Heritage in Decline: The Detriments and Dangers of Heritage Language Loss

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The Dangers of a Declining Heritage: The Motivations and Detriments of Heritage Language Loss

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Background and Hypothesis

- While it has been estimated that the HL will be wiped out by generation three, in my family, it only took two generations.
- My family is the anomaly among our Puerto Rican relatives - my father was the only one among his siblings who opted not to teach his children both Spanish and English.
- To determine what contributed to this decision, I interviewed with my father to learn of his motivations for not teaching Spanish after having conducted research on the phenomenon of heritage language loss.
- I hypothesized that the desire for assimilation into American culture through the use of the English language was a leading factor, possibly coupled with negative childhood experiences.

Results

- Similar to Liang's (2012) study, my father stated that he both sees the usefulness in the HL he still wants his family to learn it.
- Rather than teaching us the more "slang," L version of Spanish that he believes we would learn the H at school.
- He stated that, at times, he is unable to understand other dialects of Spanish, nor are they able to understand him.
- Additionally, he himself never learned how to read or write in Spanish.
- He did not cite any childhood experiences or intense desires for assimilation as reasoning for neglecting the transmission of the heritage language, contrary to my original hypothesis.

Conclusions and Future Research

- Tse (2001) notes that parents serve as "gatekeepers" to the HL.
  - The parents' use of the HL, attitudes regarding its maintenance, opportunities for education and exposure to the language all can play a role in the child's HL proficiency later in his life.
  - This conclusion appears to be correct; the little value placed on learning the HL, the negative view of the dialect spoken, and the lack of exposure to my siblings and I were given, our HL was not maintained.
  - It appears that parents are highly important to keeping the HL alive - the amount of priority placed on instruction and the attitudes towards learning and using the HL are vital to its maintenance.
  - The body of research currently available for HL loss was not seen to account for parents being unwilling to teach their children a language or dialect they perceived as being the L.

Future research can be focused on seeing how commonly such motivations lead to HL loss, particularly since less common languages or dialects wouldn't necessarily have that luxury.

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References