The Making of a Heritage Speaker: Heritage Language Acquisition and Anxiety in the United States

by

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Class of 2018

An essay submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Romance Studies

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2018
Special Thanks

To Typhaine Leservot, my advisor and tutor for this project, who has been the most supportive figure in my Wesleyan career. Thank you for helping me find my footing on this subject and exploring it with me, while also helping me become a better writer. I would also like to thank Paula Park’s Multilingual Latin America class for sparking my interest in this subject, helping me to understand the power dynamics of language, and inspiring the infant version of this project. Thank you to my parents, for always giving me the positive feedback that I needed. Finally, thank you to all of my friends who cooked me a meal or just sat with me, listened to me, and told me they wanted to know more.
INTRODUCTION

Speaking a language is an inherently personal experience, as it is the method that most people use to communicate their wants, needs, and interests. Many people in the United States have access to a second language, and some can be identified as bilinguals. According to Einar Haugen, a leading psycholinguist, a bilingual is a speaker who "can produce complete, meaningful utterances in the other language," while language professor Gustavo Pérez Firmat defines the "true bilingual" as someone "who is equally attached to, or torn between, competing tongues." These two languages can be learned in the home and/or learned in a school or another public context. The different spheres within which the languages are used, however, complicates the relationship between the languages. In the United States, these languages almost always exist in a hierarchical structure. This phenomenon is known as diglossia, in which different languages (which includes dialects as well as distinct languages) are given different social merit, often relegating one to a "high" or "dominant" position and others to various "low" positions. In the context of the United States, the heritage language is designated as the "low" language and is different from that of the national language, which is considered the "high" language.

In this essay, we will be focusing on heritage speakers who, to a large extent in the U.S., are exposed to their heritage language almost exclusively at home while their formal education is conducted in English. There are many myths to combat about heritage speakers, most notably about their language ability. Until recently, it has been assumed that all heritage speakers are
necessarily bilingual, which is a fallacy for many reasons. If the heritage language should be seen as “a language with which individuals have a . . . historical and personal connection,” it should not connote “actual proficiency of individual speakers.”¹ A heritage speaker, then, can be connected to their cultures and traditions but not necessarily have access to the full linguistic and symbolic system to communicate in the inherited language.² Heritage language users, in fact, run the gamut of language ability: they may be able to understand the language but not speak it (otherwise known as a heritage listener), able to write but not to a high academic standard, or they may have only heard the language in the home and are not fully able to understand it beyond its confines. Every form of heritage language ability exists, so it must be stated that heritage language users have a legitimate connection to language, even if they do not have what is considered “fluency.”

Colloquial and academic definitions of fluency have a strong influence on how we see and understand heritage speakers’ connections to language. An example of a formal linguistic definition comes from the Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency (CAF) model of second language capabilities. Here, fluency is seen as a mostly verbal phenomenon in which the speaker has an effective control of the language system that they are using.³ The confusion in defining this term only increases when we start thinking about fluency in two languages, since

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¹ Guadalupe Valdés, “Heritage Language Students: Profiles and Possibilities,”
³ Richard Towell, “Complexity, accuracy and fluency from the perspective of psycholinguistic second language acquisition research,” 56.
bilingualism is often constructed on different nuances of fluency. When looking at fluency within the heritage language, we can identify a dissonance between *practical* fluency (competent language use) and *perceived* fluency (how the speaker sees their own ability). The perceived imperfection of certain forms of fluency, such as only having enough language ability to communicate within the home, complicates the relationship with the heritage language. Even if the heritage speaker belongs and feels connected to a heritage language community, their inability to speak the “proper” amount of the language can be equally as isolating and frustrating as the experience between languages that is so often studied.

François Grosjean, in *Life with Two Languages* [1982], separates bilingualism from another phenomenon known as biculturalism, which indicates a dual cultural identity and is often considered to be exclusive of language ability. This distinction is important when considering different generations of immigrant communities, in which the youngest generations tend to have the least connection to the language but are often still familiar with the culture through family rituals. An inherited connection to the culture and language is distinct from an active identity as someone who lives with the culture and language. This does not negate their connection to the heritage, but it does deny them, at least in part, an easy way of proving that connection. Because this sign system is dominant for monolingual and multilingual members who share the

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4 In this essay, I will be using the gender-neutral “they/them” pronouns when describing singular subjects.
heritage, the heritage speaker who does not fully possess the linguistic heritage can be perceived as unable to fully embody their culture, even if they embody other aspects.

The role of heritage language anxiety is often under-analyzed when not in comparison to their second language. We see this in two examples of texts about bilingualism: *Life with Two Languages*, by François Grosjean, and *Tongue Ties* [2003], by Gustavo Pérez Firmat. While they offer uniquely insightful definitions and interpretations of the bilingual experience and anxieties, they do not go into the self-inflicted or community-inflicted causes of the contentious relationship with the heritage language. I have found that in spite of the prevalence of this experience, the linguistic anxiety may be mentioned in a text, but is usually minimized: the reference is often done in passing to make a separate point about language use. There are many in the field of bilingual studies that focus exclusively on the relationship between the languages of a bilingual, meaning that they look at when a bilingual chooses language A or language B to communicate. They often do not focus on the relationship that a speaker has with each individual language, but at the situations and roles in which they will choose one language or the other. François Grosjean mostly presents this linguistic perspective of bilingualism in *Life with Two Languages*.7

Also within the field of contemporary linguistics is a group of researchers, such as Guadalupe Valdés and Michael Tallon, who look at heritage language

