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## 4. Language Shyness and Heritage Language Development

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Heritage languages (HL) are languages spoken in the family, but not in the dominant society. HL's are difficult to maintain, let alone develop; shift to the dominant language of the country is very rapid, and is generally complete in a few generations (Veltman, 1983; Krashen, 1996). In this paper, we discuss one possible cause for the loss of heritage languages, a phenomena that appears to be quite common but has not been described in the professional literature. It is a kind of "language shyness" particular to speakers of heritage languages. It occurs when an HL speaker knows the HL fairly well, but not perfectly. What is often lacking are late-acquired aspects of language, aspects that typically do not interfere with communication but are important politeness or social class markers.

Because HL speakers are members of the HL group, their imperfections are very salient to more proficient speakers, who may respond by correcting and even with ridicule. Such responses can be devastating to less proficient HL speakers. Error correction and criticism do not help them; they have the opposite effect. Rather than risk error, they interact less in the HL. This sets up a vicious cycle—less interaction means less input, and less input means less proficiency. Because language is such a clear marker of social group membership, it could also contribute to alienation from the HL group.

The case histories presented here do not demonstrate how widespread the problem is, but they do demonstrate that it exists. My suspicion, after discussing this phenomena with many HL speakers, is that this kind of shyness is not infrequent. (Cases A, B, and C were students of mine in a graduate language education class.)

*Case A:* As a child in a city on the East Coast of the United States, A's parents spoke Spanish to her, and she feels that she acquired both Spanish and English at the same time, as her older sister preferred English:

As I grew older, I began to use Spanish less ... I spent my time at school and with my friends who were all born in America. Like many children, school and friends were of more interest to me than my parents and therefore I purposely set out to speak more English. Notice that I say speak more English, not speak less Spanish. I never set out to leave my native language behind. However, I did just that for reasons not of my choosing.

I began to realize as I spoke Spanish to my relatives, they would constantly correct my grammar or pronunciation. Of course, since I was a fairly young child the mistakes I made were "cute" to them and they would giggle and correct me. This ... would annoy me to no end. I wasn't trying to be "cute"; I was trying to be serious. My relatives would say, "You would never know that you are the daughter of an Argentine." Comments like these along with others are what I now believe shut me off to Spanish ....

*Case B:* B also grew up in a town in New Jersey that was 85% Hispanic. Both English and Spanish were spoken in her household. She was the youngest of five children, so "by the time I was born, there was a great deal of English spoken in the house." Her parents would speak to her in Spanish and she would answer in English:

Growing up I was the butt of many jokes ... When I was nine years old ... a man called, speaking Spanish very quickly. I stumbled through the conversation and got his name, Jorge. I left the message for my father that simply read "HORHEAD CALLED." They laughed about that for weeks and still bring it up to this day.

... every laugh and giggle chipped away at my self-esteem ... the innocent jokes and cracks took their toll on me and began the creation of a barrier between myself and my family....

Unlike A, B lived in an environment where a great deal of the heritage language was used among her generation, which added to her problem:

Along with family pressure, peer pressure played a large role as well ... my surrounding environment was filled with Spanish. Most of my

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peers were fluent native speakers. There was an unspoken expectation that if you were Hispanic, you should be able to speak the language fluently. This pressure put up a barrier with my friends as well.

Tragically, B blamed herself for not speaking Spanish well:

My self-esteem reached an all-time low in college. Several of my peers made well-meaning, but harsh comments upon hearing my Spanish. This was the final blow. It was then I made the decision that I wouldn't speak unless I could speak fluently, grammatically correct, and with a proper native accent. I couldn't even feel comfortable describing myself as bilingual on my resume. I had to add "limited proficiency" in parentheses to ease my conscience ... I was ashamed of being Puerto Rican and living in a bilingual home and never learning Spanish ... the only conclusion I could come to was that it was somehow my fault ...

Case C: C, a student in a university level Spanish for native speaker course recalls:

My father still ... interrupts me repeatedly every time I speak Spanish in his presence to correct my grammar or pronunciation. I do my best to speak only English in his company ... As soon as the need for me to speak arises, I find everything I know, can write and read, coming out in the wrong order, and the vocabulary I know suddenly becomes extremely limited and elementary. This occurs most often around those individuals who are native speakers.

