

# Heritage Language Research Priorities Conference Report

UCLA  
September 21-23, 2000

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### **Center for Bilingual Education, Arizona State University**

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The Conference Steering Committee  
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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

On September 21-23 2000, a Heritage Language Research Priorities Conference was held at UCLA. It was organized by a UCLA steering committee as a follow-up to the first national Heritage Languages in America Conference held in Long Beach, CA, in October 1999. The Conference objective was to identify broad areas of research in heritage language education and within these areas to define key researchable questions that might be political, sociological, psychological or linguistic in nature.

Participants included Terry Au, UCLA; Richard D. Brecht, the National Foreign Language Center; Donna Christian, Center for Applied Linguistics; Josué M. González, Arizona State University; Nancy H. Hornberger, University of Pennsylvania; Reynaldo Macías, UCLA; Maria Polinsky, University of California, San Diego; David Ramirez, California State University, Long Beach; G. Richard Tucker, Carnegie Mellon University; Rebecca Chávez, representing Guadalupe Valdés, Stanford University; and Terrence G. Wiley, Arizona State University. G. Richard Tucker served as facilitator.

The group discussed major substantive issues and pressing research gaps related to heritage languages in diverse educational and social contexts, considering matters of both policy and practice. The findings of the Conference are summarized in the attached report, which includes general research issues followed by specific research questions organized into seven main areas of research: the heritage speaker; the family; the community; a language-specific focus; policies; programs; and assessment.

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## **PREFACE**

In October 1999, the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) and the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) convened the first national conference on heritage languages in America. At the conclusion of that highly successful meeting of over 200 teachers, administrators, parents, and research scholars, plans for a second national meeting were made for the year 2001. In the absence of a planned meeting during the intervening year, 2000, it was agreed that a small group of interested UCLA faculty, with the advice and counsel of representatives of CAL and NFLC, would serve as a steering committee to design and implement a conference dedicated solely to the definition of researchable questions related to heritage language education.

After consideration of a number of alternatives, the steering committee was persuaded that the most efficient and economical plan for the conference was to bring together a small working panel of scholars to address this broad question: "What are the major substantive issues and pressing research gaps in heritage language education?"

### **The members of the working panel were:**

- Terry Au, UCLA
- Richard D. Brecht, National Foreign Language Center
- Donna Christian, Center for Applied Linguistics
- Josué M. González, Arizona State University
- Nancy H. Hornberger, University of Pennsylvania
- Reynaldo Macías, UCLA
- Maria Polinsky, University of California, San Diego
- David Ramirez, California State University, Long Beach
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### **Recorders and transcribers were:**

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- Jim Valentine, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Census statistics for the year 1999 indicate that 10% of the American population, a total of 25,831,000 people, was foreign-born. This is the largest number of foreign-born residents in U.S. history.

Research shows, however, that as a rule within two or three generations most non-English-speaking immigrants to the USA will have lost or almost lost their heritage languages. Ironically, while the number of residents speaking a language other than English at home is rising, the shift to English is proceeding even faster. The causes of this language loss are complex. Most researchers see the major reasons as related to the power and international status of English in the media and the economy. This, together with the power of overt and covert policies supporting English only, leads to a dramatic loss of heritage languages in the USA.

Language professionals and policymakers are increasingly aware of the potential value of heritage languages as a resource to the nation. In their paper *Tapping a National Resource: Heritage Languages in the United States*, Richard D. Brecht and Catherine W. Ingold (1998) note that more than 150 languages other than English are used in this country, and that the United States communicates with every country in the world. At the same time, they point out that in spite of extensive course offerings in foreign languages at many colleges and universities, very few people develop the level of skill in a foreign language required for professional-level work. Brecht and Ingold conclude that heritage speakers possess linguistic and cultural skills only very rarely attained by non-heritage speakers.

Conserving this resource is a matter of urgency not only for the nation, but also for individuals, families and communities. The urgency involves issues of cross-cultural understanding, identity, equitable access to social services and social justice as well as cognitive issues related to the achievement of higher level competencies.

## **REPORT**

The Heritage Language Research Priorities Conference was held at UCLA on September 21-23 2000. The Conference set out to identify broad areas of research in heritage language education and within these areas to define key researchable questions that may be political, sociological, psychological or linguistic in nature. Their findings are summarized in the following report, which includes general research issues followed by specific research questions organized into seven main areas of research.

