Heritage Language Maintenance or Loss: A Difficult Choice for Immigrant Parents

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Abstract

This article presents research findings, common themes and potential areas for future research addressing the problems of heritage language (HL) maintenance among immigrant communities. The recent trends in mobility of population caused a considerable increase in numbers of immigrants not only in traditionally multicultural countries, but also in some historically or predominantly homogeneous ones. While the government in these host countries try to deal with the numerous challenges of accepting newcomers, issues of heritage language loss and maintenance are not paid proper attention, at least not everywhere. Unfortunately, many immigrant parents ignore the problem of heritage language loss and consider it to be just an additional challenge to the overwhelming number of problems they have to face in a new country. Numerous research findings point out the potential causes of language shift and language loss among immigrant communities. All researchers are unanimous in their conclusion that heritage language maintenance depends on the support from parents, community, educators and social network in general.

Keywords: heritage language, language maintenance, language loss, semilingualism.
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Introduction

The recent trends in mobility of population caused a considerable increase in the number of immigrants not only in traditionally multicultural countries like Canada and the USA, but also in some historically or predominantly homogeneous ones. While the government in these host countries try to deal with the numerous political and economic challenges of accepting the newcomers, issues of heritage language loss and maintenance are not paid proper attention, at least not everywhere. In many cases, immigrant parents are left without any support or encouragement from the new hosting countries; on the one hand, they struggle to acquire a new language in order to survive, on the other hand, they need to ensure that their children maintain their first language. Unfortunately, many immigrant parents ignore the problem of heritage language loss and consider it to be just an additional challenge to the overwhelming number of problems they have to face in a new country. While parents attempt to survive and provide the basic necessities for their children, the younger generation lose not only their heritage language, but also the close family ties as well as their identity.

In the government document *Policy for Heritage Language Instruction*, heritage languages are defined as,

all languages other than English, French, or Aboriginal, taught in the public school system, during the regular school day either as:

- a regular subject (basic heritage language course) or
- as a language of instruction (bilingual program), or
• as a language of instruction in an enhanced heritage language program (Government of Manitoba, 1993).

This definition seems to be very ambiguous and conflicting taking into consideration the Aboriginal population who was deprived of possibilities to maintain and develop their first languages. On the other hand, French can be a heritage language for immigrant children of European descent, so Aboriginal and French languages should not be excluded from the definition of heritage languages in Canada.

In the research literature terms “heritage language”, “native language”, “first language”, “L1”, and “mother tongue/language” are frequently used as contextual synonyms. Kouritzin (2000) believes that one’s mother tongue is not merely a language; it is a unique means of communication between parents and children. In the research literature, heritage language is often defined as a “nonmajority language spoken by an individual or group considered to be a linguistic minority” (Yearwood, 2008, p.62). Valdes (2005) extends this definition and includes indigenous languages that are in danger of disappearing. Consequently, the term heritage language may comprise all first languages of immigrant minorities in different host countries as well as indigenous languages of the native population.

The main themes addressed in the research literature are the problems of a first language loss while acquiring the skills in a second language (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Chumak-Horbatsch, 1999; Guardado, 2006; Gogonas, 2009); the potential problems of self-identification and self-esteem related to the devaluation of the heritage language in childhood (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Kouritzin, 1999); broken family ties as a result of heritage language loss (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Kouritzin, 1999; Wong Fillmore, 2000; Lai, 2009); reasons for choosing dominant language versus heritage language (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Pease-Alvares & Winsler, 1994; Chumak-
Horbatsch, 1999; Cashman, 2009; Gogonas, 2009); different linguistic competence of siblings (Sridhar, 1985; Wong Fillmore, 1991); the role of bilingual programs in language maintenance (Chumak-Horbatsch, 1999; Hasbun, 2005; Kopeliovich, 2011); parental efforts and dedication in terms of heritage language maintenance (Kouritzin, 2000).

**Reasons and consequences of HL loss**

Numerous research findings point out the potential causes of language shift and language loss among immigrant communities. In many cases parents may be forced to switch to a dominant language while communicating with their children, especially if children misunderstand their message in a native language, or if parents are more or less proficient in the dominant language of their host society (Sridhar, 1985; Wong Fillmore, 1991; Schwartz, 2008; Kopeliovich, 2011). Parents often view the dominant language as a key to education and a successful future career of their children in a new country (Shibata, 2004; Guardado, 2006; Lanza & Svendsen, 2007).