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7 Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages*. 
users as distinct from “traditional” bilinguals. They have identified a connection
to a secondary culture and a language ability that is often distinct from that of a
“stereotypical” bilingual, or someone who grew up with both languages being
prominent in the home and in the community. These researchers, however, have
not rooted themselves in discussions of shame and anxiety of the speakers they
study. When they do mention heritage speakers’ anxiety, it is applied almost
exclusively to the classroom context. For example, Guadalupe Valdés, who is a
pioneer in the field of heritage language studies, reflects on the role of the
heritage language in the foreign language or heritage speaker classroom, and
discusses how the heritage speaker interacts with learners and other heritage
speakers in this context.⁸

I am proposing to contribute to the latter field of heritage linguistic
studies by focusing on the persistently understudied linguistic anxiety
experienced by heritage speakers. In order to do so, I will focus on the many
obstacles to acquiring a heritage language. In particular, in the first part, I will
focus on the roles of the state, the community, and to a certain degree, of the
heritage speaker themself, as obstacles that foster a difficult and complicated
relationship to the heritage language. In the second part, I will focus on the depth
of the anxiety experienced by the heritage speaker as a result of the obstacles
faced in acquiring the language. Heritage speakers can have any level of language
ability in their heritage language as long as they feel confident in that level of
ability. There also needs to be reassurance by those around them that their

ability is legitimate, which helps to develop a more comfortable relationship with the language. The issue really comes about when factors like the family, the community, or the society at large, in this case, the United States, reinforce that their ability in the heritage language makes them “not good enough.”

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The linguistic anxiety of heritage language speakers vis-a-vis their heritage language in the United States is a phenomenon that quietly occurs to individuals in many multilingual and multicultural communities. It is usually private and personal to the individual speaker, although it can be recognized as an issue that occurs across many different minority communities. The reason why many individuals in these communities are affected by this anxiety usually comes from a misalignment of language ability and cultural identity, creating a conflict within their communities, but most importantly for this essay, within themselves. In order to understand the personal nature of this phenomenon, and how it became so hidden among heritage language speakers, we must trace the anxiety to where it comes from, what contributes to it, and what it consists of. The anxiety shows itself through different iterations of the feeling of “not being good enough,” expressed by heritage speakers at all levels of practical fluency. It can be found in literature (Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*), memoirs (Gabby Arias’ *La Gringa*), linguistic studies (François Grosjean’s *Life with Two Languages*, Coryell et al (2010)), theoretical essays (Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s *Tongue Ties*), and many more.
While language anxiety is personal to each heritage speaker, it is part of an interaction between how heritage speakers see themselves personally, how others see them, and how they perceive that others see them in relation to their language and culture. This is because language is often used as a symbolic representation of culture, meaning that it is a primary tool for connecting the heritage speaker to their cultural identity. If the heritage language user is not considered strong in speaking, listening, writing, or reading, it can put the heritage speaker into a constant state of questioning their identity. In other words, when heritage speakers assess their connection to their cultural history and background, they are forced to confront their own perceptions of fluency compared to standard fluency. This struggle can occur if they compare themselves to other heritage speakers in their community who have a different way of speaking, or appear, to them, to have a better vocabulary or sense of grammar than they do. It can also occur outside of the community, such as in a classroom geared towards English speakers, where heritage speakers are expected to perform their heritage culture or language for their peers. Regardless of context, the fear of not being able to communicate in a way that they perceive meets their own or others’ expectations is what drives heritage speakers to feel conflicted in their identity.

To understand why heritage speakers can experience an identity crisis because of their language ability, it is helpful to divide language into terms that define its various societal functions. Adopting the nuanced divisions of the roles of language that already exist in Spanish, Pérez Firmat introduces “lenguaje,”
“lengua,” and “idioma” to place language in different societal roles. The simplest of the terms is “lenguaje,” which refers to the structural form of the language that includes the grammar and lexicon of the language. Pérez Firmat describes it as occupying the “cognitive” realm of language and therefore responsible for the most concrete forms of language.9 “Lengua,” which literally translates to “tongue,” is the most personal form of language and the only one that “can be familial” and therefore inherited.10 This area of language occupies the affective realm and is usually the locus of the most internal conflicts; it is the term that inspires us to pronounce phrases such as “tongue ties.” The last term, “idioma,” encapsulates the other two. It relates to the formation of language for national and cultural identities, and is invoked when referring to relationships with the socio-cultural environment instead of with the family.11

These three terms are helpful for understanding the linguistic anxiety experienced by heritage speakers because they situate language in different positions of influence. “Lengua” situates the issue as one that occurs within the speaker. Since it also relates to their family and their heritage, it is where living up to real or perceived expectations is most intense. The intimacy of one’s “lengua” is what makes it most vulnerable to criticism, whether from the self, from the minority community, or from society at large. In contrast, “idioma” is most related to the constructs created outside of the speaker themself for what their language ability “could” be if they lived in a country that speaks the

10 Ibid., 14.
11 Ibid., 17.
prestige form of the language. In the United States specifically, national expectations of English can infringe on the heritage speakers’ desire to embrace or ignore their heritage. “Lenguaje” is related to the development of language as exterior to both the self and the nation. It is language as an object of study, meaning that it encapsulates the “formal” or prestige aspects of language. This is a term that can be employed by a speaker who sees their “lengua” (mother tongue) as different from a more rigid “lenguaje” (structural language), which can be adopted by the speaker in search of a “correct” version of the language. Overall, then, the source of the linguistic anxiety felt by heritage speakers can be the result not just of self-perception, but more broadly, of an unbalanced triangular relationship between the speaker’s self-esteem regarding their own language use and ability, their community and family’s linguistic expectations, and the general diglossia in the U.S. at large that places English above any other language. These terms prepare us to locate the obstacles that stand in the way of heritage language acquisition and that contribute to a large degree to the difficult relationship a heritage speaker has with the inherited language.

