The first decade of the Heritage Language Journal: A retrospective view of research on heritage languages

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Editorial Commentary

The First Decade of the *Heritage Language Journal*:
A Retrospective View of Research on Heritage Languages

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Since the 1970s, the offering of courses designed specifically for minority language speakers has increased exponentially in the U.S., Canada, and beyond. Most of this increase has occurred within the past two decades, concurrent with the emergence of Heritage Language Acquisition (HLA) as an autonomous field of academic inquiry. In 2002, under the direction and editorship of Olga Kagan of UCLA and Kathleen Dillon of the UC Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning, the National Heritage Language Resource Center established the *Heritage Language Journal (HLJ)* as a forum for scholars to publish the results of research relevant to heritage language (HL) phenomena and to advance knowledge about educating HL speakers. To date, 19 issues have been published (not including the present one), addressing a wide range of topics and languages in diverse geopolitical settings and social contexts. Having assumed the co-editorship of *HLJ* along with Olga Kagan last year, I deemed it appropriate to reflect with our readers upon some of the main questions and central issues that have been posed in the many wide-ranging studies published in the journal since its inception. In this commentary, I highlight some of the key findings from various studies published in *HLJ*, making limited reference to a few closely related studies published in other venues for purposes of theoretical dialogue. I ask that the reader bear in mind that present limitations of space have not permitted me to cite numerous other outstanding articles that have appeared in *HLJ*. My hope is that this commentary will spark the reader’s interest to explore independently the pages of our journal, and enter into dialogue with the scholars whose exceptional work has served to determine the shape that the field has taken over the past decade.

Main Foci

Of a total of 105 articles published in *HLJ* from fall 2003 to summer 2014, 75 (71%) were empirically based studies presenting original research; the remaining 30 (29%) were essays that offered theoretical proposals regarding research and/or pedagogical practice in the field, or provided an overview of a relevant issue or the situation of a particular HL. In the 75 empirically based studies published over the past decade, six main areas of focus are reflected: (1) the language of HL speakers as produced in interviews with researchers, in classroom conversations, in research-oriented tasks (e.g., sentence completion or cloze), and/or as observed behavior in grammaticality judgment tasks or perception experiments; (2) affective and social aspects of HLA with particular emphasis on *attitudes and identities*, motivations for studying the language formally, and ideological dimensions of the language; (3) *assessment* of the language abilities of HL students for institutional purposes; (4) the *literacy practices* of HL learners and the processes by which they engage in reading the HL and/or use and acquire written forms of the language; (5) *pedagogical approaches* to teaching and learning HLs, mostly in the U.S. context; and (6) the beliefs, attitudes, practices, or abilities of *teachers* in HL programs.
Table 1

*Empirically Based Studies Published in HLJ Fall, 2003–Summer, 2014*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Focus</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent of Total Studies</th>
<th>Comparative Method (HL/L2 or HL/NS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LANGUAGE of HL speakers (discourse production, completion task, or judgment task)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>20/26 (77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATTITUDES AND IDENTITIES of HL learners; motivations for formal study; ideological dimensions of HLs</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>3/21 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASSESSMENT of HL language abilities for institutional purposes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4/10 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITERACY practices; acquisition of reading or writing abilities in HL learners</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1/8 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES or classroom practices</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2/5 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEACHERS’ beliefs, attitudes, practices or abilities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>75</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>30/75 (40%)</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>

As Table 1 reflects, the majority of articles dealt either with the language of HL speakers (35%) or with issues of attitudes and identities, HL learner motivations or ideological matters (28%). Studies related to assessment and to literacy practices each constituted about 10% of the published articles; pedagogical approaches and teacher-focused studies each comprised less than 10%. Research endeavors that relied upon a comparative method (i.e., presenting data from HL speakers and from ‘native’ or monolingual speakers as a baseline or control group, or explicitly comparing HL and L2 learners) were most frequent in studies of language (77%), assessment (40%), and pedagogical approaches (also 40%).

Although I have not undertaken a careful, systematic, and quantitative appraisal of the empirically based studies published in other important venues for research on HLA and issues of bi/multilingualism, my impression is that the distribution of main foci found in *HLJ* is similar to that observed in the field more broadly, including various specialized journals taken as a whole. Quite clearly, language as system or object—be it theoretically construed either as underlying representation, universal grammar, socially negotiated form, or interactive practice—is reflected in a great number of the questions that researchers of HLA and bilingualism have posed over the past decade. In their inquiries regarding language as system or object, the majority of researchers have adopted a comparative stance, seeking insights into the ability (i.e., competence or repertoire) of bilingual or HL speakers/learners vis-à-vis that of less or ‘non’ bilingual speakers/learners. Literacy practices and the acquisition of reading and writing skills have been the main focus of relatively few empirical studies, despite their centrality in HL pedagogy.
Empirical studies related to assessment have also been relatively few, and studies explicitly addressing pedagogical approaches or the effects of formal instruction fewer still. Much more empirical and classroom-based research on these latter two areas of HLA is needed in the years ahead.

**Fundamental Research Questions and Concerns**

Perhaps what would at first blush appear to be a rather disproportionate amount of scholarship on language as system and on affective matters in HLA may actually be an indicator of a more overarching concern in the field regarding the **identity and identification** of HL speakers/learners. Here I refer not only to identity in the social psychological sense, but to the problem of identification according to linguistic and institutional criteria. From a theoretical standpoint, one of the most recurrent concerns in research published over the past decade has been how to define the term ‘heritage’ vis-à-vis ‘second’ and ‘native’ language. An additional dimension of this concern—still relatively unexplored—regards the meaning that ‘heritage’ assumes when placed before the terms ‘speaker,’ ‘user,’ or ‘learner.’ A series of theoretical questions regarding identity and language ability that have far-reaching practical implications come to mind: How much linguistic ability in the HL is necessary in order to qualify as a HL learner for purposes of education, and as a HL speaker for purposes of linguistic research? How much ‘say’ does the actual student or study participant have in the matter? For example, can a student who firmly believes that Cherokee is his HL yet has little ability in the language be classified as a heritage learner? Does a U.S. Latina who has basic conversational fluidity and fairly robust comprehension abilities in Spanish yet does not identify herself as a Spanish “speaker” belong in a Spanish HL program or in a L2 program? Are HL speakers of Cantonese or Hakka also HL learners of ‘Chinese’ (a term which is institutionally synonymous with Mandarin), or are they L2 learners of Mandarin? Is the Modern Standard Arabic taught in classrooms really a ‘heritage’ language, given the reality that no one ever speaks this variety at home? How much should students’ own beliefs and perceptions about their ethnic or linguistic identities and their demonstrable oral language abilities enter into the equation, and into our research?