In many cases children think that their first language is quite useless in their surrounding, so they treat language maintenance as a boring task initiated by the parents, especially if the bilingual programs or tutors do not inspire any interest in language learning (Kopeliovich, 2011; Hasbun, 2005; Chumak-Horbatsch, 1999). Many researchers prove that language-minority children are willing to achieve proficiency in the mainstream language in order to be accepted in the new society and not to be different in any way. Consequently, when they face a choice of dominant language versus heritage language, they tend to favour the mainstream language (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Pease-Alvares & Winsler, 1994; Kouritzin, 1999; Chumak-Horbatsch, 1999; Cashman, 2009; Gogonas, 2009). In addition, children are very selective in terms of the language for communication. With monolingual relatives they tend to use their heritage...
language, while with bilinguals they may code-switch; on the other hand, with representatives of a dominant culture they use the mainstream language, so their language is very context dependent (Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994; Schwartz, 2008; Gogonas, 2009; Dahl, Rice, Steffensen & Amundsen, 2010; Gogonas, 2012). First generation immigrant children are likely to use their first language more with their grandparents and parents (the possibility of code switching is still high), while they choose the mainstream language in communication with siblings or peers (Sridhar, 1985; Lanza & Svendsen, 2007). Kouritzin (2006) notes that “identity and language “decisions” made by children in the face of assimilation-oriented dominant culture, are decisions later regretted” (p.20).

The research findings indicate that another potential reason for language shift may be attributed to teachers who do not have a special training in second language acquisition; as a result, they express negative attitudes towards minority language maintenance and think it is the prerogative of immigrant parents only (Lee & Oxelson, 2006 as cited in Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2011). In addition, public school teachers may encourage parents to use English only at home in order to “help” their children with second language acquisition. This practice leads not only to HL loss but also causes deterioration of family ties when parents are not able to communicate effectively with their children in a second language (Rodriguez, 1983).

Anti-immigrant ideology and hostile attitudes towards some ethnic groups in a host country may provoke the feeling of shame and alienation as well as marginalization of heritage languages (Kouritzin, 2006; Cashman, 2009; Gogonas, 2009; Gogonas, 2012). The insufficient heritage language skills of immigrant children can be justified by the lack of institutional and government support in terms of official policy, for example, lack of Turkish language exposure for the immigrant children of Turkish origin in some European countries (Yazici, Ilter, & Glover,
2010); no official support for bilingual education in Spanish-English for Arizona minority children (Cashman, 2009); disapproval of minority language education for Albanian children in Greece (Gogonas, 2009). One study stands out and offers somewhat contradictory results. In Belarus despite the official promotion of Belarusian and the fact that the country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, there is still a high decline in the use of Belarusian and an increasing popularity of Russian among young people enrolled in higher educational institutions (Brown, 2008). This study implies that family tradition in language choice may outweigh to some extent the official policy towards language choice. Canagarajah (2005) claims that sometimes people are “happy with the inconsistencies and tensions in policy “(p.442) since they have a possibility to negotiate their linguistic preferences.

In general, without the institutional support and professional guidance, maintaining the family language is “like swimming against the tide” (Kopeliovich, 2011, p.111) or “fighting a lonely battle” (Guardado, 2006, p.67). Kouritzin (1999) asserts that,

as long as the educational system demands that parents assist their children in their acquisition of English language and culture, instead of encouraging them, and even assisting them, in having their children maintain their first languages, language loss will continue to occur, even in the most highly educated and linguistically aware families (p.42).

The implied belief of the researchers that language maintenance is more likely to happen among urban residents contradicts the results of the study analysing the maintenance of German as a mother tongue in Canada. Prokop (2002) illustrates that the use of German as a home language decreased significantly in the urban areas of Alberta and Manitoba, while in rural areas
there was a slight increase in the use of German as a home language. This particular case demonstrates that the language loss was caused by a new style of life (moving to the big cities) as well as the aging of the population who maintain German as the language for communication.

Among the most significant effects of heritage language loss, the researchers usually mention the deterioration of family relationships, problems with self-identification and inability to achieve complete fluency in any language. Research literature addresses the complex concept of language loss as leading to further problems in communication between generations in the family. Language shifts affect family relationships since parents can no longer teach their children important moral values, so parents fail to perform their traditional function of family educators; they lose their authority and respect from children, and the close family ties are broken (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Kouritzin, 1999; Wong Fillmore, 2000; Lai, 2009). While interviewing the participants regarding their heritage language loss, Kouritzin (1999) observes that,

In cases where the parents didn’t learn to speak English fluently, the loss of family moved closer to home. It became difficult for the parents to be influential in their children’s lives, to guide them, to nurture them, or even to encourage their learning at school by helping with their homework or discussing the day’s events (p.171).

Loss of one’s mother tongue may also lead to identity crisis in adult life since “heritage language ability and cultural identity are inextricably linked” (Kouritzin, 1999, p.179). On the other hand, “multilingualism provides a much more complicated reality for identity” (Lanza & Svendsen, 2007).