### Experiences in Foreign Language Classes

HL speakers are often quite successful in foreign language classes; they are, after all, "false beginners" (or false intermediates). But not all HL speakers succeed in foreign language classes. Often, classes focus on conscious learning of grammatical rules that are late acquired. Some HL speakers may not have learned or acquired these items. It can happen that non-speakers of the HL who are good at grammar will outperform HL speakers on grammar tests and get higher grades in the language class, even though the non-speaker of the HL may be incapable of communicating the simplest idea in the language, while the HL speaker may be fairly competent in everyday conversation. This only adds to the HL speakers' problem, giving them even less confidence in their command of the HL.

There is some empirical evidence supporting this conjecture. Kataoka (1978) compared Japanese American students with non Japanese American students taking Japanese language courses at the university level. The groups had similar GPA's and grades in Japanese classes, but the non-Japanese students devoted significantly more time to the study of Japanese, had significantly more interest in speaking Japanese, and had higher scores on a language aptitude test (aptitude for grammar study; Krashen, 1981).

The Japanese American students, however, had greater conversational fluency and reported more use of Japanese outside of class, but there was no difference between the groups in confidence in Japanese spoken proficiency. Teachers recognized that Japanese Americans were more fluent, but did not rank them more highly in accuracy and actually rated non-Japanese higher in writing. Clearly, teachers did not value the abilities the Japanese Americans had, and made their evaluations to

**Table 1**  
Predictors of Grades in Japanese Class Among Japanese American Students

CLASS GRADE AND	
length of residence in Japan	.13
use of Japanese at home	.05
parents speak Japanese	.07

*from: Kataoka (1978)*

a significant extent on the basis of late-acquired aspects of language that are taught directly and emphasized in traditional language classes. The fact that HL speakers were more fluent but did not have greater confidence in their spoken proficiency suggests that the Japanese American students internalized their teachers' judgments.

Katoka reported low correlations between comprehensible input-related variables and grades (table 1), confirming that spoken fluency and class success are not strongly related.

If HL speakers do well in a class, there is no victory: After all, they are members of the HL group and are expected to speak the language. HL speakers are thus in a no-win situation in such a language class, even if they get high grades.

A's case exemplifies the problem: Her background with Spanish did not make high school Spanish a snap. The emphasis was on learning, not acquisition:

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Classmates' voices from high school keep ringing in my head. "What are you taking Spanish classes for? They must be easy for you. Oh, you're taking it for an easy 'A', aren't you?" ... Truthfully, the Spanish classes I took in high school were hard and I had to work with my grammar and accent for long periods of time.

Instructors, like other more proficient HL speakers, often have very high expectations for HL speaking students. C recalls:

... the most intimidating and painful experiences I have had ... while attempting to learn Spanish have been dealt me by native Spanish speaking instructors ... at the university ... It is a subject of discussion among many students, native Spanish speakers as well as native English speakers that these professors, but certainly not all, are particularly hard and much more demanding of students who are of Latino background ....

Those with no knowledge of the HL face special problems in regular foreign language classes. Robert, described in Romo and Falbo (1996), came from a Mexican American family in Austin but did not speak Spanish:

His parents did not speak Spanish at home. They encouraged Robert, however, to study Spanish in high school. Robert said that he felt uncomfortable in class:

" ... I don't like volunteering there ... She gets mad at me. They expect me to volunteer since I'm Mexican, but I don't do it. The teacher gets mad at me. There are only, like, two or three Mexicans in there. I told them, 'You know, if I knew Spanish, why would I be taking the class?' 'They always expect me to do things and I don't do it.' (Romo and Falbo, p. 23)

Robert stopped taking Spanish classes after two years.

### The Consequences of Language Shyness

As noted above, language shyness often leads to less competence, and even more shyness. The consequences are serious: The speaker may eventually give up on the HL. This means a loss of the economic and cognitive benefits of bilingualism, and can also result in estrangement from the HL community. Giving up on the HL can also affect "ethnic emergence," a stage many minority members go through in which

there is increased interest in one's ethnic heritage. It may be that ethnic emergence is an important step toward attaining a positive self image and the acceptance of both cultures (Tse, this volume).