The relationships among language ability, linguistic awareness, and speaker/learner identity were implicitly at the crux of Valdés’ original arguments (1977, 1978) regarding the need for Spanish for Native Speakers courses in the U.S. nearly four decades ago. In her proposal for a “comprehensive language development program” for bilingual speakers, Valdés (1978) argued that: “defining native language instruction for the profession...is simply a question of deciding exactly what teaching a standard dialect of a language involves” (p. 103, emphasis in original). She urged that learners must hone “a dedication to bringing about the acquisition of ‘educated’ language use to include an overall development of total proficiency as characteristic of educated speakers of any language” (p. 106). The active institutional construction of an identity as an ‘educated’ speaker of the HL is a dynamic and multifaceted process that causes some individuals to confront rather difficult linguistic realities, both socially and academically, as evidenced in articles published in the first issue of *HLJ*. In that issue, Martínez (vol. 1, no. 1, 2003) observed that HL learners enter college language courses “…with deep-seated emotional issues about their heritage language. They have been taught, and in many cases have internalized, a feeling of inferiority about their heritage language…. This phenomenon translates into a heightened sense
of linguistic insecurity and inhibition that directly interferes with the language development process” (p. 50). The broader issue posed by Martínez was one of awareness. Affirming that knowledge and understanding of language variation are emancipating and enriching elements in the intellectual development of students, Martínez urged HL educators to integrate critical dialect awareness-raising activities in the classroom from the basic level. Linguistic insecurity, of course, poses substantial challenges to getting students to enroll in HL courses, and oftentimes curtails their desire to use the language both inside and outside of the classroom. It also means that they likely do not enter into most of the research that we continue to carry out, and upon which we test hypotheses, build theories and formulate pedagogical approaches in HLA.

Kondo-Brown (vol. 1, no. 1, 2003) opened her article in the first issue of HLJ by affirming that: “Broadly speaking, HL refers to any ancestral language such as indigenous, colonial, and immigrant languages, and therefore, it may or may not be a language regularly used in the home and the community” (p. 1). She noted two broad differences in the meaning of the term. The first would be relevant to the individual, who may consider herself a HL speaker of an ancestral language even though she has little or no ability in the language. The second is the meaning of the term typically observed in the educational realm and in linguistic research, which necessarily implies some ability in the language in question. Similarly, Polinsky & Kagan (2007) distinguished between ‘broad’ and ‘narrow’ definitions of HL learners; for the latter, actual linguistic ability in the HL is essential. In the statement formulated by the original steering committee of the National Heritage Language Resource Center at UCLA in 2000: “A defining distinction between heritage language and foreign language acquisition is that heritage language acquisition begins in the home, as opposed to foreign language acquisition which, at least initially, usually begins in a classroom setting” (UCLA Steering Committee, 2001, The Family, para. 1).

In the first issue of HLJ, Kagan and Dillon (vol. 1, no.1, 2003) observed several linguistic phenomena that serve to differentiate HL and L2 learners on pedagogical grounds: (1) spelling generally poses a greater challenge for HL learners than for L2 learners; (2) pragmatics and stylistics require differential instruction for HL speakers, as they tend to possess greater abilities than L2 learners in this particular aspect of language proficiency; (3) aural comprehension skills require less formal classroom attention for HL learners than for L2 learners; and (4) the ‘metalanguage’ of pedagogical grammars presented in textbooks and typically used by L2 teachers can be relatively incomprehensible to HL speakers (pp. 82-83).

In an effort to gain better insights into what HL learners acquire and how they acquire it, I urged in the first issue of HLJ that systematic investigations compare the language of HL and L2 learners, following objective, empirical methodologies (Lynch, vol. 1, no. 1, 2003). My reasoning was that to understand and explain fully the extent of the differences between these two groups, researchers and practitioners must also understand and explain fully the similarities between them. I suggested that the general questions asked in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) would be highly relevant to the field of HLA as well, and that the research methodologies used to respond to questions of SLA would lend themselves fruitfully to inquiries in HLA. If Valdés’ principal objective in 1978 was to formulate the most effective and appropriate ways to foment ‘standard dialect acquisition’ or ‘overall development of total
proficiency’, in recent years the focus has perhaps been more on questions of differentiating between heritage, second, and native language speakers in language acquisition theory and pedagogical practice. **HL proficiency and input** vis-à-vis that of L2 learners and native speakers, as well as issues of language ability in relation to **identity and literacy practices**, seem to remain at the heart of theory and research in HLA now more than a decade later. In what follows, I comment upon each of these three main research foci.

**Focus on HL Proficiency, Input, and ‘Incomplete Acquisition’**
As Table 1 demonstrates, much research on language *per se* has been circumscribed to comparisons, with all of their concomitant advantages and the relative ease of methodological procedure that they involve. For most critics of such comparative/contrastive research endeavors in HLA and bilingualism, as much as in the field of SLA, the potential pitfalls outweigh much of the scientific insights that they may provide. I would argue, however, that the preponderance of comparisons in HLA research perhaps reflects a highly intuitive (i.e., ‘unscientific’) social and cultural reality, in which HL speakers with ‘high level’ abilities are frequently perceived as “not-quite-native” while those with ‘low proficiency’ repertoires are viewed as exceptional or problematic L2 users. In either case, their HL usage or performance in everyday sorts of settings often elicits evaluative commentary, and the ensuing conversation perceptually confronts HL speakers with an imagined native speaker and/or a stereotyped L2 learner.