1. OBSTACLES TO HERITAGE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The larger environment of the United States is officially tolerant to foreign languages by having no official language for the land, but it does favor English overall. Assimilation tactics such as all-English schooling and

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nationalistic English-only movements have given the United States a strongly
dominant English-speaking population. Because English is the unequivocal
dominant language, all heritage languages become minority languages. This is
how Native American languages, Spanish, French, German, etc. became minority
languages even though they were the dominant languages in some parts of the
U.S. not so long ago.\textsuperscript{13} While the national climate may not directly forbid use of
the heritage language, it does subvert its usage to a lower position in the overall
society, thus creating a diglossic environment where English is always on top.
Public education in the United States is also given almost exclusively in English,
which does not allow heritage speakers to gain the requisite skills in their
heritage language to become literate in the language. Instead, they are schooled
in what is often a second language (English) that imposes itself on their home
(heritage) language. As a result, heritage speakers at all levels often lack in all
four linguistic skills in their heritage language (reading, writing, speaking,
listening) compared to English.\textsuperscript{14} A study done by the Department of Education
mentions that “school districts are obliged to take affirmative steps to help ELs
[English Learners] (as members of national origin minority groups) learn
English and benefit from educational offerings” as an extension of the Civil
Rights Act of 1964.\textsuperscript{15} However, many states still limit funding and access to dual-
language programs because they are seen as too expensive, even though the
benefits of these programs have been proven to be effective in improving overall

\textsuperscript{13} Hudson, \textit{Sociolinguistics}, 32.
\textsuperscript{14} Tallon, “Foreign Language Anxiety in Heritage Students of Spanish,” 28.
\textsuperscript{15} U.S. DOE Office of English Language Acquisition, "Dual Language Education
student success and self-image in schools.\textsuperscript{16} These limitations on bilingual schooling have a lasting effect on the students themselves.\textsuperscript{17} By undermining the potential successes of heritage language speakers by not providing proper education in both languages, the school system creates heritage speakers who cannot fulfill all expectations of fluency. This is a huge factor in creating shame in the heritage language because it forces the heritage language into a permanently lower role compared to the second language.

More generally, all municipal, state, and federal institutions in the United States are English dominant because the "idioma" (de facto national language) of the United States is English. This diglossic environment mistreats and leaves behind the other languages and cultures with which heritage speakers might identify. The proof of the success of these types of policies, both explicit and implicit, can be seen in the significant decrease of French in Louisiana and the stereotyping and targeting of the Chicanx\textsuperscript{18} community, mostly in the Southwest of the country.\textsuperscript{19} The United States actively encouraged the disappearance of Cajun French through policies such as ending French as a language that can be

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 85.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 1.
\item \textsuperscript{18} See deOnís, “What’s in an ‘x’?: An Exchange about the Politics of ‘Latinx’” for an explanation of the use of the “x” instead of the gendered “o/a” at the end of “Chicanx.”
\item \textsuperscript{19} The Chicanx community is composed of Mexican immigrants and former Mexican nationals whom the border crossed, making them part of the United States, with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. These groups are not necessarily composed of immigrants, since many of their ancestors have been on their land since before it was known as the United States.
\end{itemize}
used for education in 1921.20 By the mid twentieth century, Cajuns had “acquired an often negative connotation of uneducated, rural Francophone,” associating their language with low education and poverty.21 While the language and culture are being rehabilitated, beginning with organizations such as CODOFIL (Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, formed 1968), significant language loss has occurred. French in the United States was forced into hiding and weakened throughout the twentieth century, and has all but disappeared in spite of more recent revival movements. Chicanx Spanish has also been subjected to these aggressive language assimilation policies. Use of language in these communities has become limited to family circles for fear of perpetuating a negative stereotype of the community. The negative attention this community faces is continued and renewed because of attacks by political figures such as our current President, Donald Trump.22 Many Spanish heritage speaker communities are still thriving in the United States, even in states with some English-only laws.23 The resilience of language and culture are particularly

strong in the Chicanx community, but the linguistic anxiety and shame is still present in many of their great writers.24

These examples demonstrate another consequence of an English-dominant environment on heritage speakers: namely, they highlight how the socioeconomic status of their community relates to the prestige of their cultural heritage at large, including their language. Some immigrants may be fleeing from political or economic conflicts and arrive in the United States in a less than favorable situation. Grosjean states that groups that are often most successful at maintaining their languages arrive in the country with “teachers, social leaders, journalists, and writers,” a luxury that isn’t always available to political and economic refugees who are forced to resettle in other parts of the world.25 Negative stereotypes of immigrant groups, such as that they are poor or lazy, can be reinforced when they are not afforded the same opportunities due to their economic class, creating a social hierarchy between English monolinguals raised in the United States and heritage language speakers whose heritage language is associated with low socioeconomic status, regardless of their actual economic class.26

Negative connotations associated with immigrant groups, as well as the diglossic environment described above, create situations in which heritage language speakers are discouraged or made uncomfortable for using their heritage language in a context that is not within the family. These heritage

24 A few examples: Gloria Anzaldúa, Rudolfo Anaya, Sandra Cisneros.
25 Grosjean, Life with Two Languages, 110.
26 Ibid., 224.
speakers inhabit an environment that is actively inhospitable to their heritage language. This English dominant setting can harm what Pérez Firmat describes as the “sonic” environment of the heritage language.\(^{27}\) Heritage speaker communities have been identified by groups such as ProEnglish\(^ {28}\) and the conservative Make America Great Again movement\(^ {29}\) as creating the “wrong” sort of sonic environment for the United States. It is logical, then, that many heritage speaker communities would want to divorce themselves from the negative connotations generated by these far-right conservative movements.

