

How Educators Influence Heritage Language Speakers' View of Themselves

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Introduction

Language is used, at the most fundamental level, to communicate with others in cultural and socially constructed settings. Within these settings, language users consciously choose specific dialects in order to demonstrate social closeness to or distance from others. It is this process of language choice that brings some to call language a powerful metaphor for identity (Jaffe, 1999). In recent years researchers have been exploring how choice of language, or language variety, not only reflects identity, but necessarily makes people who they are. Given that often the connection between language, or dialect, and identity is intertwined, what happens when individuals with different varieties of the same language encounter one another?

This article will address how heritage language (HL) speakers react when they encounter individuals who speak a different, often implied or perceived to be, superior dialect of Spanish. This reaction is especially important because how highly HL speakers esteem their language is one of the factors that influences whether the HL is maintained or lost (Vermy, 2008). The discussion will lead to how educators often, albeit in many instances unconsciously, translate difference into deficiency and how this in turn affects the HL learners' desire to speak Spanish. Finally, I will offer suggestions that educators might follow and propose additional research ideas that would benefit both HL speakers and educators alike.

All languages and dialects are created equally

It is widely maintained that, scientifically or linguistically speaking, every language is capable of adequately expressing any array of ideas or concepts—no matter how intricate—that fit the needs of its speakers (Edwards, 2009). Moreover, contrary to common beliefs, a dialect is not a substandard language variety—every individual, without regard to socioeconomic or educational level, speaks a dialect (Fromkin et al., 2007). Still, the concept of language purism prevails and change is commonly considered “decay” or that the language is somehow “deteriorating” if and when it adapts to the desires and/or needs of its speakers. If a language does not change, it dies (the fate of Classical Latin should eradicate the die-hard prescriptivists’ argument to the contrary). Edwards (2009) states, “The power of social convention, attitude and prejudice regularly translates difference into deficiency” (p. 5). Due to a series of historical events, a portion of the population has received certain advantages in the game of life, and the way they speak has been deemed “standard.” Linguists’ use of the non-pejorative term “nonstandard” when referring to other language dialects has been taken to mean “substandard,” “a word that does not exist in a linguist’s lexicon” (Edwards, 2009, p. 5). Not surprisingly, the myth that those who are higher on the social scale speak more “correctly” prevails. This may be because the standard dialect is the one used by educated individuals, the one expressed in formal contexts, and the one used in printed materials. As Edwards (2009) summarizes, “[The standard dialect’s] power and position derive from political circumstance” (2009, p. 66).

In his pioneering study, Labov (1966) demonstrates the importance of the power of perception and how, if one perceives a dialect to be inferior, for all intents and

purposes, it is. In short, he found that lower-class respondents tried to hide their use of lower-status (or nonstandard) speech forms and that they produced more higher-status (or prestige) speech forms than even the upper-middle-class respondents did. This is certainly not the only example in which people have reassessed and altered their dialect due to the perception of the power of the standard variety. Caveat: the stigma attached to a certain dialect is directly related to the status of the individuals who speak it.

Language encounters and their consequences

Duranti affirms that one of the most prevalent ways that one community exercises control over another, or certain members of a community dominate other members, is by designating the acceptable ways of speaking—known as standardizing or codifying a particular dialect (2001). So, assuming this standardization, or codification, is the objective, this “desired good” is manufactured and distributed to the speech community. In short, by disseminating the “acceptable ways of speaking” via the educational system, mass media, the government, and the “cultural establishment,” a select few determine how the masses *ought* to speak (Fishman, 1971) and this same minority decides the value of all linguistic forms. Hence, an association is made between those who use (and in a sense, enforce) this dialect and the places where it is used, the kinds of interactions that most typically transpire there, and the principles or goals they symbolize (Haugen, 1966; in Fishman, 1971). Quite simply, standard forms are highly valued; nonstandard (read: substandard) are not. This is especially evident in the discrepancy between the dialect of Spanish *spoken* by many HL speakers and the “standard” that is *taught* in school and appears in the mainstream Spanish media. Many educators speak this “codified” or “standard” form; many HL learners do not.