On the question of how much common linguistic ground there is between second- and third-generation HL speakers and what Cook (1992) would term ‘L2 users’ of the same language, we still have no clear, empirically supported answer. Of the numerous studies published in **HLJ** and in other venues over the past decade, similarities appear with respect to some features of phonology, grammar and discourse, and differences appear with respect to other features, e.g., Kupisch *et al.*, vol. 11., no. 2, 2014; Mikhaylova, vol. 9, no. 2, 2012; Montrul, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013; Zhang, vol. 11, no. 1, 2014. One also observes a high degree of variability among individuals. In my view, at least five fundamental methodological considerations have prevented us from reaching any firm conclusions at this point. These are: (1) representativeness of samples, both in terms of speakers and in terms of features and types of language considered, e.g., controlled experimental task versus structured interview versus casual speech, oral versus written modes, descriptive versus argumentative or hypothetical discourse, etc.; (2) the number of participants in studies, which is often rather low; (3) comparability of subjects in terms of the input they have received and the actual output in which they engage, i.e., social exposure and regular use of the language in non-classroom settings; (4) replicability of studies in methodological terms; (5) diversity of topics and contexts of language use, e.g., classroom versus laboratory versus home versus public settings, service encounters, etc.

On this latter point, Polinsky (vol. 6, no. 1, 2008) affirmed that “heritage speakers’ knowledge cannot be fully assessed via observation ‘in the wild’ and needs to be tested and measured using more consistent methodology” (p. 62). Of course, most sociolinguists and anthropological linguists stand behind the methodological conviction that observation ‘in the wild’ is precisely what provides researchers with the most realistic and representative insights into what HL speakers can do—and actually do—with language in lived practice, thus more truly reflecting their linguistic competence. As Elaine Tarone has argued since the late 1970s, L2 speech varies
according to context and interlocutor; one could argue that HL speech does as well (see Tarone, 1988). It is noteworthy that in a recent article published in Language Learning, Robert DeKeyser (2013) pointed to a very similar set of confounding methodological variables that have prevented researchers from reaching a consensus as to whether a ‘critical period’ for L2 acquisition exists, and precisely how much and in what specific aspects of language it exerts a quantifiably definitive influence. As Mikulski (vol. 7, no. 1, 2010) suggested in the case of Spanish HL speakers, “language use may be an equally or more important determinant of language abilities” than age of arrival in the U.S. (p. 28). Similarly, Godson (vol. 2, no. 1, 2004) emphasized the importance of language use patterns over the lifespan in her phonological study of Western Armenian HL speakers in the U.S., observing that: “even though the influence of English was stronger for those exposed to English as children than for those exposed as adults, the latter group showed significant changes in the direction of English. This means that the effects of the dominant language extend over a lifetime” (p. 45).

Both age of acquisition, amount of input or exposure, as well as ‘quality’ of input (Schwartz et al., vol. 11, no. 2, 2014) and variety of sources of input (Kupsich et al., vol. 11, no. 2, 2014) remain key questions of debate in theory and research. Many scholars in the field, among them Carmen Silva-Corvalán, Silvina Montrul, and María Polinsky, argue that the apparently simplified or partial grammars and discursive repertoires of HL speakers in comparison with those of L1 or native speakers can be attributed to ‘reduced input’ in the HL, leading to what they term ‘incomplete acquisition.’ There is debate regarding the quantity of input question, however. O’Grady, Lee, and Lee (vol. 8, no. 3, 2011) posited that:

…what matters for language acquisition is not so much the frequency of particular forms as it is the frequency of clear-cut instantiations of mappings between form and meaning. That is, children do not learn the past tense suffix or the definite article simply by encountering the forms -ed and the. Rather, learning takes place only to the extent that children encounter situations in which forms can be successfully linked to a corresponding semantic function, thereby creating mappings. (p. 316)

Following this line of thought, O’Grady, Lee, and Lee revised the Input Strength Hypothesis in the following way: “The most frequently instantiated form–meaning mappings are acquired first and are the most accessible for language use throughout life” (p. 25). These authors also pointed out that: “No one knows precisely how much input is required for a language to be acquired and maintained at a satisfactory level of proficiency” (p. 26). More recently, Putnam and Sánchez in Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism (2013) made a similar claim:

… input (quality/quantity) is not the only factor determining heritage language acquisition. Until suitable answers to fundamental questions such as “how much data is enough (even for monolingual L1 acquisition of features and structures)?” and “how exactly does one measure and compare ‘sufficient’ with ‘insufficient’ primary linguistic input?” are found, arguments in favor of an insufficient input hypothesis as the primary (if not principal) factor for the often simplified structures and paradigms found in heritage languages are
difficult to uphold. (p. 487)

These authors maintained that “claims of low frequency in the input as the sole or dominant source of ‘incomplete acquisition’ are insufficient” (p. 480) and that two shortcomings with the current state of HL research are the (over) reliance on the notion of ‘insufficient input’ and “the predominant focus on the result of incomplete acquisition rather than the process of the development of the grammar” (p. 481). Putnam and Sánchez emphasized that focus must shift from HL grammars as a result of incomplete acquisition to HL grammars as a process of acquisition. Input can lead to rather robust proficiency in terms of comprehension— or what has been called receptive ability—yet if there is no agency or effort on the part of the HL speaker to put the language into actual use or practice, proficiency does not develop in terms of productive processes. Following Putnam and Sánchez’s line of thought, this phenomenon would probably account for the presence of so many HL learners who have strong comprehension abilities yet weak or practically nonexistent productive abilities. The argument regarding the relative weight of input on one hand, and the lack of what Putnam and Sánchez term ‘activation of functional features’ on the other, is reminiscent of the debate that took place in the field of SLA during the 1990s between proponents of input as the key ingredient in L2 acquisition and those who, like Swain (1985), wagered that output must receive equal if not greater consideration in the acquisition equation.