### **General Research Issues**

Firstly, various definitions of the terms "heritage speaker" and "heritage language" were discussed. While the term "heritage language" as currently used in the USA may refer to any ancestral language that may, or may not, be spoken in the home and the community, the following definition of a heritage speaker was proposed at the outset of the conference because of the intention to focus on a pedagogical research agenda:

The term "heritage" speaker is used to refer to a student who is raised in a home where a non-English language is spoken, who speaks or merely understands the heritage language, and who is to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language.\*

\*Valdés, Guadalupe, 2000, p. 1

It was generally agreed that there is an urgent need to establish a more valid and complete data base for research purposes. Current demographic data, for example, about the distribution of heritage language communities, is inadequate and often misleading. The research conducted will, therefore, require the use of innovative data collection instruments. An important step would be to redesign data collection instruments to gather accurate information on the location, concentration and profiles of the communities.

A multidisciplinary research effort was recommended to explore the diverse aspects of heritage language maintenance and development. In this process it was seen as important to collaborate with counterpart organizations for English as a second language (ESL), foreign language and bilingual education to clarify and focus initiatives, avoid duplication, facilitate engagement and consolidate efforts. Experts from other fields, including economists, scientists and social scientists would, it was argued, have important roles in measuring the effects of heritage language learning on the individual, the family, the community and the nation.

A comprehensive review of existing literature on the subject of heritage language education was considered necessary, including an annotated bibliography of international and U.S. studies in the field that would distinguish both the research issues that heritage language learning has in common with other fields of research in language education such as first and second language acquisition, bilingualism, ESL and foreign language acquisition, and the distinctive issues that require urgent attention in this field. Since the field of heritage language learning involves a complex set of variables, it was suggested

that it would be advisable for researchers to be aware of the advantages of theoretical frameworks to provide a helpful basis for research. Existing or possible models include frameworks, mapping for example the theoretical approach to be taken, the continua in learning pathways, or the range of variables to be considered.

In considering existing programs and options for development, it was thought essential to consider the various contexts within which HL learning occurs, including the interface between heritage and formal education; issues of availability and quality of programs; and options for access to suitable teachers, curriculum, materials and methodologies, including new technology. At the heart of the area of HL education is the question of how best to encourage and provide effective and efficient language learning. Accommodating the needs of heritage speakers, which are clearly different from those of foreign language students, will require changes in secondary and post-secondary language programs. As no methodology currently exists to provide heritage students with suitable instruction, a number of research questions were suggested in this area.

Similarly the area of assessment was seen as crucial, impinging on all the research areas discussed. Discussions included not only assessment of learning and evaluation of programs but also the need for the results of this research to be presented convincingly to the wider public. It was acknowledged that while any discussion of heritage language education in the U.S. has a political dimension, strategies for publicizing the results of research are important. This is especially the case in informing parents and children of the benefits of maintaining a heritage language.

In planning HL education, it was noted that all stakeholders should be consulted, especially heritage language communities. This was considered crucial since language learning and retention occur in a variety of formal and non-formal contexts that need to be examined, described, measured and manipulated to examine their influence on language learning and language retention. It was observed that language study, nurture and contact yield both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. They may be equally desirable, and they need to be equally well understood. A focus on exclusively linguistic outcomes would in fact ignore a large body of potentially relevant data. Comprehensive surveys were, therefore, seen as essential to assess needs, resources, problems and attitudes; to establish current and potential heritage language use; and to explore options for promoting heritage language education at the national, community and personal levels.

Part of this research would, it was suggested, include an analysis of underlying rationale, motivation, attitudes and goals. Examples given were the implicit or explicit views of the community towards the promotion of a particular language, dialect or pidgin; the overt or covert attitudes of policymakers, educators and others towards the promotion of heritage languages in general and towards specific languages; and the rationale or lack of rationale of the individual heritage speaker.

Unless policies are based on thorough consultation as described above, participants suggested that there is the serious likelihood of a mismatch in heritage language development between needs and provision. For example, programs may be offered in a perceived standard form of a language that does not meet the needs of the community concerned. A prestige dialect or standard may be taught which is almost incomprehensible to the particular community concerned, or has a damaging effect to relations within the community. There has been little research into this issue and specifically into the effect of mismatches between, for example, the expectations and requirements of student and teacher, child and parent, or employee and employer.