White and Vermy (2010) discuss the HL learners, their interaction with foreign language educators, and the importance of honoring nonstandard dialects as well as the standard. “These (nonstandard) dialects, while important markers of family and social communities, often possess grammatical and lexical features that are at odds with educators’ perceptions of ‘good language use.’ As HL speakers and foreign language educators interact, HL speakers often feel oppressed by efforts to change their language” (p. 6–7). As previously mentioned, linguistic difference is commonly viewed as linguistic deficit and this is, unfortunately, a very common tendency among educators. As such, it is paramount to understand how instructors’ attitudes transfer to students’ opinions of their language, and hence of themselves. Walsh (1991) discusses at length how bilingual Puerto Rican students in Boston internalize their teachers’ negative attitudes toward them. Even earlier investigations demonstrate the effects of accents and dialects on teachers’ attitudes toward their pupils (Choy and Dodd, 1976; Seligman et al., 1972; Williams et al., 1972). Imagine the range of emotions an individual encounters when the language variety he or she speaks, the dialect that has so many emotional and personal ties to familial and cultural experiences, is undervalued. A concerted effort to raise awareness among educators of the richness of linguistic and dialectal diversity of HL would do wonders for student/teacher interaction in the HL classroom.

How people perceive their language is directly correlated with whether the language is maintained or lost. Admittedly, if there are many environments in which the language is used (church, work, home) and if the demographics associated with the language are positive (for example, continuing immigration), the language is more likely to prosper. However, there is ample evidence that the attitudes toward the “minority”

language dialect play a significant role in whether or not individuals will want to continue to use it. The subtleties of one language having greater prestige over another in a community ought not to be overlooked. Individuals are loath to speak a language or language dialect if there is a stigma attached to it. In précis, “where (a language) is valued and regarded with pride as identifying the minority group and expressing its distinctive culture, there is more chance of it being maintained” (Holmes, 2001, p. 70). By continually indicating that the word an HL speaker uses is “wrong” or that the verb form represents “uneducated speech,” instructors repeatedly send the message that HL learners are “deficient speakers whose language skills border on barbarian and whose socioeconomic situation will never improve” (White and Vermy, 2010, p. 7). It should come as no surprise when HL speakers choose not to continue, or even start, learning their mother tongue.

Vermy (2010) shows that when Spanish speakers feel their non-standard variety has been devalued, they prefer to speak English. These same individuals call their dialect of Spanish “ghetto” and discern that it is not the same variety that is used on television or by their teachers in school. As White and Vermy (2010) discuss, it is possible for educators to demonstrate the viability of the standard without devaluing the dialect the HL speaker uses.

Joseph (2010) notes, “each of us performs a repertoire of identities that are constantly shifting, and that we negotiate and renegotiate according to the circumstances” (p. 14). This includes using different registers, dialects, or even languages depending on the situation. This practice is natural and it encapsulates the beauty and wonder of human language. Shaming people for the way they speak is tantamount to mocking people for

the color of their skin. Educators need to demonstrate greater sensitivity to HL learners. How might we do so? We can start by reflecting on our own attitudes toward language dialects and by realizing that just as there are a myriad of different people in this world, there are innumerable language varieties—and that all languages change! In the classroom, we can elicit forms and lexicon and ask how they are different from the ones provided in texts. Moreover, we can ask when these forms are used and with whom. Finally, we can help HL learners to “gain a better understanding of their current language practices while also considering the appropriateness of using the acrolect (standard) for successful negotiation of sociopolitical institutions and discourses” (White and Vermy, 2010, p. 7).

Conclusion

Clearly, students thrive in positive learning environments. Though perhaps unwittingly, educators have not always provided HL speakers with optimal conditions that encourage native language maintenance. Future research might look at attrition of HL learners in various foreign language programs and try to uncover the reasons for the loss of interest. In addition, further studies are needed on the attitudes foreign language instructors hold toward their particular dialect and how they interact with and view pupils who use this same dialect. Finally, Lippi-Green (2004) captures the importance of why a shift needs to occur with regard to how educators deal with HL speakers’ varieties:

When persons who speak languages that are devalued and stigmatized consent to the standard language ideology, they themselves become complicit in its propagation against themselves, their own interests and identities. Many are caught in a vacuum: when an individual cannot find any social acceptance for her language outside her own speech communities, she may come to denigrate her own language, even while she continues to use it.

Although educators cannot enforce social acceptance outside the classroom, there clearly is no reason for students to encounter negative attitudes inside the classroom.

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