Dynamic Language Use in Heritage Bilinguals of Spanish

I. Background and Purpose

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 40 percent of people in the state of California speak a language other than English at home. A large number of bilinguals in this group are individuals who are heritage speakers of Spanish, individuals who acquired their first language in the home (typically a minority language) and then a societal language once they started schooling. The bilingual experiences of heritage speakers are unique at the social, cultural and linguistic levels and characterizing the linguistic experiences of this group is an aim of our project. Research on heritage speakers of Spanish has focused on identifying the differences in linguistic performance that exist between them and second language learners and/or native speakers of Spanish. However, within the population of heritage speakers of Spanish there is a continuum of diverse experiences that merit further investigation. Bilinguals learn to adapt to the demands of the environment and context(s) in which they communicate (Green & Abutalebi, 2013), which, in turn, shapes their experiences as bilingual speakers of a heritage language that is spoken in more restricted contexts compared to the wider-spoken societal language. The proposed study aims to expand on research conducted on a population of heritage speakers of Spanish and their bilingual experiences in Southern California. Further U.S. Census Bureau data shows Los Angeles and San Diego counties present an enriched linguistic environment, with their populations having a 31.6 percent and 15.5 percent higher multilingual population over the national US population, respectively. Spanish heritage speakers become a population of interest when one considers the high prevalence of Hispanic & Latino individuals, making up 49.1 percent of the Los Angeles county population and 34.8 percent of the San Diego county population. Through our research, we hope to contribute to the growing field of research on heritage speakers and gain more insight into the linguistic experiences of these individuals, particularly by understanding how they use their two languages across different contexts and among different social groups. Lastly, about 82% of California’s public school enrollment are students who come from a Spanish-speaking home. Understanding the experiences of these students can inform school policy and help us to better support educators. Our research has the potential to support the improvement of curriculum used in heritage language pedagogy and bilingual education policy at large.
II. Literature Review

Heritage speakers have long been a significant population of bilingual individuals whose cognitive processes and language use are unique in nature. The cognitive effect of one’s heritage language on their dominant language varies immensely. Scontras et al. (2015) considers the outcomes of the effects of speakers’ native language. One effect Scontras et al. acknowledged within Spanish heritage speakers was a change in how speakers perceived morphological agreement. This study looked at and observed how heritage speakers of Spanish appear to handle number and gender agreement in their heritage language similarly, and possibly even handle them together, as opposed to native Spanish speakers that appeared to perceive them as different categories. Scontras et al. also acknowledged a phenomenon known as attrition, where individuals seem to lose language ability due to their speech or ability to judge grammaticality of sentences. "This study demonstrates that the linguistic outcomes of heritage bilingual speakers differ to a certain extent to those of monolingual speakers of Spanish, and these phenomena may be caused by the shift in dominant language input during the individual's childhood.

Language attrition in heritage speakers is further explored by Flores and Snape (2021) when they look at language development in returnees. Returnees were described as heritage speakers who return to a location where their heritage language then becomes the dominant language in the environment they live in. Studies suggested that although the previous dominant language could begin to show attrition in this new linguistic environment, individuals that remained in their previous linguistic environment for around 10 years or longer maintained their language abilities when compared to those that had only stayed for a few years. This finding also suggested that age of onset may not be as significant as previously thought, with Flores arguing that length of exposure should also be considered. Ultimately, Flores and Snape conclude that there are many factors that contribute to a heritage speaker’s language ability, and that returnees often demonstrate positive language development following a migration to a homeland.

Previous studies and research have shown that there are a variety of factors that affect a heritage speaker’s linguistic ability in their heritage language. As a result we plan to look at not only a heritage speaker’s ability in their languages, but also look at the extent of which their heritage language is present in their lives, across multiple contexts and when communicating with different members of their social groups.

III. Proposed Study
Participants

The participants are individuals over 18 years of age who are heritage language speakers of Spanish. Heritage language speakers is an umbrella term for individuals who speak a minority language with their family, in their home, or within a community of speakers. Heritage speakers eventually acquire the societal language through the education system once they start schooling at around ages 5-6. In this study, we focus on individuals who speak Spanish at home and English, the dominant language, in societal and academic settings.

Methods

Our study will measure language proficiency to help us create a continuum of our participants’ language abilities in both languages. Participants will complete a verbal fluency task (where they will be presented with a category name and asked to name as many examples as they can) and a picture-naming task (where they will name a set of images) in both English and Spanish. In addition, we use three questionnaires: the Bilingual Language Profile, Bilingual Switching Questionnaire, and a Social Network Questionnaire (administered in the form of a semi-structured interview). All the data from these tools will be gathered through Gorilla, an online research tool and platform. The study is estimated to last between 1.5 to 2 hours and is to be completed in one session using the following tasks and measures:

- **DELE** To measure participants’ proficiency in Spanish, the *Diplomas de Español como Lengua Extranjera* (DELE) test was administered.