O’Grady, Lee, and Lee (vol. 8, no. 3, 2011) affirmed that processing considerations are as crucial as the question of input in HLA. With respect to input, they concluded that, when compared with children in monolingual environments, the input of HL acquirers is surely more restricted in the quantitative sense. Thus, there are difficulties presented by what they characterize as non-optimal form-meaning mappings in the HL. In a comparative study examining the performance of Hindi HL and FL learners in practice ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs), Ilieva (vol. 9, no. 2, 2012) observed that the HL group “showed control over complex syntax structures and discourse strategies usually considered indicative of Intermediate High level and above, but at the same time they lacked a mastery over basic smaller language forms and structures usually expected to be produced with some consistency at Novice High or Intermediate Low” (p. 170). She also attributed ‘fossilization’ of incorrect language forms in the speech of some HL learners to their experience with the language at home, “where usually communicative functionality outweighs language accuracy” (32).

Montrul (vol. 8, no. 1, 2011) affirmed that “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,” and that “changes observed in bilingual grammars are seen as a result of the process of acquiring two grammars in response to differential amounts of input” (p. ii). This position is quite similar to that maintained by Silva-Corvalán in her extensive studies of Spanish-English bilinguals in Los Angeles (1994, 2014). Montrul drew an important distinction between grammar and speech, it seems, or perhaps competence in the generativist sense and competence in the sociolinguistic sense, affirming that:

Incomplete acquisition is…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. (p. ii)

On this point, Montrul (vol. 8, no. 1, 2011) noted that some sociolinguistic scholars object to use of the term ‘incomplete acquisition,’ arguing that incompleteness implies deficiency, and that the language of heritage speakers should be regarded as ‘different’ rather than ‘deficient’. Montrul clarified that:

[W]e 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. (pp. iii-iv)

Perhaps here is where the question of whether a differential and consensual variety of something possibly called ‘U.S. Spanish’ might already exist or be in the process of socially emerging. Similar to Montrul, but with rather different terminology, I have argued elsewhere (Lynch, 2013) that there is no ‘U.S. Spanish’ variety to speak of in the traditional sociolinguistic sense, for two principal reasons: (1) a lack of community-based norms of usage owed fundamentally to the lack of generational continuity of Spanish in the U.S.; (2) readily apparent patterns of discontinuity according to the variationist model, that is: lack of a shared “set of norms for the interpretation of language, as reflected in the treatment of linguistic variables: patterns of social stratification, style shifting, and subjective evaluations” (Labov, 1989, p. 2). In other words, what William Labov termed “orderly heterogeneity normally rest[ing] on a uniform structural base” is what seems to be impeding the coalescence of a consensual common variety—or at least a series of varieties—in this country beyond the first generation of Spanish speakers who immigrate to the U.S.

Of course, this does not mean that HL acquisition proceeds in haphazard fashion or reflects what Rod Ellis (1999) characterized as ‘free variation’ in SLA. As Polinsky (vol. 6, no. 1, 2008) maintained, among HL speakers “[t]he system is different from its correspondent system in the baseline, but it is still coherent, albeit in its own way” (p. 40). In terms of the baseline for purposes of comparison, Polinsky observed that: “it is not always clear how to assess what it is that heritage speakers do and do not know in their first language, so developing a replicable methodology of language investigation is also essential for heritage language studies as a field” (p. 40). She also urged that: “Understanding the nature of incomplete acquisition is crucial for our understanding of acquisition, and it is fair to say that heritage speakers provide a crucial missing link between competent L1 learners, balanced bilinguals, and possibly L2 learners” (p. 40, emphasis added). Isurin and Ivanova-Sullivan’s (vol. 6, no. 1, 2008) narration task-based study of the grammatical and lexical features of Russian HL speakers led them to a conclusion that relied on the same spatial metaphor:
Russian heritage speakers may indeed be ‘lost in between’ in the continuum of language speakers. They outperform English-speaking learners of Russian in such linguistic areas as the correct use of aspect/tense and cases, but they fall well behind the native speakers in these same areas. Moreover, they seem to be more comfortable than L2 learners in using the predominantly VS [verb-subject] word order of Russian narrative discourse. At the same time, their mastery of that category is far from that of the native speaker. These findings are not accidental but rather are determined by the linguistic uniqueness of the population whose first language was either incompletely acquired or underwent certain changes due to L2 influence. (p. 100)

In a comparative study of compound sentence interpretation by monolinguals, HL speakers and L2 learners of Chinese, Zhang (vol. 11, no. 1, 2014) affirmed essentially the same: HL speakers’ overall performance “was somewhere between that of native speakers and CFLLs [Chinese foreign language learners] who had studied Chinese for two years” (p. 45). In accordance with all of these authors, consensus in the debate regarding linguistic ‘in-between-ness’ and ‘incomplete acquisition’ is far from being reached, and will surely continue to generate substantive research in the years ahead.

**Focus on Language Ability in Relation to HL Identity**

Beaudrie and Ducar’s (vol. 3, no. 1, 2005) survey study of beginning- or low-level Spanish HL students in Arizona was also suggestive of the ‘in-between’ situation of HL acquirers in terms of input. Some 79% of the students surveyed by Beaudrie and Ducar indicated that although they seldom used Spanish with parents, grandparents or relatives, they were “frequently surrounded by Spanish, with ample opportunities to overhear the language,” and they “demonstrate[d] a high degree of motivation to study Spanish” (p. 1). Of those same students, 73% reported frequently being addressed by parents in Spanish; the majority also stated that they often or always overheard conversations between grandparents, parents, and relatives in Spanish. This would suggest that the amount of input that such students receive is certainly more than that received by the traditional L2 student, yet obviously not as much as the typical L1 speaker in a monolingual setting. Beaudrie and Ducar affirmed that: “HL programs and research have often overlooked beginning level learners, especially within university settings” (p. 1). They argued that the situation of these ‘low-level’ HL learners must be better addressed in language research and in instructional settings. The problem, of course, is that they often do not identify or self-place in specially designed HL courses, or come forward to participate in our research endeavors.