Many heritage speakers with means have chosen to escape this linguistically and politically inhospitable environment in order to be surrounded by their heritage language. In his discussion of Juan Ramón Jimenez, a Spanish national who moved to the United States and then on to Puerto Rico, Pérez Firmat describes the writer’s joy at returning to a “hospitable linguistic environment, a place where, as he put it, he would be enveloped in ‘atmospheric Spanish.’”\(^ {30}\) The sounds of Spanish around him were a comfort, and a way to reduce the anxiety of maintaining his heritage Spanish that appeared during his time in the United States. Pérez Firmat then describes a similar euphoria experienced by Pedro Salinas, a prolific Spanish writer who “thrived” during his time as a professor at the University of Puerto Rico.\(^ {31}\) For him, the sounds of the

\(^ {27}\) Pérez Firmat, *Tongue Ties*, 46.
\(^ {29}\) For an analysis of the goals and historical influences on this movement, see Alan M. Kraut, “‘Make American Great Again’... Again?,” *Center for Migration Studies*, http://cmsny.org/publications/kraut-make-america-great-again-again/.
\(^ {30}\) Pérez Firmat, *Tongue Ties*, 46.
\(^ {31}\) Ibid., 46.
“trilled ‘r’ that he would have never have heard on the lips of his neighbors in Wellesley or Baltimore” led him to experience pride in his language and also in himself.\textsuperscript{32} It is clear, then, that being in an environment where the language is present and dominant can create a stronger, more positive, and more intimate connection to the language itself. It is no surprise, then, that heritage speakers who lack such an environment in the context of the United States would feel isolated from their language or have difficulty speaking or listening to it outside of the home context.

The only possible sonic environment that is tolerant of the heritage language in the United States lies within the community and the family; however, these two groups can also act as an obstacle to heritage language acquisition because of a lack of means made available to them or a low commitment to passing on the language. The family and the community are the main transmission point of language and culture to the heritage speaker. The frequency of use of the heritage language within these communities, the decision by the immediate family to impose the language (or not), as well as the varied pedagogical abilities of all parties involved (the encouragement of heritage language instruction is critical) strongly affect the heritage speaker’s linguistic skills in the heritage language. Considering these influences, the parents of heritage speakers play a primary role in educating their children in the language. However, this education is often considered incomplete by international linguistic standards. ACTFL (the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 47.
Languages) is an organization that defines standard levels for language learners worldwide. Their various levels of language ability are based on a learner’s listening, speaking, writing, and reading ability. These standards can be difficult for parents to keep in mind while they are also responsible for creating an environment in which the heritage speaker feels encouraged or not for their use of and ability in the heritage language. As Grosjean states, “it is the environment and the culture . . . that cause the bilingual to change languages” from their heritage language to the dominant language, “along with attitudes, feelings, and behaviors—and not language as such.”\(^{33}\) When the family and the community come together to support language use, they can create a successful dynamic for heritage speakers on all scales of practical fluency. Unfortunately, this sort of partnership is rare and difficult to establish in the English-forward United States.

Another way that the partnership of communities and families can block the inheritance of the heritage languages has to do with their relationship to specific dialects or accents. These forms of language can be considered “prestigious” or “non-prestigious.” Even in communities that speak a single language, there can be discrimination against non-prestigious ways of speaking. The prestige language within Chicanx communities, for example, is not English, but what would be considered “proper” Spanish, a form of language that is considered “official” in the Spanish-speaking world and undisturbed by Anglicisms. In a study discussing seven Chicanx heritage speakers of Spanish who chose to pursue Spanish classes online, a cited reason for why students

\(^{33}\) Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages*, 284.
became interested in the courses is because "the notion of linguistic purity exerts significant pressure on how people come to view varieties like Spanglish and, in the case of our participants, Tex-Mex."\textsuperscript{34} This relegates the local dialects of Spanish in the U.S. to a lower position, making practically fluent bilinguals feel as though they are unable to properly communicate. Here, the community of Spanish speakers puts pressure on heritage speakers to assimilate to a form of language that does not necessarily conform to their upbringing or heritage.

Another way the larger community of Spanish speakers distinguish language prestige among themselves presents itself in Pérez Firmat’s discussion of Pedro Salinas. During his stay in Puerto Rico, he finds himself criticizing the “Americanization” of the Spanish that he encounters on the island. In his speech \textit{Aprecio y defenso del lenguaje} given to the students at the University of Puerto Rico, he praises the Spanish nature of the language but simultaneously chastises them for allowing “contaminants” like English.\textsuperscript{35} As a Spaniard living in a U.S.-influenced Caribbean Spanish speaking community, his critiques of the local Spanish create a form of intra-communitarian diglossia that can make a speaker, such as a Puerto Rican in the U.S., uncomfortable with their language knowledge or ability for speaking Puerto Rican Spanish.