Policy and planning would be effectively supported, some participants suggested, by the availability of case studies, models and portraits demonstrating exemplary activities. These might include portraits of individual cases; family histories documenting efforts at maintaining heritage language use and knowledge, problems and strategies for maintaining the use of a heritage language; a study of the reasons why a particular community has maintained its language; relevant language policies, and examples of effective programs with supporting publicity material.

Finally, participants considered the issue of establishing priorities in research, because resources are necessarily limited and the field covers such a wide range of pressing issues. However since the intention of the conference was to focus on language education research, no attempt was made to prioritize. While Spanish was seen as a test case for the nation, decisions on priorities will ultimately be made by individual researchers and institutions. It is hoped that the research questions that follow will be useful in guiding their research.

## **Specific Research Areas**

Specific research questions have been organized under the following categories:

- the heritage speaker
- the family
- the community
- a language-specific focus
- policies
- programs
- assessment.

## **I. THE HERITAGE SPEAKER**

### **Discussion**

In this area, discussion focused on the phenomena of languages in contact and language loss. The need for a more comprehensive database mentioned above was seen as particularly important in identifying details such as numbers of heritage speakers, location and languages spoken. It was also considered important to distinguish studies of the heritage speaker from foreign language, ESL and other learners. Participants suggested that profiles and case studies of individual heritage speakers might include the effect on heritage language learning of variables such as the learner's age; background; motivation; extent and quality of exposure to the heritage language; productive and/or receptive skills; sequence of modalities acquisition; gaps in acquisition; whether and at what stage English dominance takes place; and the effect on the heritage speaker of language loss.

### **Research Questions**

*How and to what extent can previously learned heritage language skills be recovered and/or built upon?*

*What are the various paths that can result in acquisition, maintenance or recovery of a heritage language?*

*What are the necessary or significant conditions leading to development and growth in the knowledge of a heritage language?*

*Is there evidence to support the theory of cross-language "transfer"? Which conditions promote cross-language transfer in the case of the heritage speaker?*

## **II. THE FAMILY**

### **Discussion**

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, is usually begun in a classroom setting. Accordingly, an understanding of the variables of family life that may affect the knowledge of heritage language is needed. Variables might include socio-economic data for the extended family, such as ages of family members at time of assessment, age at emigration, length of residency in the U.S., socio-economic status, level of education, occupation; the number of generations living in the household/community; families' use of their heritage language (e.g., for which purposes the language is used, how frequently, by whom, and which modalities are used); families' perception of the importance and necessity of using the language; perceived importance within the family of belonging to cultural and religious institutions and belief systems; affiliations with educational institutions.

### **Research Questions**

*Are there mental health consequences within families and communities when the heritage language is lost and parents are unable to pass on family and cultural values to their children? To what extent do families benefit when a heritage language is preserved?*

*What are the characteristics of an exemplary biliterate learning environment in the home?*

*What are common patterns of parental involvement in their children's studies of their heritage language, including preschool literacy development, supervision of homework, expectations and value placed on academic achievement? Which resources are available at home such as reading materials in various media in the heritage language, access to computers etc., and how important is this type of learning reinforcement?*

*What evidence is there that different ethno-linguistic and socioeconomic factors influence the degree of support that parents give their children in studying their heritage language? For example, how do parents from different ethno-linguistic and socioeconomic groups support their children's emerging literacy ( e.g. reading and writing in the heritage language and in English) during the preschool/school years? How does a lack of support at home, e.g. in families where parents are illiterate, affect the early development of literacy skills?*

### **III. THE COMMUNITY**

#### **Discussion**

Heritage language communities may be defined by geographic areas with significant heritage language populations or by the language, cultural and religious institutions and media that unite speakers of a language. There is a need to develop socioeconomic profiles of specific heritage language communities, based on factors such as the community's history in the USA; the degree of language contact within the community; the rate of continuing immigration into the community of speakers of the same language, and of other languages; attitudes to education in the heritage language including motivation, the extent of use, perceived status and needs for language maintenance and development; maintenance and loss of heritage languages and cultures over time; the role of cultural and religious institutions and belief systems in heritage language maintenance and development; links to educational institutions; resources, including the presence and availability of media (television, radio, software, print); the extent to which commercial activity is carried out in the heritage language; efforts by governments of countries where heritage languages are spoken to promote their language within the U.S.; and perceptions by the English and non-English speaking communities of the importance of the heritage language.