Besides destroying the family bonds and influencing the process of self-identification, the loss of heritage language may affect negatively the acquisition of a foreign language and lead to
the so called *semilingualism* “…inadequate command of both first (L1) and second (L2) languages…” (Cummins, 1979, p.222 as cited in Kouritzin, 1999, p.22). Wong Fillmore (1991) supports the idea that insufficient first language skills impact the process of learning a second language. In particular, young children may stop using their mother tongue prior to being proficient in a foreign language; as a result, they may not be proficient enough in both languages (Wong Fillmore, 1991; Kopeliovich, 2011).

**Factors influencing HL maintenance**

The benefits of heritage language maintenance are significant in terms of family communication, self-identification and general academic success of immigrant children. Several studies concluded that proficiency in a heritage language may positively influence the overall academic achievements of bilingual students (Yearwood, 2008). The research conducted by Shibata (2004) does not refute this belief but presents a different conclusion. There were no significant relationships between proficiency in heritage language (Japanese) and academic success of the participants; on the other hand, heritage language competence does not influence negatively English language proficiency and academic achievement in general.

Although a heritage language significantly contributes to the successful parent-child communication, Oh and Fuligni (2010) assert that heritage language use alone is not enough to sustain intimate and close family ties; the level of proficiency in the first language influences the quality of parent-children relationships. This statement needs further clarification since the notion of proficiency is quite vague, and immigrant parents may have totally different understanding of their children’s competence in their first language. While some parents may be
satisfied with their children’s more or less basic communicative skills in a heritage language, others may have high expectations, especially in terms of literacy skills in a heritage language.

The minority children seem to benefit significantly from education in their first language. Brock-Utne (2012) provides the results of research among African children who were educated in English and then in their native language. The results indicate that mother tongue is definitely more effective in schools since not all children can master English and understand the language of instructions. Some other research projects point out the benefits of bilingual programs and heritage language schools. For example, in Israel there are numerous Russian private schools that are complimentary to the official public schools. These additional schools are very successful in promoting Russian language and culture among young immigrants from the former Soviet Union (Schwartz, 2008; Kopeliovich, 2011). Similar finding were presented in the study of Japanese–American college students whose proficiency in Japanese was due to the fact that they attended Japanese language schools (Shibata, 2004). Unfortunately, even if children are enrolled in bilingual programs, it does not guarantee their heritage language maintenance because “bilingual education does not appear to offer children enough protection from language shift” (Wong Fillmore, 1991, p.333). In another study among Ukrainian–Canadian children, mothers seemed to be satisfied with their children’s proficiency in Ukrainian, but pointed out their dissatisfaction with the curriculum at Ukrainian programs and lack of community support in maintenance of their first language (Chumak-Horbatsch, 1999).

Bilingual programs and tutors may be only additional resources in maintaining the first language, but they cannot completely compensate lack of communication in the heritage language at home (Kopeliovich, 2011). All researchers are unanimous in their conclusion that heritage language maintenance must be accompanied by the support from parents, community,
educators and social network in general. In order to maintain the heritage language, it must be used in all domains (Sridhar, 1994). Having interviewed 21 participants about their personal loss of heritage languages, Kouritzin (1999) concludes that “neither the home, nor the school, nor the community could have single-handedly ensured first language maintenance for the subjects in this study” (p.210). Unfortunately, in real life this collaboration between families, schools and communities is often problematic.

Another suggestion regarding maintenance of the first language was to include some elements of students’ heritage languages in the curriculum and to make sure that enough resources are available in school libraries for those students who are really willing to preserve and improve their heritage language in the English-speaking society (Yan, 2003). Researchers also indicate the positive teachers’ attitude towards minority languages as a significant factor contributing to the prestige and maintenance of heritage languages. Unfortunately, teacher’s encouragement alone does not provide the desirable effects. In the study where the teacher was facilitating the use of heritage language in the classroom among the students (almost all of them shared the same heritage language Spanish) within a year the observers noted a shift from 29% of the first language use at the beginning of the year to only 8% at the end (Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994). One study advises teachers to encourage their students to write a journal in their first languages and then translate it to the classmates and the teacher (Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994). In addition, Choi and Yi (2012) found that media from a heritage culture may help in the development of literacy skills (I believe the findings should be treated with caution because their research only focused on university students with Korean background, so this area may need further investigation in terms of specific age and cultural backgrounds of the participants as well as their initial level of proficiency in their heritage languages).
Parental interest and involvement in the process of heritage language maintenance depends on their attitudes towards their culture, identity, religion as well as ethnic origin since different nationalities do not have the same commitment to the first language maintenance among their children (Yan, 2003). For some ethnic groups their language is a strong indication of their cultural identity (Gogonas, 2012). For example, research found that language shift happens more frequently and faster among Asian Americans than among Latino Americans (Kim & Min, 2010; Oh & Fuligni, 2010). In addition, the choice of home language in mixed marriages may be often explained by a number of societal, political and economic benefits of the mainstream language (Brown, 2008). Giles et al (1997) proposed the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality which is the objective evaluation of the strength of an ethnolinguistic group’s distinctive identity and its chances of language maintenance in multiethnic, multilingual situations. According to the theory, low ethnolinguistic vitality favors linguistic assimilation and acculturation, while high ethnolinguistic vitality favors the maintenance of the minority language and of cultural distinctiveness (Giles et al. 1977 as cited in Cashman, 2009, p.44).