Within the community, heritage language anxiety can be a product of variable expectations of language. This can be because of the sheer diversity of communities themselves, which do not always use a unified version of the

\textsuperscript{34} Coryell, Clark and Pomerantz, “Cultural Fantasy Narratives and Heritage Language Learning,” 456.
\textsuperscript{35} Pérez Firmat, \textit{Tongue Ties}, 48.
minority language. Community centers and churches, which often run youth groups and community service projects, act as meeting places and education centers for those who identify with the heritage. In Carole Rosenstein’s study on cultural heritage non-profit organizations in the United States, she identifies 139 Hispanic [sic] organizations which work to support the arts, festivals, community service, and language use. These types of organizations create the community standards for expression of the cultural heritage and language, which can develop the inner struggle of a heritage speaker who does not feel “good enough” at some or all of the expressions of the heritage.

2. DEFINING HERITAGE LANGUAGE ANXIETY

While heritage speakers are subject to many serious incursions on their language acquisition by the state, their community, and their families, it is important to recognize that the heritage speaker is not exclusively a victim in this situation. The choice remains for the heritage speaker to identify, or let themselves be identified, as related to their heritage. In Sociolinguistics, Hudson defines the connection to heritage language as “not so much your exposure to a particular variety of speech, but rather your willingness to identify yourself with the kind of person who uses it.” Language use, then, is one of the many factors incorporated in choosing a social group, especially since language is incredibly hard to develop or maintain for those who do not have an environment in which

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37 Hudson, Sociolinguistics, 184.
they are consistently connected to the language.\textsuperscript{38} Some environmental factors that affect social group identification are where the heritage speaker lives, their race, their socio-economic status, as well as their cultural identity.\textsuperscript{39}

All of the factors of group identification come into play when we look at heritage speakers in adolescence. This is because of the strengthening need to find a social group during the teenage years and into early adulthood. Unlike in childhood, teenage heritage speakers are able to choose whether, and how, to connect to their heritage through acceptance or rejection of cultural practices. A prominent form of rejection is to refuse to speak the language or refuse to associate with other people who share the same heritage. This is a socio-cultural choice that comes from social pressures to belong to a specific group that directly affects a heritage speaker’s relationship with the heritage language.

Grosjean references a study observing French speakers in Northern Maine where “older people prefer to speak French, whereas those under thirty, approximately, prefer to speak English.”\textsuperscript{40} Here, choosing against the heritage language of French is an identifying factor of younger people, who see English as the language of social interactions while French remains as the language of the home. For speakers with lower practical fluency, Hudson describes adolescence as a period where learning “a new language or dialect perfectly” is no longer possible while “it is also essential to be in step with other ‘relevant’

\textsuperscript{38} Grosjean, \textit{Life with Two Languages}, 295. \\
\textsuperscript{39} Hudson, \textit{Sociolinguistics}, 185,6. \\
\textsuperscript{40} Grosjean, \textit{Life with Two Languages}, 137.
adolescents.” Speakers with low practical fluency will, then, have less of a chance to develop linguistic connections with other people who share their heritage and are often more likely to experience bullying or feel different or “othered” by those who have stronger language ability. Grace Cho, in her study “The Role of Heritage Language in Social Interactions and Relationships,” mentions an adolescent Korean heritage speaker who cites “the language issue” as a reason why she did not want to associate with people who shared her heritage and as a result chose not to participate in either her linguistic or her cultural heritage.

Choosing a language and a social group in adolescence demonstrate how issues of self-esteem and anxiety are specifically developed in the heritage speaker. The internalization of these exterior conflicts affect the way a personal relationship is cultivated by the heritage speaker with their language and culture. It also affects their perception of their own ability in the heritage language. The consequence of this exterior/interior conflict is that the way they see themselves as people becomes tied up in their heritage language ability. Speakers at all levels of practical fluency can feel anxious about their perceived fluency. This is seen in Pérez Firmat’s comparison of himself, a native-born Cuban who grew up in a Cuban-American neighborhood in Florida, to Judith Ortiz Cofer, a Puerto Rican-born and American raised writer. He sees the same same anxiety appear in both of them when there are expectations regarding

their Spanish level put in front of them. He supposes that heritage speakers “think you think they should speak like natives.”\textsuperscript{43} He has even had the same experience himself, where “for someone born and raised in a Spanish-speaking country” he feels that his language ability “is just not good enough, not what it should be.”\textsuperscript{44} This is an example of how heritage speakers expect themselves to be able to produce a mythical form of “native” speech, regardless of their practical fluency. The internalized pressure to produce their heritage and its language in the same way that a “raised” monolingual is able to produce their language and culture is often misconstrued or simplified as an issue of bilingualism, whereas, in reality, it is related to the heritage speaker’s relationship with, and difficulty accessing, their heritage language. In other words, the difficulties experienced by heritage language speakers in the United States are not inherent to being bilingual but rather inherent to the diglossic environment of the country. Bilinguals who grew up in ambilingual, non-diglossic communities, such as the French-German areas of Switzerland, do not face the same linguistic anxiety vis-a-vis their heritage language.\textsuperscript{45}

The monolingual anxiety of the heritage language speaker is an issue of language ability being misaligned with cultural identity and the diglossic environment in which their languages were learned and socially reinforced. It is first and foremost a monolingual issue in the sense that any native speaker who does not feel like they can speak like a native would feel this conflict regardless

\textsuperscript{43} Pérez Firmat, \textit{Tongue Ties}, 157.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 157.
\textsuperscript{45} Grosjean, \textit{Life with Two Languages}, 19-20.
of whether they speak another language or not. Grosjean poses that "the bilingual will be as fluent in a language as the psychosocial environment requires." I dispute this statement because the speaker’s ability does not always fulfill the expectations set by their social context (their family and community) or their psychological environment (their personal expectations of language ability). If this were the case, there would be no identity crisis to speak of, and heritage speakers would always be able to meet their expectations of language ability in their heritage language. It is helpful to consider the psychosocial environment when looking at heritage speakers, but it cannot be set as an expectation that they will fit the requirements of fluency that are set by their community “idioma” or their personal “lengua.”

