Lesser-studied Heritage Languages: An Appeal to the Dyad

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The Eleventh Heritage Language Research Institute had as its theme "heritage languages in unexpected places," which afforded us, as scholars, an attempt to broaden the empirical base of heritage-language study beyond those areas that have been the primary focus of this research program to date (e.g., Heritage Spanish, Russian, German, Chinese, etc.). As part of the Institute, we led a roundtable discussion on the topic of lesser-studied heritage languages. Our goal for the roundtable was to facilitate a frank discussion of what it means for a language to count as a lesser-studied heritage language, together with an acknowledgement of the benefits conveyed by studying such languages. The hope was that this discussion could function as a catalyst for future research on lesser-studied heritage languages.

Identifying lesser-studied heritage languages presupposes the ability to identify heritage languages and their speakers. For present purposes, we identify heritage speakers as unbalanced bilinguals who acquired their first, heritage language in the home and whose second language serves as the dominant language of the broader community. When we introduced these criteria in our discussion, we were surprised by the resistance with which they were met: assuming the Institute participants constitute a representative sample of heritage-language researchers, it is obvious that the field has yet to arrive at a consensus on our object of study; namely, the most accurate description of what a 'heritage language' *is* (and subsequently *isn't*). However, we leave this crisis for another day.

Supposing we can identify heritage speakers and the heritage languages they speak, the task turns to determining which among those languages count as *lesser-studied*. Perhaps the most sensible advice we received was a plea for empiricism. If the goal is to determine which heritage languages count as lesser-studied, then all one needs to do is count: survey research output on heritage languages and count which heritage languages are frequently studied; the complement of that set (or some subset thereof) will be the lesser-studied heritage languages.

Figure 1 reports the results of just that sort of counting. We surveyed the twelve most recent general issues of the *Heritage Language Journal*, encompassing volumes 12(2) through 17(1). These issues included a total of 54 new research articles, each targeting a specific heritage language.[1] We chose to exclude special issues from our analysis to avoid any skewing that might arise when an issue targets a single heritage language.

Figure 1

Counts of Heritage Languages Studied in a Survey of Twelve Issues of the Heritage Language Journal
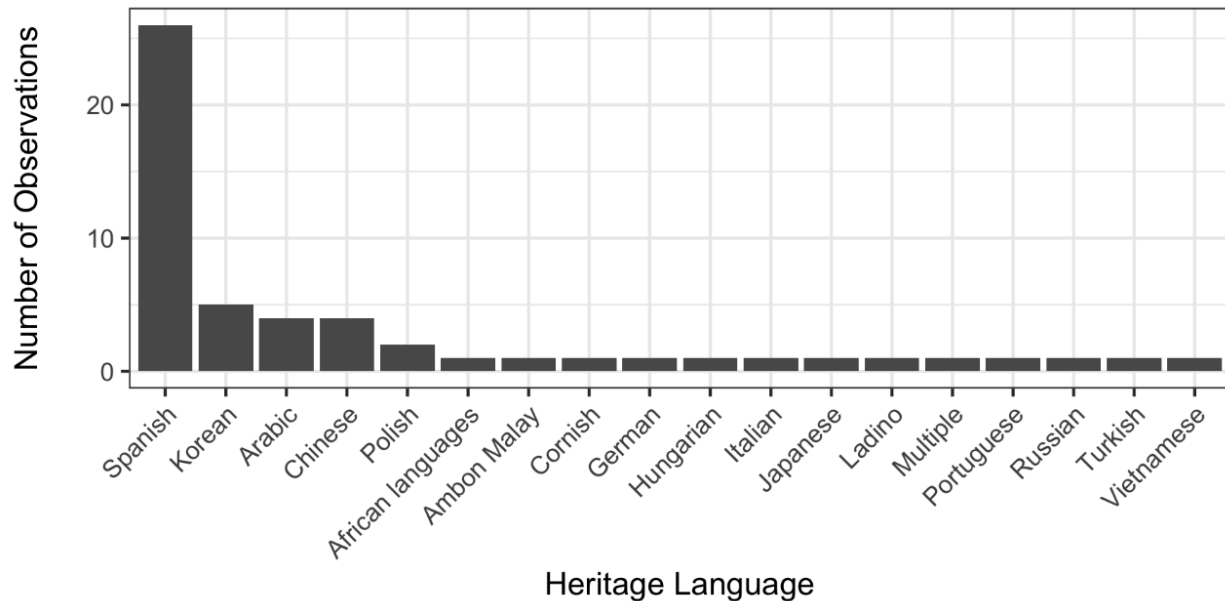
As Figure 1 makes clear, by far the largest portion of research (48% of the 54 articles) has focused on Spanish as a heritage language. The next-most-frequently-studied language, Heritage Korean, accounts for 9% (five out of 54) of the articles in our sample; Heritage Chinese and Heritage Arabic come next, with four articles each, and Heritage Polish appears in two articles. The remaining languages were featured only in a single study.