Carreira (vol. 2, no. 1, 2004) argued that we must seek ‘explanatory adequacy’ in defining HL learners, and that our definitions must encompass the notion of agency. She cited Hornberger and Wang’s proposal that HL learners are “individuals who have familial or ancestral ties to a particular language that is not English and who exert their agency in determining whether or not they are HLLs of that HL and HC” (p. 8). Carreira sketched three categories for defining HL learners, according to the relative importance they assign to the following criteria: (1) place in the HL community; (2) personal connection to the HL and HC (heritage culture) through family background; and (3) proficiency in the HL. At the community level, definition of the HL learner is relative to such considerations as the number of community members that speak the HL, goals
with respect to linguistic revitalization, and language teaching resources. Community membership—and not demonstrated proficiency—is the criterion that largely serves to define HL learners of indigenous languages in the U.S. One may have a personal connection to the HL without being an active member of a community affiliated with the HL. Proficiency-based definitions of HL learners are, according to Carreira, the most restrictive, in the sense that they can exclude individuals with strong family or personal connections to the HL (cf. Polinsky & Kagan, 2007). However, for purposes of linguistic research and pedagogical practice, they seem unavoidable.

Of course, issues of perceived community membership and linguistic proficiency are not well defined and overlap each other in concentric ways. Concretely, there can be a mismatch between what the individual knows and identifies with as HL, and what institutional and educational powers—that-be ascribe to the individual. There are numerous examples: HL speakers of Mexican and Central American indigenous languages who are routed into Spanish HL courses; speakers of the immensely diverse varieties observed throughout the Arab World who enroll in Modern Standard Arabic courses, in which the target HL is practically a L2 (cf. Charles Ferguson’s 1959 seminal proposal regarding diglossia in the Arab world); or Haitian Creole speakers identified as French HL learners. Many HL learners of ‘Chinese’ actually speak linguistic varieties that are unintelligible with Mandarin and reflect a different graphic system, i.e., simplified characters used in Mainland China and Singapore, and traditional characters used in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other Chinese-speaking regions. Wong and Xiao (vol. 7, no. 2, 2010) affirmed that for non-Mandarin Chinese HL speakers, HL learning is complicated by the struggle of learning standard Mandarin and at the same time maintaining HL dialects in an English-majority society. They noted that: “dialect speakers may easily become a subset within the heritage language learners, encountering unrealistic expectations of teachers and peers, while finding their needs unmet” (p. 314). With regard to the apparent ‘proficiency’ mismatch and the effort to approximate Mandarin, one Cantonese-background student in Wong and Xiao’s study remarked that: “I try to speak Cantonese a little off to make it sound like Mandarin, but sometimes it is completely off. It’s not even a word... the tone is also difficult. Sometimes when I listen to the teacher when she speaks, it sounds like that one word in my head, but it’s completely another word and it sounds different” (p. 330). In this way, HL knowledge, idealized proficiency in terms of Mandarin, and imagined identity as Chinese in the broad nationalist sense and/or the global economic sense, must be reconciled for the non-Mandarin-background HL learner (see Wu & Leung in the present issue of HLJ).

He (vol. 4, no. 1, 2006) suggested that Chinese HL speakers may feel more highly motivated to study the language in response to its growing popularity as L2 in the U.S. in recent years; I believe that one could say the same of Spanish HL speakers in the U.S. since the mid 1990s. The roles that particular languages play—or at least are imagined to play—in the global economy and the workplace are most likely a source of motivation and positive orientation (cf. Monica Heller’s Bilingualism: A Social Approach, 2007). He also observed a positive correlation between the degree of success in Chinese HL acquisition and the frequency with which learner’s families use the language by choice, i.e., if Chinese is spoken at home because of parents’ lack of ability in English, the second generation is more likely to perceive the HL as “limiting rather than enriching” (p. 19). On the other hand, in homes where parents have bilingual abilities yet
speak Chinese by choice, learners tend to see the language in a more positive light. According to He, lifespan factors also appear to condition motivation to use and formally study the HL. She noted that: “Chinese HL students in university Chinese HL classes often claim that they disliked taking Chinese lessons at a young age when they lacked the maturity and the desire to remain connected with their family background, whereas now that they are fully grown and ready to embrace their cultural heritage from the past, they are eager to learn Chinese HL” (p. 19). Chinen and Tucker (vol. 3, no. 1, 2005) quantitatively documented the same phenomenon in a Japanese HL Saturday School in Los Angeles. In a comparative statistical analysis of students across grades 7 to 11, these authors observed a greater sense of Japanese ethnic identity among the older pupils. They wrote that: “the formation of ethnic identity requires a certain time for ‘gestation’ and even social maturity. One of the students we interviewed said, ‘Compared to before, I have more Japanese friends, and I know more Japanese stuff. I feel like I’m becoming more Japanese. Next year, I may be even more Japanese’” (p. 38).

In her study of ‘willing’ versus ‘reluctant’ HL learners of German in Western Canada, Dressler (vol. 7, no. 2, 2010) reminded us that not all HL learners self-identify as such; she proposed that the concept of ‘positioning’ appears to explain best why some are reluctant to do so. Some students in Dressler’s study were reluctant to claim HL speaker status because of the unwillingness of others to consider them as such. For example, because one student’s German-speaking grandmother refused his attempts to communicate with her in German, he would not lay claim to the HL label. A student of Romanian origin, who had lived in Germany as a child before her family immigrated to Canada, conceptualized her reluctant HL identity in spatial terms: “I already have to juggle being Canadian with being Romanian. Really, there is no space for being German” (p. 172). Another student did not strongly position herself as a HL learner of German, yet she emphasized the European history of her family.