There is an assumption that religious identity can be crucial in the maintenance of a heritage language (Fishman, 1987 as cited in Lanza & Svendsen, 2007). While in some cultural communities religion can be an important factor contributing to language maintenance (Gogonas, 2012), in some other cultures religion plays a marginal role (Sridhar, 1985).

**Discussion**

Most researchers use qualitative methods employing observations, questionnaires and interviews (Sridhar, 1985; Lanza & Svendsen, 2007); self-reports (Brown, 2008; Oh & Fuligni,
2010; Gogonas, 2012); recorded speech of the participants (Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994). In many cases the quantitative methods are combined with qualitative, and the triangulation method is employed by interviewing children, parents, and teachers as well as ethnographic methods of participant observations (Gkaintartzi & Tsokalidou, 2011). Perhaps with the issue of heritage language maintenance and loss, personal experience and parental sharing of their frustration or success can be more persuasive than numbers. Kouritzin (2006) states that “while statistics and experiments convince institutions, policy-makers, and governments, stories convince individuals. Therefore, in order to change people’s minds, in order to change people’s hearts, we must engage them with other people’s stories” (p.6).

In most cases the participants in the research projects are volunteers and are selected on the basis of their accessibility using the “snowball” method (Sridhar, 1985; Guardado, 2006). In many studies the participants were highly educated from middle or high social classes (Sridhar, 1985; Brown, 2008), and data were collected mainly in urban centres (Sridhar, 1985; Pease-Alvarez & Winsler, 1994; Lanza & Svendsen, 2007; Brown, 2008; Kopeliovich, 2011).

The data about children’s use of languages is usually based on parent’s reports which may not be accurate (Sridhar, 1985). The understanding of the heritage language maintenance and proficiency is also very subjective both among parents and researchers. There is no clear definition of the concept of first language maintenance, so some studies also focus only on some narrow or specific aspect of language without taking into consideration the whole complex of contributing factors. For example, a study exploring the maintenance of Russian as a heritage language among Russian Jews in Israel (Schwartz, 2008) was focused only on vocabulary acquisition among immigrant children. This approach seems to be insufficient since the
knowledge of vocabulary does not necessarily mean the language competence, especially if we take into account the complex structure of the Russian grammar.

In general, the research literature seems to address mostly the causes and effects of heritage language loss rather than maintenance. Moreover, there is a lack of research findings regarding specific linguistic immigrant communities in a Canadian context. I believe the issue of language maintenance should be given the priority since once the language is lost, it is impossible to relearn it as a first language despite the confidence expressed by some people that they may regain their first language within the period of 6 months providing they are immersed in that language (Kouritzin, 1999).

In spite of the numerous publications and studies conducted in the area of heritage language maintenance and loss, there are still some questions or uncertain areas worth attention in future:

1) When are the monolingual children ready to learn a new language? Is the age at which it is “safe” to start learning a language the same for all children from all linguistic backgrounds?

2) Although it seems quite a challenging task, there was an indication regarding lack of possibilities for cross-generational study (only first generation immigrants) (Sridhar, 1985).

3) Research literature does not provide a clear guidance as to how a monolingual teacher may encourage bilingual students to maintain their first languages.

4) There is lack of research exploring in complex all components: parental attitudes and efforts to maintain 1st language; school and teachers’ preferences and policy; social communication and peers/friends’ influence on maintaining the first language; government official policy.

5) It is worth exploring whether the difficulty of language may influence children’s preference to choose a foreign language as a means of communication because it is easier than the heritage language.
6) It would be interesting to explore and find more plausible reasons to explain why the individual heritage learners achieve different results under the same linguistic consequences.

**Conclusion**

Kouritzin (2009) encourages every student to think of two important questions while doing a research: “who you are writing for” and “who you want to honor in your writing” (p.79). In my future research project I hope to honor those immigrant parents from all linguistic backgrounds who managed to maintain their first languages and who are able to communicate with their children in their mother’s tongues despite all challenges and difficulties of immigrant life in a foreign land. I also write for those parents who were misled by general assumption that heritage languages may cause confusion and prevent their children from successful integration into the new host society. I also write for those parents who were discouraged by their children’s shift to English and who gave up maintaining their first languages. Speaking your first language and encouraging your child to do the same in a family context must become a daily routine, and eventually it is rewarding. One of the most precious things immigrants brought from their native land is the language; another precious thing is their family. Immigration could be less painful if they manage to keep both.

**References**