The psychosocial environment of multilingual authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa can be complicated by emotions that exist on a long spectrum of pride and shame related to both the language and the culture. She sums up her multifaceted language experience when she says, “So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language . . . I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.” The concept of not being able to talk about language without causing emotional strife is a common thread through many texts by heritage language users. A common phrase that is shared through these texts is that the author feels as though they are “not good enough” at the language. This comes from people of all backgrounds who come to live in

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46 Ibid., 256. Italics is mine.
the United States and feel the encroachment of a different language and cultures on their heritage language ability.48

One important source of anxiety that affects gaining comfort in the heritage language results directly from insufficient schooling in the language. Immigrant parents and the heritage speakers they raise may not have experience in all of the realms related to language as they do in English. Realms of language can be seen as different modes of language usage: the “familiar” mode, for example, would be the level of language achieved by communicating within the home, and the “academic” mode would be the level of language achieved to communicate in the realm of college or the university. Many heritage speakers remain in the more familiar realms of emotional and household communication, so-called “kitchen” language. This is because the schooling system often does not provide adequate support for bilingual education. While possibly being considered “fluent” when it comes to speaking or listening skills in their heritage language, the heritage speaker may not have achieved a higher education in the heritage language. As a result, their writing and reading skills would be lacking, as well as their ability to move between familiar everyday language and professional language. Even if they have developed an academic realm of their heritage language, it can be seen as haughty to use it around other heritage speakers, and has, in some cases, created a divide between the highly educated speaker and their community.49

48 Arias, La Gringa, 3.
49 Ibid., 39.
Not having access to all realms of language is a source of strife for heritage speakers. These different realms are often defined by different skill sets, which are more readily divided into useable categories. This involves looking at language as it relates to “lenguaje,” or as a system of signs that are “acquired” and used to communicate as defined by organizations such as ACTFL.\textsuperscript{50} While the four categories of language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) are necessary for an academic exploration of the language, it makes the academic standards the international standard for fluency. In casual usage and in models such as the CAF model that try to capture the colloquial language use in contrast to ACTFL, fluency is often thought of as native-like production of speech and native-like listening abilities. This further comes with the expectation of native-like writing and interest in reading authentic cultural materials in the language. These connotations of fluency are related to what is learned in the familiar realm, and not in an academic context. This is a likely factor that influences why heritage speakers are reportedly uncomfortable in contexts when they perceive that they are expected by their community or by other speakers of the language to be fluent and communicate with “proper” grammar and vocabulary.\textsuperscript{51} When Pedro Salinas critiqued the Spanish of Puerto Ricans, he subconsciously used the word “lenguaje” so as to appeal to the higher, ACTFL-like standard of language, instead of reaching for the more personal term of “lengua.”\textsuperscript{52} When heritage speakers are confronted by both the formal and informal skills expected of them,

\textsuperscript{50} Pérez Firmat, \textit{Tongue Ties}, 18.
\textsuperscript{51} Coryell, Clark and Pomerantz, “Cultural Fantasy Narratives and Heritage Language Learning,” 453.
\textsuperscript{52} Pérez Firmat, \textit{Tongue Ties}, 18.
their thought process becomes that they are “not good enough” by any existing measure.

Within schools we can see additional sources of fear and stress based on the expectations that heritage speakers set for themselves. In Michael Tallon’s dissertation about heritage language speakers in traditional Spanish classes in the U.S., he breaks down the points where these specific speakers experience language anxiety. The first point is a fear of making mistakes, when heritage speakers are confronted with someone who is perceived to have elevated expectations of their language ability and they feel like they have to perform language for them otherwise they will appear “stupid.” There is also a fear of imperfect accent, in which the heritage speaker again fears social retribution for not being able to pronounce words and phrases correctly. The third point is lack of vocabulary, meaning that they don’t recall, or have never learned, a word in the heritage language and feel as though they are expected to produce it, otherwise they are not fluent. The common thread through all of these are the high expectations that heritage speakers put on themselves to be able to produce language to a certain level that they have not necessarily been prepared for outside of the classroom.

These internalized expectations regarding language use can go far in affecting heritage speakers’ perspectives of language. Grosjean talks about how

53 Tallon, “Foreign Language Anxiety in Heritage Students of Spanish,” 143.
54 Ibid., 144.
many heritage speakers\(^5^5\) perceive the proper forms of their language as "more beautiful, more expressive, more logical, and better to express abstract thoughts, and [their] language is felt to be ungrammatical, concrete, and coarse."\(^5^6\) The imperfections of the heritage speaker's language ability lead them to devalue their own perceptions of the language and create an emphasis on the superiority of the dominant language. This creates a secure delusion for the heritage speaker, who then firmly believes that they do not need the first language. A strong example of this is developed by Pérez Firmat in his discussion of George Santayana, a writer who spent the first eight years of his life living with his father in Spain and then moved to the United States to be with his mother and siblings. He is described as "deliberately abandon[ing] Spanish" to focus on his English rather than confronting the Spanish language that he was exiled from when his father sent him away from Spain.\(^5^7\) This is how the anxiety surrounding heritage language ability can become so acute as to turn into shame of language or culture.