The longstanding historical presence of Spanish in New Mexico is fundamental to the concerns expressed by Vergara Wilson and Martínez (vol. 8, no. 2, 2011). These authors affirmed that “using proficiency as a criterion in a definition of HLL runs counter to one of our [University of New Mexico] primary program goals: revitalizing Spanish in New Mexico among a population in which the language was deliberately eradicated” (p. 283). Historical considerations and ancestry are also indisputably at the heart of efforts to preserve and revitalize indigenous languages. Reyhner (vol. 7, no. 2, 2010) observed that: “A primary goal and impetus of indigenous language revitalization programs is to re-establish this lost link to traditional values and culture” (p. 309). Some evidence offered by Haynes (vol. 10, no. 3, 2013) lends support to the largely historical and ancestral or familial motives for learning and revitalizing Native American languages. Haynes found that students’ positive attitudes toward the tribal language did not correlate with feelings about non-English languages; those who had a positive view of HL learning did not tend to have a similarly positive orientation toward other languages in general.

However, Haynes also suggested that the lack of correlation between HL orientation and FL motivation could be attributable to a view that FLs conflict with tribal languages. She reasoned that: “with the limited resources (both fiscal and temporal) that schools have to devote to language classes, resources devoted to foreign language teaching are perceived as detracting
from tribal language education” (p. 372). Community support beyond the home comes to the forefront in this regard, particularly where fiscal resources are greatly limited and in contexts where speakers take a neutral or disdainful attitude toward formal study and institutional support of the HL. For example, in Luning and Yamauchi’s study (vol. 7, no. 2, 2010), many parents of children enrolled in Kaiapuni language immersion in Hawaii remarked that extended family members and other community members sometimes did not agree with their decision to send children to the Kaiapuni program. These authors urged that: “families who choose heritage language education may need support for their decision to go against others in the community who do not value this form of education” (p. 225).

Considerations of historical presence, cultural value, and community-centered ideologies lead us finally to some of the theoretical arguments posed in relation to religious identities. Laleko (vol. 10, no. 3, 2013) affirmed that: “religious organizations are known to play a key role in the preservation and promotion of community languages and traditions by providing a place for community members to gather on a regular basis” (p. 388). She remarked that because Russian immigrants of the Soviet era tended not to be involved in religious practice, Russian HL maintenance among their children faced a distinct disadvantage. Several studies have indeed pointed to the positive impact of religious identities and spiritually based activities on HL acquisition and use. Carreira and Rodríguez (vol. 8, no. 2, 2011) cited various studies documenting the “critical role” of religious education programs as “purveyors of linguistic and cultural input for immigrant children” in the U.S. setting, and noted, for example, that these programs are the largest provider of extra-curricular instruction in Spanish for Latino children in Los Angeles (p. 162). In their study of two Catholic programs in that city, Carreira and Rodríguez observed “a rich academic and linguistic experience in Spanish,” including literacy development (p. 165). They emphasized that in the context of such programs, “the development of Spanish and academic skills is not an end in itself, but a means through which children are socialized to religious beliefs and core Latino cultural values such as educación, respeto [respect], familismo [familism], and cariño [affection]” (p. 165).

Social ‘in-group’ factors conditioning HL maintenance also emerge in the context of religion-based programs. At a Yiddish language school attended by ultra-Orthodox Jewish girls in Jerusalem, Tannenbaum and Abugov (vol. 7, no. 1, 2010) observed that although Hebrew—the majority language—was clearly favored as a holy language in scripture and prayers, Yiddish was overwhelmingly preferred for daily interaction. These authors affirmed that the girls’ attitudes towards both languages were “conflict-free” and noted no appreciable degree of intergenerational familial conflict regarding language choice (p. 83). According to them, despite ultra-Orthodox Jews’ status as a minority group in Israel, there was no evidence of a decrease in Yiddish language use over the generations. In fact, they noted some indications of “ongoing maintenance work and use of Yiddish, including among members of the younger generation” (p. 83) (cf. Avineri, 2014, in Language & Communication). This seems good evidence that where factors of affiliation and community membership are strong, majority language pressures on identity construction can be overridden by the desire to maintain the minority language which, in this particular case, according to Tannenbaum and Abugov, serves as a ‘fence.’
Social ‘in-group’ solidarity was also noted in Otcu’s study (vol. 7, no. 2, 2010) of Turkish Saturday School students in New York City. Muslim students in the school found respite from religion-based social conflicts experienced in the context of regular American school on the weekdays, and indicated that Saturday School peers made better friends because they had more in common with them.

In an ethnographic language socialization study of Punjabi Sikh families in California, Klein (vol. 10, no. 1, 2013) observed that Gurbani classes served to “orient students to the use of archaic Punjabi through spiritual practice,” while teachers in Sikh youth discussion classes “discursively construct[ed] the everyday use of modern Punjabi as a moral imperative for the preservation and transmission of Sikh religion and culture in the future” (p. 36). Family participation in activities at the temple provided the context for the socialization of Sikh teachings and practices. At home, English was the dominant language. Klein highlighted a moment in Sikh discussion groups when two counselors incited youth to speak Punjabi at home with their families:

> “Why do you speak a language that’s not yours in your own home? You should speak Punjabi. It’s not like I’m telling you to do something foreign to you. It’s very innate to you. You guys- from the first day you guys were born, you have heard your parents converse in Punjabi. It has been engraved in you guys since the first day you guys were born. You guys need to come back to your roots” (p. 42).