### The Cure

The ideal cure for the weak HL speaker would be to change people's attitudes about correctness in language, to persuade stronger HL speakers not to ridicule or correct, but to tolerate weak HL speakers' errors, and to encourage interaction in the HL, a much better way to develop accurate HL competence. This is not likely to happen. Our standards for language are very high and feelings about correctness are strong (Finegan, 1980): Group membership requires perfection. In addition, many strong HL speakers' personal theories of language development are based on correction, not comprehensible input, despite the theoretical evidence against correction (Krashen, 1994).

Our usual prescription for the HL speaker are special classes (e.g. "Spanish for Native Speakers"). Such classes have been described in the professional literature but have never, to my knowledge, been evaluated. Moreover, from the published descriptions, it appears to be the case that nearly all such classes are based on traditional methodology, with direct teaching of grammar, reading comprehension and writing style. For those who are well educated in the HL, such classes are simply a test that they pass, because they will have already acquired most if not all of the material that is consciously taught. For weak HL speakers, such classes might only make their situation worse.

**Table 2**  
Predictors of Confidence in Speaking Among Japanese American Students  
(Kataoka, 1978)

CORRELATION WITH CONFIDENCE IN SPEAKING JAPANESE	
Variables Reflecting Comprehensible Input	
length of residence in Japan	.38
use of Japanese at home	.29
parents speak Japanese	.29
Variables Reflecting Study	
length of study	.12
grade in class	.01

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Kataoka reported that for Japanese American students in Japanese classes (see above), correlations between confidence in speaking and length of study and success in study were very low, but correlations between confidence in speaking and variables reflecting comprehensible input were higher (table 2). This suggests that the solution may be heritage language classes that provide comprehensible input, comprehensible input that some HL acquirers find difficult to obtain in the informal environment.

An especially powerful form of comprehensible input is free voluntary reading, an activity that can build language competence tremendously but can be done in private (ideal for shy heritage language speakers). One way of helping HL students establish a reading habit in the HL is to teach popular literature. In McQuillan (1996), twenty HL speakers participated in a ten week class that was focused on free reading, literature circles (small group discussion of what was read) and a survey of popular literature. There was no direct teaching of vocabulary or any other aspect of language. Sixteen of the 20 increased their score on a vocabulary test, with only the highest-scoring pretest students not showing gains. Such results are consistent with a vast number of studies showing that pleasure reading is an excellent way of developing advanced competence in language.

McQuillan (personal communication) provides a case history that supports the idea that reading is helpful for HL development:

GS was a student in my class who grew up in the United States with Spanish-speaking parents. As an English-dominant speaker, he felt very insecure about his Spanish, but felt it was important to learn how to speak it well. He enrolled in a Spanish for native speakers course in high school, which he found "very hard," getting a grade of B-. He did not continue to read or have much contact with Spanish after the course, however, probably because the focus of the course was on grammar and "literature."

When he enrolled in the Spanish for native speakers course in the university, he had still never read an entire book in Spanish, but was eager to learn. Having been given the choice of readings for the class, he began to read the sports page of the local Spanish newspaper, and pick up books in Spanish from the local library. He joined the campus Mexican American club and was considering studying in Mexico over the summer. His confidence in using Spanish had clearly increased as a result of the exposure to the pleasure reading and cultural themes in the classroom.

Such classes can be supplemented with subject matter teaching in the HL, with an emphasis on cultural material (e.g. history, current events) that will make students' reading more comprehensible and that will contribute additionally to HL competence.

There is mounting evidence that heritage language development is not only harmless, it is also beneficial (Tienda and Neidert, 1984; Fernandez and Nielson, 1986; Tienda and Neidert, 1986). HL development has practical and cognitive advantages and also helps heritage language speakers interact with and learn from their elders and community (Wong-Fillmore, 1991). Heritage language development appears to be a good investment for the individual as well as for our society.

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