#### **Research Questions**

*What is the general attitude of the heritage language community towards the study or maintenance of a given heritage language or dialect, what degree of support does, or could, the community offer for programs and what motivates that support , for example socioeconomic, religious, political or cultural factors?*

*What are the optimal ways of building heritage language efforts within the community, especially basing efforts on community needs and desires, and training community members to work in the field of heritage language education or in applied research?*

*How are issues relating to health, social justice, equity and access to services affected by a lack of linguistic support for a particular heritage language?*

*What are the advantages of having extensive community collaboration in policy and planning for particular heritage language programs and how can this be achieved?*

*What are the personal and social repercussions of a mismatch of heritage language development (i.e., the teaching of a language variant that differs from the variant spoken in the community to the extent that the mismatch interferes with communication)?*

## IV. LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC FOCUS

### Discussion

In addition to a discussion in principle of the needs and issues related to heritage language education, it was considered important to develop profiles of specific languages and their varieties, and of the attitudes and social judgments of the target community toward their own and related language varieties. Criteria for developing these profiles should include linguistic features such as oral and written language forms; variations in dialect and standards and their perceived status; syntax and lexicon; the sociolinguistic context, particularly in relation to social uses and functions of the language/dialects; historical and cultural features; demographic details such as population and distribution of native and heritage speakers of the language within and outside the USA; the degree of internationalization in the language.

### Research Questions

*Which language properties can be assumed to be the best predictors of overall language knowledge? Are these properties the same for all languages or do they differ by language?*

*Which languages/dialects do specific communities need/want to learn and why?*

*Is the word "dialect" operative in all cases of heritage language education? For example, can it be appropriate in some cases to categorize the heritage speaker's competence as a degree of bilingualism in English and a household idiolect, a particular register spoken in the home and community, or a dialect not fully acquired? Is the ability to make such a categorization useful for the purposes of defining the heritage speaker's competence, or) designing a suitable heritage language program?*

*What is the role of various orthographies, and the way in which they are processed, in acquiring and developing literacy abilities in and through different languages (initial literacy, second language literacy, and biliteracy)?*

## **V. POLICY**

### **Discussion**

Adequate understanding of linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic factors was considered essential in developing a coherent heritage language education policy. While more reliable baseline data were seen as important for planning purposes, it was observed that information and analysis are not sufficient in themselves for the formulation of policy. Other factors are important, such as winning public support and creating an environment where such policies are seen as acceptable. The question of viability was related to this issue. Programs which are legislated but insufficiently resourced are geared for failure and set back the cause of heritage education. Participants emphasized that the voices of the heritage speakers are essential in policy development. Unless the heritage language community is motivated and supportive of programs, these programs are doomed to failure. Research questions in this area, therefore, include issues related to building support at all levels for heritage language education policy, as well as for language policy in. Achieving this support will, it was claimed, depend on developing and promoting a strong rationale for programs supported by clearly formulated, practicable goals, well documented evidence of research results and well-supported arguments for potential benefits to the nation, the community and the individual.

### **Research Questions**

*What are the main areas of need at federal, state, community and individual levels that justify the development of heritage language knowledge?*

*How can the historical and present-day resistance to Spanish in the United States, even as Spanish becomes an increasingly mainstream language, be understood? How is this resistance similar to, and how does it differ from, resistance to other non-English languages, including that documented in the 1920s and 1930s during a period of rapid Americanization? What are the implications of such resistance to an effort to gain public support for heritage instruction in Spanish and other languages?*

*Under what conditions do English-speaking U.S. communities embrace foreign language education, as distinct from heritage languages, and why? What are the most effective measures to build support, provide incentives, and counter assimilationist arguments such as those posed by the English-only movement?*

*What policies and initiatives already exist, at international, national, state, community and institutional levels, that may affect heritage language promotion and development, and how effective are these policies?*

## **VI. PROGRAMS**

### **Discussion**

Discussion of this area focused on developing a pedagogy of heritage language instruction to promote and motivate learning. To achieve this goal, initial research was recommended into the relative effectiveness for heritage speakers of formal and informal programs of instruction. It was suggested that the numerous contexts in which language learning occurs - including community language or heritage programs, parallel school programs, and exchange or study abroad programs - will need to be examined and measured according to demand, need and available resources to determine the most efficient and practicable means of increasing the language proficiency of heritage speakers. Rigorous research is required to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs, discover lacunae and recommend new pedagogical approaches in this field.