Klein pointed out that the counselor in this example worked to construct an oppositional relationship between English and Punjabi by referring to English as “a language that’s not yours,” and prosodically emphasizing the word ‘foreign’ in reference to English and ‘innate’ in reference to Punjabi (p. 42).

Klein highlighted that such interactions in youth discussion groups reflect “teachers’ attempts to socialize the notion that the everyday use of modern Punjabi language is a moral imperative” for which teachers apparently “hold the youth accountable” (p. 47). While in the context of the Gurbani class, performativity and participant roles reflect how “the use of archaic Punjabi orients participants to a shared semiotic repertoire, a collective past, and the role of moral embodiment in Sikh spiritual practice…. These educational activities present a view of language as moral action” (pp. 46–47). Klein’s study is particularly revealing not just in terms of HL motivation and socialization, but with regard to the performative essence of HL identities, perhaps in the way Aneta Pavlenko (2006) has underscored in her work on bilingual minds, and along the lines of Bonny Norton’s (2000) proposals regarding L2 learner identities. Klein affirmed that:

> Language, in Gurbani, is a vehicle for embodying the principle of Ultimate Reality, or the Sikh notion of the divine. The verses when recited are also viewed as carrying emotional resonance within the community of adherents and linking them, spiritually and affectively, to Sikhs engaged in the same religious practice in historically and geographically remote communities. In the prayer activity, participants enact membership in a transnational moral...
body that is connected across time and space through semiotic mediation (p. 47).

This phenomenon is quite similar to that documented by Armin Schwegler in his studies (2005) of the religious practice of Palo Monte Mayombe in Cuba, in which the only vestiges of African languages of the slave-descendant population on the island are found in highly ritualized spiritual practices. One also recalls the inextricable historical link between French language maintenance and the institution of the Catholic Church in Quebec and the Atlantic provinces under British rule.

In sum, language practice as bound up in religious practice is a construct of performativity, which involves a good degree of imagination and identity negotiation in relation to a community of some sort—be it a local, national or transnational community, as in the case of so-called global languages such as Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, or Spanish. I believe that contextualized ethnographic research on situated language practice stands to make a valuable contribution in this regard in the future. Certainly more research on Saturday Schools, community-based HL learning, community and critical service learning experiences (cf. Leeman, Rabin & Román-Mendoza, vol. 8, no. 3, 2011) are greatly needed in the field of HLA.

Focus on Literacy Practices
Parra (vol. 10, no. 2, 2013) underscored the vital connection between community engagement and multiliteracy practices in an advanced Spanish language course for both HL and L2 university students in the northeastern U.S. Based on the semester-long curriculum of ‘Spanish and the Community’ and an examination of students’ final projects that reflected themes of migration, identity, language contact, the border, and the individual imaginary, Parra concluded that the critical pedagogical framework of the course and its “broad understanding of literacy that incorporates the multiliteracies perspective as a window to access the community imaginary, in conjunction with a community service component, provide[d] valuable and meaningful learning opportunities” for both groups of students, who were led to integrate classroom and community experiences (136). Both Parra (vol. 10, no. 2, 2013) and Callahan (vol. 11, no. 2, 2014) emphasized, respectively, the pedagogical importance and great cultural relevance of museum spaces for HL communities, and the potential of those spaces for HL learning experiences, in particular with respect to literacy. Meskill and Anthony (vol. 6, no. 1, 2008) emphasized the potential of cyberspace for HL acquisition and use. These authors argued that one viable way to develop HL literacy skills within the U.S. context of English-language hegemony is through computer mediated communication (CMC). The findings of their yearlong case study of five university HL learners of Russian suggested that regular CMC assignments and discussion board activities as part of coursework led to substantial gains in vocabulary, register awareness (i.e., ‘spoken writing’, informal messages, and formal/academic texts), grammar knowledge, and spelling ability. With regard to the latter, three of the five students remarked that, in online postings, they scrutinized the spelling of their classmates more than that of their instructor, and also mentioned that participation in online discussions led them to consult dictionaries, both online and print, in the search for confirmation of correct orthographic form (p. 5).

Importantly, all five Russian HL learners in Meskill and Anthony’s study expressed particular
satisfaction with the opportunities that CMC assignments afforded them in terms of culture and identity. In reflective interviews, one student noted the following: “I liked that we had so much in common and when I said something, like how I felt when I had just come to this country, everybody understood me because everybody went through the same stuff” (p. 9). Another highlighted the ‘cultural insider’ advantage of HL cohorts: “I enjoyed the fact that I could make a totally Russian joke like the one about Georgians and their specific accent and be sure that all the others would understand me and I didn't have to struggle explaining the idea” (p. 9). As the authors noted, citing Campbell and Rosenthal (2000), “a desire to understand themselves better as a cultural entity and thereby locate their linguistic/cultural identity” is among the main reasons for HL learners to enroll in HL courses specifically designed for them (p. 9). Affirming both the affective and linguistic benefits of CMC assignments in Russian HL courses, Meskill and Anthony concluded that: “In addition to serving as a neutral and supportive venue for exploration of bicultural identity, the medium afforded learners the time and tools for the careful development and composition of their ideas in the language they were targeting for improvement” (p. 12). You and Liu (vol. 8, no. 3, 2011) echoed this affirmation in the context of Korean and Chinese community language schools in Phoenix, urging that the integration of technology and digital materials in this HL instructional setting would serve to motivate and engage learners, particularly given the visibility of Korean pop culture (i.e., movies, television shows, music) across Asia and in the U.S., and the rapidly growing economic and political importance of China worldwide.