The linguistic anxiety can also go beyond shame and turn into frustration in relation to the heritage culture. The community or the larger environment can see the language ability of a heritage speaker as a symbol of belonging to that culture, so if they do not speak in a certain way or have not adopted certain culture-specific terms, they are not deemed a "real" Latinx, Cajun, French, 

\(^{5^5}\) Grosjean uses the term bilinguals almost exclusively in his text, but I am interpreting it here as heritage speakers since the term was not yet prominent when this text was published.

\(^{5^6}\) Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages*, 121.

\(^{5^7}\) Pérez Firmat, *Tongue Ties*, 27.
Haitian, etc. Grosjean cites a French speaker who, when at a dinner at the house of French friends, made a social gaffe by using the informal “tu” with a guest of her age instead of the formal “vous.” This guest was a friend of the family’s, but was visiting from out of town and needed to be treated as someone of high status at the event. Grosjean goes on to explain that events such as this one are “usually very trying and can result in loneliness, hostility, self-pity, disorientation, and fear of ridicule.”58 Social events with other community members can put the speaker in a place of not only feeling they cannot speak the language well enough to understand that others around her were using the “vous,” but not being able to distinguish sociocultural expectations of how to treat guests.

The nature of the linguistic anxiety here is demonstrated as an emotional and deeply personal connection to the language, making any real or perceived critiques a direct threat to the sense of self of the heritage speaker. Because the anxiety is high within each individual speaker, it is often hidden from other heritage speakers. The only reason we know about this phenomenon is through personal accounts and through studies that allow heritage speakers to speak their minds privately and without judgment by others. Communities that share a heritage and a language, then, often also share (albeit unknowingly) an anxiety, shame, and frustration related to both the heritage and the language. They also fear others knowing about this shame and anxiety because they assume that they are representatives of their minority community – the ones who present the

58 Grosjean, Life with Two Languages, 159.
heritage to outsiders as well as the ones who must embody it to their communities.

It is important to clarify that not all heritage speakers experience this anxiety in the same way. In fact, certain individuals experience this linguistic anxiety more than others in the community of heritage speakers. Certain generations in particular tend to experience linguistic anxiety and shame more than others. In the same community, there can be first generation immigrants who are almost entirely monolingual in the heritage language and people who are fourth generation who have a good ability to understand the heritage language but are unable to speak the language themselves. In *Life with Two Languages*, Grosjean demonstrates that each generation has different levels of language ability associated with them and therefore has slightly different forms of language anxiety.\(^59\) Those who remain dominant in the heritage language but don’t have contact with as many heritage speakers as they had in the past can feel as though they are losing vocabulary or ability in the language, and are therefore losing touch with their heritage country. The “middle” generations, or the ones who are caught in the continuum of heritage language monolingualism and English monolingualism, often have varying ability to understand and speak the heritage language while maintaining a connection to older generations to whom they can compare their language ability. For those who have become monolingual in English, there is usually a shadow of words and phrases in the heritage language that remains, as well as a potential wish to fulfill the heritage

\(^{59}\) Grosjean, *Life with Two Languages*, 103.
in some way that perhaps does not relate directly to using the language. The “middle” and final generations are where the shame and anxiety is at its strongest because they often have the most informal relationship to the language.

These generations who experience language loss are a feature of the linguistic ecosystem of the United States. While the country presents itself as a “melting pot” of cultures, the goal of most policies supported over time have been to assimilate to a single language and culture. Assimilation has been a more successful project in the United States than in many other countries because “there was no apparent logical opposition between the ethnicity of incoming immigrants and the ideology of America . . . immigrants could accept the latter without consciously denying the former.” This means that an immigrant could enter the United States and feel as though they were joining the national culture without explicitly denying their heritage culture. The heritage culture and the language that goes with it could be left to the wayside without feeling like it was being actively denied to them, which then backfired for future generations, who lost access to the language and the heritage. The assimilative culture in the United States is then the reason why the language anxiety exists here in the first place, causing a nationwide language attrition of immigrant languages. This language attrition can then create hierarchies of language ability

61 Grosjean, Life with Two Languages, 111.
where the families and communities that maintained a stronger connection to the language might have different forms of anxiety than those who have a weaker connection or lower expectations related to the language and heritage.

The different degrees of shame felt by all generations of heritage speakers in the U.S. comes from the belief that they are, overall, insufficient in the eyes of others (their community, the larger environment) and in their vision of themselves because of their language ability. Pérez Firmat, a first generation American who has published books in both English and Spanish, still believes that in order to “insist I’m still Cuban, even after all these years, I should speak and write it like a native.” Despite being in the United States since the age of eleven, his Cuban identity compels him to feel required to speak and write like someone who never left the island. His identity is inextricably tied to being Cuban, and therefore a native Spanish speaker. His sense of self hinges on his ethnic and language identities remaining unchanged, so feeling any form of perceived insufficiency in the heritage language becomes an attack on his identity. The shame of feeling as though he is not Cuban “enough” guides his decisions to write, speak, and live in the language. This personal example reveals a unique form of contrasting identity: he compares himself not only linguistically to a form of fluency that does not exist, but also culturally to a nation and a culture that he no longer exists in.

Just as Pérez Firmat describes his own deep-seeded linguistic shame, he also presents the shame hidden in the authors that he studies in Tongue Ties.