- **Bilingual Language Profile - BLP** *(Birdsong, Gertken & Amengual, 2012)* To understand how participants use their languages outside the context of this research study, we utilize the *Bilingual Language Profile*. This self-reported questionnaire enables us to view how participants acquired their languages. Language acquisition varies across the spectrum. Some are constantly surrounded by the minority language, whereas others are not. We are interested in gaining information on the different linguistic environments and their implications. In addition, we look at participants’ language proficiency and attitudes toward their languages.

- **Bilingual Switching Questionnaire - BSQ** *(Rodriguez-Fornells et al., 2012)* The *Bilingual Switching Questionnaire* assesses the degree and frequency of language switching habits in bilinguals by focusing on four constructs: switching tendencies in the (1) first and (2) second languages (tendency to switch to the L1/L2), (3) contextual
switches that are triggered in particular situations, and (4) unintended switches that occur without the speaker’s awareness.

- **Social Network Questionnaire (Lev-Ari, 2017)** The Social Network Questionnaire is used to calculate the network size of the participants. Through a semi-structured interview, participants are asked to name all the people that they regularly interact with for at least five minutes during each day of the week. Participants are also asked to indicate the age and relation of each of the individuals they list along with the language(s) they use to communicate with them. Social network size is then computed by counting the number of interaction partners that are listed in the questionnaire.

- **Neuroticism Extraversion Openness-Five Factor Personality Inventory:** To understand if there is a relationship between language and personality, we utilize the Neuroticism Extraversion Openness-Five Factor Personality Inventory in Spanish and English. In this test, participants are assessed over five domains which include: neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, and agreeability to assess the scores in each domain with the inventory given in the respective language. Scores will then be analyzed and compared to understand the differences between the different personality traits bilinguals demonstrate based on what language they are using.

IV. **Proposed Analysis**

Data from the experimental tasks will be analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Analyses will be conducted through a team of undergraduate student researchers mentored by a graduate student from the School of Education, and with the support of faculty advisors Dr. Judith Kroll from the School of Education and Dr. Julio Torres from the School of Humanities.

All team members will contribute to carry out qualitative analysis of the semi-structured interviews. All interviews will be transcribed in both English and Spanish. Recurrent themes will be identified by two team members using Dedoose. Coders will meet with the graduate student to discuss common themes and their interpretation and significance of these. Based on previous literature, we will try to identify themes that capture participant degree of biculturalism, linguistic identity and attitudes.

**Group Member 1:** Analyses in this scope of the study will aim to characterize the heritage speaker experiences of our participants. Current language use will be assessed as a
function of social network data which will also be extracted from the short interviews. Data from the BLP will be compared to the size of participant social networks. Data from the BSQ data will be analyzed to identify frequency of language switching languages across multiple contexts.

Group Member 2: A big question our lab would love to explore is the potential correlation between language and personality. Specifically, how one’s personality changes in response to a language switch. This specific question was presented by Veltkamp and colleagues in 2012 who administered the Neuroticism Extraversion Openness-Five Factor Personality Inventory and found that both German and Spanish bilingual speakers exhibited shifts in their association to cultural norms when switching between languages displaying a sense of biculturalism. The conclusion of the aforementioned study was that new language acquisition opens individuals up to exploring multiple aspects of their personality in different ways. To adapt this research to our own study, heritage speakers will be administered this measure. Data on language attitudes and identity domains from the BLP will also be juxtaposed with the results from this measure.

V. Anticipated Results

If we consider potential results from the social network questionnaire, we can anticipate that speakers who have a greater number of Spanish and English speakers in their social network are more linguistically diverse. In the sense that they use both languages across multiple contexts will show more interactions with individuals who speak both languages. The opposite could also be true where speakers who show more interactions with only Spanish speakers or only English speakers will show more dominance in only one of their languages. We also expect that individuals that use both of their languages with the majority of the people in their social networks will show greater frequency of switches in their responses in the BSQ. We also expect to see a relationship between bicultural associations and language proficiency. Individuals who identify with both cultures more equally or identify with the culture of their heritage language will be more likely to have higher proficiency in that language. We expect to see this openness and cultural preference in our participants’ interview responses and in the Neuroticism Extraversion Openness-Five Factor Personality Inventory. Finally, using our proficiency measures (DELE, verbal fluency and picture-naming task) along with the data from our BLP questionnaire we hope to understand the variation in our participants’ bilingual experiences.

VI. Timeline
Fall 2022
- Prepared study proposal
- Designed study on Gorilla online experimental platform
- Initiated participant recruitment on volunteer-basis (no compensation)
- Began data cleaning and preparation for preliminary analyses

Winter 2023
- Participant recruitment for compensation
- Continue data cleaning and preparation
- Preliminary analyses

Spring 2023
- Carry out secondary analyses of data
- Begin to write research paper

Summer 2023
- Move on to results, discussion and conclusion sections of research paper
- Work on UROP Symposium presentation

VII. Itemized Budget

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References


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