You and Liu remarked on the influence of parental involvement in community schools, suggesting that when parents help their children with written homework assignments, read to them in the HL, and view films in the HL with them at home, there is a positive developmental impact on language abilities and attitudes. In a survey study conducted with HL learners of Korean, Russian, Thai and Vietnamese at UCLA, Jensen and Llosa (vol. 5, no. 1, 2007) observed a lack of engagement with written forms of the HL in the home environment, despite the availability of print materials. Even though only three participants in their study stated that they had no print materials in the HL available at home, less than half of the 128 students surveyed (43%) reported that they had been read to in the HL during childhood (p. 106). The 58% of participants who reported reading in the HL spent an average of only 64 minutes per week doing so. Jensen and Llosa also noted that about half of the students in their study assessed themselves as “slow readers,” a perception that the authors believed could in turn negatively influence motivation to read in the HL (p. 106). Callahan (vol. 7, no. 1, 2010) posed a similar question in light of the findings of her interview-based study of the literacy practices of Spanish HL speakers in New York City: “[D]o individuals with fewer skills engage in an activity less often, or does their less frequent engagement lead to their lack of skill?” (p. 15). Affirming that although one might logically suppose there would be a relationship of mutual influence with regard to this question, Callahan observed that, ironically, the participants in her study who possessed the most proficiency in written Spanish were those who used it the least on a daily basis (p. 15, emphasis added). She also observed that translation was “by far” the most common literacy practice at home and at work among her interviewees, who reported doing sight translations of forms and official correspondence from English into Spanish, principally for friends or family members (p. 13).
Callahan concluded that: “The fundamental issue is the dominance of English in most written domains, with the exception of those few professions in which Spanish occupies an equal or greater amount of space…. [A]cquisition and maintenance of written Spanish comes at a higher cost in that it requires an even more conscious and concerted effort” (p. 16). In a comparative assessment of the abilities of HL and L2 adult learners of Chinese, Xiao (vol. 4, no. 1, 2006) found that although the HL students outperformed their L2 counterparts on measures of listening, speaking, grammatical knowledge and translation, they did not fare any better than the L2 students in reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, or character writing. Xiao concluded that: “heritage learners’ oral exposure to their home language does not necessarily lead them to acquire reading and writing skills more quickly than non-heritage learners” (p. 47). Jensen and Llosa also concluded that in order for HL speakers in the U.S. context to develop functional literacy skills in non-English languages, there must be systematic support for the language beyond the spheres of the home and the local community: “[O]ften literacy practices begin at home within HL families and communities, but social and educational policies that promote language diversity and literacy must also be in place” (p. 109).

All of these studies point to the need for sustained and systematic research on the relationship between home language practices, formal and informal exposure to written forms of the HL in print and online, and the de jure and de facto policies regarding HL and minority language use in institutional and public spaces. Particular attention must be paid to the rapidly growing world of online communities, e.g., social media and gaming, which place users from around the globe in close linguistic contact with each other (cf. Thorne, Black & Sykes, 2009, in Modern Language Journal).

**Looking Ahead**

Some of the questions posed and particular considerations made in the studies that I have cited in this commentary hint at the directions that researchers of HLA will likely take in the years ahead. Only fifteen years after the occasion of the first national conference on Heritage Languages in America, organized by the Center for Applied Linguistics and the National Foreign Language Center in October 1999, the field of HLA remains a nascent one in many respects. Looking ahead, global flows and transnational mass migrations in the age of postmodernity will surely make HL speakers an ever more present phenomenon in all regions of the world. Scholars and practitioners of HLA stand poised to make vital contributions to humanity’s understanding of ‘language’ in every sense of the term: social, cultural, psychological, cognitive, neural, computational, institutional, and educational. Precisely for that reason, in light of the exciting transformations of the phenomenon that we abstractly label as ‘language’ moving into the postmodern era, I am highly optimistic about the future of *HLJ*.

I suppose that some of the main foci of future research endeavors in HLA will likely be the following (in no particular order):

- Mental representations of HL and cerebral activity involved in HL use
- The control and variability of language in HL speakers/learners
- The common linguistic features and cognitive processes of HL, L1 and L2 speakers/learners
The distinctive linguistic features and cognitive processes of HL in comparison to L1 and L2
- The criteria-based definition and quantifiable assessment of differential degrees and types of HL proficiency (i.e. low, mid, high)
- Development of pedagogical materials appropriate to differential degrees and types of HL proficiency
- The effects of differential instructional practices on HL development
- The nature of input and its relationship to output in HL acquisition and use
- Social dimensions of cognition/cognitive dimensions of social practice
- The roles of HL learner agency in linguistic development and the limitations of use posed by social and ideological conditions
- HL as situated practice in particular sorts of communities and in community-based experiences (both in the real and virtual worlds)
- HL acquisition and use in relation to global language identities (particularly Arabic, Chinese, French, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish)
- HL use in relation to transnational identities
- HL use in relation to workplace identities
- HL use in relation to online identities
- HL access and use in mass media and the Internet, particularly through the lens of literacy practices

This list is by no means exhaustive, and reflects only a few of the compelling issues that came to mind as I reviewed all of the articles published in our journal over the past decade. My hope is that, in the next several years, we will see a greater number of studies devoted specifically to child and adolescent learners of HL, to matters of literacy development, and the measurable effects of particular pedagogical practices. Empirical studies that consider HL community practices in a general sense are of the essence, as are longitudinal studies that address the complex ways in which language evolves over the lifespan. Notwithstanding the great value of snapshot sorts of data or studies in apparent time, a more comprehensive understanding of the term ‘heritage language’ will likely emerge from systematically tracking the acquisition, use, competence, repertoires, attitudes, and practices of individual speakers in their everyday lives over a number of years, particularly from childhood to adolescence, and into adulthood and middle age. In this regard, community involvement on the part of HLA scholars and a more nuanced familiarity with individual speakers beyond the laboratory and the classroom would likely provide key pieces in the current research puzzle.

References (beyond HLJ)


Notes

1. Here I refer to research not only on acquisition of linguistic form and function, but also on socialization, language practice, assessment, and pedagogy.

2. References in text to *HLJ* papers are hyperlinked; to see these papers, readers must be logged in to the [Heritage Language Journal](https://www.average.net).