

Maria Polinsky: Heritage Languages and Their Speakers

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Maria Polinsky is a professor of linguistics at the University of Maryland. She works with several research stations and labs around the world and is one of the founders of the linguistic field of heritage languages. Her 2018 publication, *Heritage Languages and Their Speakers*, is a comprehensive and informative book on the nature of heritage languages and the characteristics of their speakers. The book begins with a preface and acknowledgements on behalf of the author, followed by a list of abbreviations of grammatical terms which serve as a tool to analyze the supportive examples throughout the book. Out of the eight chapters the book consists of, two provide a sociolinguistic approach to heritage language speakers (HS), while one focuses on suggested methodologies and approaches for investigating heritage languages (HL). The remaining chapters provide an insight into HL development from the perspective of various branches of linguistics.

The Preface reveals that the goal of writing the book was twofold; on the one hand, it intends to seek answers to an “objective scholarly question,” on the other hand, it is driven by a personal impression of “subjective bafflement” HL left Polinsky with while exploring this novel field of linguistics (p. xiii). Although many linguists have come up with a definition to HL over the years (Valdés, 2001; Montrul, 2016; Rothman, 2009), the author offers yet another: “A heritage language is therefore the home/minority language of a bilingual who is dominant in the main societal language” (p. 10). This statement is later expanded to include sequential language learners in addition to simultaneous ones. The publications enlisted as resources for the book (e.g. Silvina Montrul and Wiley et. al.) may prove to be essential for further references for a new scholar in the field. In comparison, the author considers *Heritage Languages and Their Speakers* a complementary material to these “well-developed experimental and pedagogical perspectives” (p. xv).

The first chapter of the book discusses the three categories of speakers essential to the study of heritage languages: baseline, heritage, and homeland speakers. By definition, the baseline “is the language of adult first-generation immigrants that serves as the input to heritage learners” (p. 12). Since baseline speakers no longer have the chance to keep up with the dynamic changes of their L1 as opposed to the homeland speakers who live in the old country, heritage speakers – who are the second generation speakers of L1 – have a solidified, archaic tone to their firstly acquired language inherited from their baseline speaker parents (p. 11).

As there are two kinds of data which can be collected for research purposes in the field, two separate designs of studies are suggested for researchers: longitudinal and mass observations. Acclaiming the work of such large-scale, ongoing projects as the Heritage Language Variation and Change (HLVC) project in Toronto, for example, special attention is drawn to the importance of selecting

the right type of research methods for research purposes. Some caveats are added to warn against making the wrong choice in that regard. For scholarly purposes, the difference between homeland and baseline languages are comprehensively explained along with the points to be taken into consideration when conducting research on them.

Exploring the phenomenon of transfer from the dominant language among HS, some thought-provoking questions are raised, such as “to what extent does the L1 grammar play a role in shaping the developing L2 grammar?” and whether “...the simplified, non-standard characteristics observed in the heritage grammar [are] due to transfer in the dominant language” (p. 18)? The explanation given to these questions is supported by research evidence on the Korean language.

After being introduced to language attrition and its effects on baseline and heritage language speakers, the new term “divergent attainment” is introduced which stands for innovation of the language (p. 18). It is strongly argued that divergent attainment should not be considered incomplete acquisition as heritage languages have a systematic grammar regardless of their differences from that of the homeland speakers.

The second chapter explains why, despite its universal nature and role as *lingua franca*, the English language is just as well subject to linguistic changes when spoken as a heritage language as any other languages. To support this claim, historical records dating as far back as the Civil War are cited here.

The third chapter highlights the various tests, questionnaires, methodologies, and tasks which may be used for field research and data processing. The guidelines listed here can aid new researchers in the field to select and tailor these methods and techniques to their needs.

From the fourth to seventh chapters a very detailed analysis of HL is provided in connection to the main branches of linguistics. The explanations are supported by a large number of examples from various researches conducted by the author and other linguists. In the fields of phonetics and phonology, it can be concluded that the sound system HS have for their L1 and L2 languages are maintained separately. Thus, Polinsky encourages researchers to pursue the answers to the phonological differences between HS and baseline speakers. Morphology and morphosyntax also pose many challenges to researchers of HS. Among other elements, the contrast between perpetually salient versus silent elements in HL production and comprehension are greatly emphasized. By exploring a multitude of syntactic elements, the properties and limitations of such current research strategies as the “good enough” strategy which, in chapter six manifests itself as the “shallow processing” and “good enough processing” approaches, are further elaborated on (p. 289). Chapter seven is dedicated solely to lexical and propositional semantics of HL; a linguistic field which, according to the author, remains unstudied at this point.

The main theme of chapter eight is endangered languages. Research on HS of endangered languages must be differentiated from HS of widely spoken languages because endangered languages have a quantitative limitation on their baseline and homeland speakers. Two terms reappear in this chapter which are closely linked to the concept of “the idealized speaker” – a term once again introduced by the author (p. 28). The first one is “young, available, literate” (YAL) and the next one is “western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic” (WEIRD) (p. 28). Both represent HS groups that would produce “cleaner data” than lesser erudite speakers in linguistic experiments (p. 332). It is argued that YAL and WEIRD research participants are likely to outperform endangered language speakers because they fit well into society due to their being educated in society’s dominant language. The counter argument would be that they would presumably suffer from stress imposed on them by the expectations of society versus their home environment (p. 333).

Polinsky believes that at times it is hard to determine whether an interviewee is a heritage speaker or a baseline speaker. Therefore, it is suggested that researchers look for signs in the speaker’s language that might provide clues to identify them as either a HS or a baseline speaker. Such signs include disfluencies, repetitions and redundancies, and the amount of variation. Polinsky warns against relying solely on bibliographical data as they might reflect flaws (such as when an interviewee is uncomfortable with answering a question). The tolerance principle can come to the aid of the researcher to identify HS by observing whether language production exceeds the threshold of exceptions. If it does, then the speaker is indeed a HS (p. 335).

In the Conclusion, a comparison is made between HS, baseline speakers, and L2 learners. It is proposed that HL should be considered new dialects of L1 with morphology being close to that of children. In their lexicon, HS are similar to L2 learners but they resemble some language behaviors of baseline speakers, such as sound production and overall comprehension. Being bilinguals, their two languages constantly exercise pressure on each other. What distinguishes them from the other two categories is that HS are very innovative, especially grammatically. This brings us to the ongoing debate whether their grammar is hybrid or innovative? The question, however, remains unanswered. The claim that no language can be fully understood without its heritage language sounds like a wakeup call for researchers to pursue new ways to approach the field of HL (p. 353).

I would like to end my review with an inspiring quotation by Maria Polinsky:

„I consider it the ultimate challenge of linguistics to apply our theories to new data, especially when the data are messy and hard to analyze. Indeed, it’s precisely this challenge that has driven my long-standing interest in heritage languages: they are messy, but they are also lean. If we can figure out what makes them tick, we will have a much better

understanding of which components of natural language design are indispensable and which are more fragile” (Polinsky, n.d.).

References

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