga and Debra Friedman. 2004. "Using the OPI to place heritage speakers of Russian." *Foreign Language Annals* 36: 536-545.

Kim, Ji-Hye, Silvina Montrul, and James Yoon. 2006. "On the logophoric long-distance binding interpretation of the Korean local anaphor 'Caki-casin' by early bilinguals." *Proceedings of the Annual Boston University Conference on Language Development* 30: 305-315.

OBSERVATORIO
de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

McDonald, J. 2006. "Beyond the critical period: Processing-based explanations for poor grammaticality judgment performance by late second language learners." *Journal of Memory and Langugae* 55: 381-401

Montrul, Silvina. 2002. "Incomplete acquisition and attrition of Spanish tense/aspect distinctions in adult bilinguals." *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 5: 39-68

Peyton, Joy K., Donald A. Ranard, and Scott McGinnis, eds. 2001. *Heritage Languages in America: Preserving a National Resource.* Washington, D.C.: Delta Systems, and McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Polinsky, Maria. 1996. "Cross-linguistic parallels in language loss." *Southwestern Journal of Linguistics* 14: 1-44.

Polinsky, Maria. 1997. "American Russian: Language loss meets language acquisition." *Formal Approaches to Slavic Linguistics,* 370-407, edited by W. Brown, et al. Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Slavic Publications.

Polinsky, Maria. 2000. "The composite linguistic profile of speakers of Russian in the US." In *The Learning and Teaching of Slavic Languages and Cultures,* edited by Olga Kagan and Benjamin Rifkin, 437-465. Bloomington, IN: Slavica.

Polinsky, Maria. 2006. "Incomplete acquisition: American Russian." *Journal of Slavic Linguistics* 14: 161-219.

Polinsky, Maria. 2008. "Gender under incomplete acquisition: Heritage speakers' knowledge of noun categorization." *Heritage Language Journal* 6: 1.

Potowski K. J. Jegerski, and K. Morgan-Short. 2009. "The effects on instruction on linguistic development in Spanish heritage language speakers." *Language Learning* 59: 537-579.

Ryan, Camille. 2013. "Language Use in the United States 2011." American Community Survey Reports, US Census Bureau. http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/acs-22.pdf.

Sanchez, Rosaura. 1983. *Chicano Discourse.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Seliger, Herbert W. and Robert M. Vago. 1991. *First Language Attrition.* Cambridge: CUP.

Silva-Corvalán, Carmen. 1994. *Spanish in Los Angeles.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Valdés, Guadalupe. 2000. "The teaching of heritage languages: an introduction for Slavic-teaching professionals." In *The Learning and Teaching of Slavic Languages and Cultures,* edited by Olga Kagan and Benjamin Rifkin, 375-404. Bloomington, IN: Slavica.

Valdés, Guadalupe, Sonia V. González, Dania López García, and Patricio Márquez. 2008. "Heritage languages and ideologies of language: unexamined challenges."

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University

OBSERVATORIO
de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

In *Heritage Language Education: A New Field Emerging*, edited by Donna Brinton, et al., New York: Routledge.

Van Deusen-School, Nelleke. 2003. "Toward a definition of heritage language: sociopolitical and pedagogical considerations." *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 2: 211-230.

Wiley, Terrence. 2008. "Chinese 'dialect' speakers as heritage language learners: a case study." In *Heritage Language Education: A New Field Emerging*, edited by Donna Brinton, et al., New York: Routledge.

Erin Boon
PhD Candidate
Harvard University

Maria Polinsky
Professor of Linguistics
Harvard University

19

OBSERVATORIO
de la lengua española y las culturas hispánicas en los Estados Unidos

Instituto Cervantes at FAS - Harvard University