### **Research Questions**

*How can direct instruction in heritage languages facilitate learning and retard or reverse the process of language shift?*

*How do the goals, curriculum and expected outcomes of a heritage language program differ from those of a foreign language program or native language instruction? To what extent do they differ by language?*

*How can we build on the oral/aural proficiencies of heritage speakers to develop literacy?*

*What successful models exist for instructional programs, methodologies, teaching styles and materials?*

*How do we motivate heritage speakers to maintain their language skills, and what learning strategies would best equip them for this purpose?*

*How can an understanding of phenomena such as diglossia or proficiency in non-standard languages and dialects enrich instruction in the standard language? What models exist for incorporating these phenomena into a curriculum?*

*What evidence is there to support the theory of cross-language "transfer", and what are the pedagogical implications of this theory for heritage speakers?*

*What is the cognitive, psychological and social impact on heritage speakers of immersion programs in English?*

*How effective are programs outside school hours? What are their linguistic and non-linguistic goals, and are these realistic given the frequency and length of study time? What models for these programs exist or might be proposed taking into account issues such as teacher supply and training; curriculum development and materials; articulation and accreditation of courses and other needs?*

*What are the specific issues related to programs in the less standardized, more community-based heritage languages, and what options are there for promoting the maintenance of these languages?*

*What are the most efficient and effective means of evaluating the success of programs for heritage speakers?*

## **VII. ASSESSMENT**

### **Discussion**

Assessment was seen as a key instrument for analysis in each of the research areas described above. In order to ensure that this assessment is relevant and suitable for heritage speakers, it was suggested that current assessment instruments should be analyzed and reviewed or new instruments devised. There is reason, for example, to question the validity of establishing benchmark tests and profiles of language behavior to be assessed in the absence of longitudinal data indicating what heritage language learners know and are actually able to do. There is also a need to learn whether the same measures can be used for multiple purposes including placement and achievement and, if not, how assessments should vary.

### **Research Questions**

*What are the limitations of current methods of assessing language performance and making inferences about linguistic knowledge (e.g. the ACTFL proficiency levels and the National Standards), especially for heritage language learners?*

*What factors must be taken into consideration when designing assessment procedures for heritage language learners? For example, to what extent could research on the different backgrounds of test-takers and their test results contribute to developing new assessment tools for heritage speakers? What is the knowledge base for heritage speakers? What are the competencies, skills and capabilities that should be considered in assessing the proficiency of heritage speakers, including the early learner? What are appropriate and authentic task types? Which modalities should be assessed? Can they all be assessed; and for what purposes?*

*To what extent are different versions of a language (such as urban standard, other dialects, rural or émigré versions of the language and borrowings from English) accepted/acceptable in the assessment process, and how would the possibility of multiple versions affect instruction?*

*What multivariate assessment measures already exist, or could be designed, to facilitate the gathering of linguistic and non-linguistic data for profiles of heritage language families, including qualitative and quantitative data? What data sets exist based upon these measures? What innovative analytical procedures (qualitative or quantitative) such as growth curve analysis could be used? What other types of data-collection procedures or tools might be applicable, including from other fields such as neurology?*

*What new methodologies or technologies, including neurological measurements, can be used to map the development of bilingualism in children, including assessment of simultaneous development in two languages and two modes (oral expression and literacy)?*

## **CONCLUSION**

It became abundantly clear from the lively discussions held during the conference that the questions that require the attention of policy makers, research scholars, and language educators involve the consideration of complex, interrelated and interdependent social, political, psychological and linguistic variables. It is to the credit of the conference participants that significant steps were made toward defining and delineating sets of questions that now must be addressed by interested stakeholders. Clearly answers to these questions, and others that will be generated by subsequent conferences, will provide an informed basis for determining the future of heritage language education.

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