On the basis of this counting, an obvious (and unsurprising) conclusion presents itself: Heritage Spanish should not count as a lesser-studied heritage language. Whether Heritage Korean, Heritage Chinese, or Heritage Arabic should count as lesser-studied depends on the comparison population: compared to Heritage Spanish, these heritage languages are indeed studied far less; compared to the other languages in our sample, they are not. We merely raise this issue, without the intention of settling it here.

Beyond confirming that Heritage Spanish is the most extensively-studied of heritage languages to date, an even more striking result emerged from our survey. So far, we have talked about heritage languages in isolation from the dominant languages with which they coexist. In addition to counting the heritage languages, we can also count those dominant languages. Figure 2 organizes the 54 research articles from our sample according to the dominant language in the language dyad under investigation; there, we see that the overwhelming majority of research (87%, or 47/54 articles) focuses on heritage languages where English is the dominant language. The next-most-common dominant language is German, which accounts for just 6% (3/54) of our sample. If anything

is lesser-studied in heritage-language research, it is heritage language dyads where the dominant language is anything other than English.

Figure 2

Counts of Dominant/Societal Languages Studied in a Survey of Twelve Issues of the Heritage Language Journal
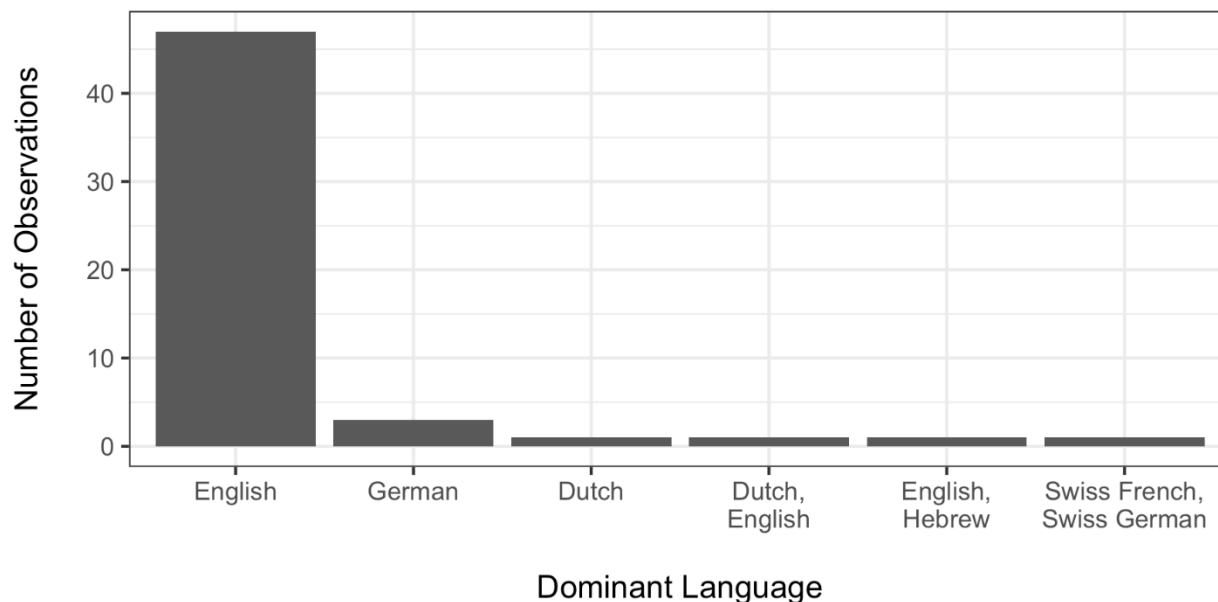
If our aim as researchers is to develop robust empirical generalizations concerning heritage languages and explanatory theoretical accounts thereof, we must ensure that our data are not limited exclusively to cases where English is the dominant language. Widely-adopted generalizations about heritage languages might then turn out to be limited to heritage languages *in contact with English*, thereby obscuring the true essence of heritage language competence (although see Polinsky's (2018) appeal for a more nuanced definition of cross-linguistic interference, i.e., *transfer*). We therefore make appeal to the potential importance of language dyads when considering which languages may count as *lesser-studied* in heritage-language research, and---in an effort to more fully understand the unique properties of heritage language broadly construed---we exhort the field to seek out heritage languages in cases where the dominant societal language is not English. The geopolitical realities that lead to heritage languages make such cases less readily accessible, but we believe that those realities serve to make studying more diverse language dyads all the more valuable to our scientific understanding of language.

REFERENCE
Polinsky, M. (2018). *Heritage languages and their speakers*. Cambridge University Press.

NOTE

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1. Five of the 54 articles targeted more than one heritage-language dyad. In one case, African languages were grouped together for the purpose of research. In two cases, different Heritage Spanish populations with different dominant languages were investigated. Another case looked at heritage Ladino among speakers with varied language backgrounds. The final case performed a large-scale survey of heritage language instruction in the U.S. context.