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62 Pérez Firmat, Tongue Ties, 161.
Pérez Firmat introduces Calvert Casey, the child of an American and a Cuban who grew up in the United States (a second generation immigrant), as someone who felt that “to speak a language was to occupy a place, to settle into a cultural habitat with its history and contours.” Casey believed that he was responsible for taking on the burden of carrying on not only the history of his own family, but also the history of all of those who have used or adopted Spanish: “to say alpaca is to let an anonymous Quechua Indian speak with our lips, to say arar is to become one with the voice of a Spanish peasant.” Casey set himself to the task of upholding his language and “perpetuat[ing] the movements of thousands and thousands of lips.” Language here becomes an irreplaceable connection or link to the heritage. If this connection is lost or damaged in any way, it can provoke frustration in the heritage speaker. Casey frequently cursed his parents for giving him such an “Anglophone name” that made him sound to those that did not know him or his work to be only American, and not Cuban-American. He, like many other heritage speakers, puts it on himself alone to maintain and perpetuate his language and history.

Another link between the original source of the heritage and the current heritage language speaker is, however, not the result of choice. Rather, it is imposed by their appearance. More specifically, it is imposed by how members of the heritage community are viewed and stereotyped by outsiders and insiders alike. Although appearance can be mitigated by dress, it is not always entirely

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63 Ibid., 93.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 91.
resolved by it. As a result, a heritage speaker may be identified, and in turn, identify more or less strongly with their heritage and language based on their race and appearance. While these judgments are problematic, they must still be presented as another contributor to heritage speaker anxiety. Personal appearance can be used to understand community expectations of language ability. Many heritage speakers can look “like [a] native speaker,” even if they have a low level of practical fluency. This is where people in and out of the heritage community confound ethnicity and language ability. This demonstrates that even on occasions when identity and appearance align (e.g. belonging to a heritage and fulfilling its stereotypical appearance within and/or outside of the community), there may not be a steady connection to the heritage language. This strengthens the expectation of “native-like” command of the language not just by outsiders but from the heritage speaker as well. Expectations of native speech from community members can also come from honest misunderstandings, since, as Grosjean points out, “bilinguals will choose a particular language easily and almost automatically” by judging the “linguistic background of the person [they] are talking to” solely based on the latter’s appearance. Despite the fact that bilinguals are often good at guessing, they can confuse a heritage speaker with lower language ability for someone who has a higher language ability and create a disruption when the heritage speaker either does not understand or cannot respond appropriately. The reverse can also occur, where a heritage speaker does not fulfill the stereotypes of appearance and is forced to constantly reaffirm

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67 Cho, “The Role of Heritage Language,” 376-7
68 Grosjean, Life with Two Languages, 138.
their connection to the community and to those exterior to it. This reversed situation can also be difficult for a heritage speaker to overcome, especially if they are not sufficiently at ease in the heritage language to make the quick symbolic connection.

Overall, heritage speakers place a heavy burden on themselves to be able to produce both language and culture to a standard of perfection that does not exist. They expect themselves to be able to achieve near fluency, while not being prepared by their schools nor, often, by their communities, to achieve it. This is especially prominent for heritage speakers that have more limited language contact and may only be able to understand the language and not speak it, otherwise known as heritage “listeners.” This is when Grosjean’s example of matching identity to that required by the psychosocial environment becomes helpful again: if the level of the heritage speaker’s own expectations do not match their level of identification with the heritage, they can then experience shame and frustration in their inability to achieve balance in these areas. The linguistic anxiety, shame, and frustration experienced is unique to each individual in each affected community and is inseparable from their identity. It is also inseparable from the systems that worked to directly influence the heritage speaker’s desire and ability to continue with their language by not providing adequate courses in school, or not providing proper community role models for how to embody and perform the heritage.

3. TOWARDS A CONCLUSION: DEALING WITH THE ANXIETY
Now that we have recognized the obstacles to heritage language ability and the resulting anxiety, shame, fear, and frustration, how do heritage speakers react to this anxiety and shame? To start, we should understand the ways in which heritage speakers can move towards or away from their heritage language and identity, which involves practicing symbolic connections to the culture. This particular practice of culture can be seen as performative. “Performative identity” in relation to culture is a term that is borrowed from feminist studies, specifically from Judith Butler, who defines performativity as “a public action” which demonstrates "the identity of the actor, but … as a compelling illusion, an object of belief.”69 Performing the heritage identity involves portraying mutually understood representations of the culture in calculated ways so as to be seen as a member of the heritage culture. One reason why a heritage speaker can feel as though they need to perform their identity is when influences from outside of the community intrude on the heritage, and they feel the need to prove their membership to that group instead of feeling implicitly accepted as a part of that group.

An example of performing identity can be through borrowing lexical items from the heritage language in order to demonstrate a unique connection. Pérez Firmat describes how various Latinx authors adopt Spanish phrases into their writing. Sandra Cisneros is an author who broke ground on writing with code-switching in her published texts in English, without providing translations for the Spanish phrases. Pérez Firmat notes that in her poem “Dulzura,” she

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utilizes the phrase “juntito a mí,” using the male ending -ito to indicate that the person whom she wishes to make love to her in Spanish is a man.\textsuperscript{70} This is a way that she constructively performs her identity to make her belonging known to her heritage community. Pérez Firmat also gives a somewhat contrary example to Cisneros: Esmeralda Santiago, whose memoir \textit{When I Was Puerto Rican} begins with “How to Eat a Guava.” This is a skill that “Puerto Ricans or their Newyorican cousins do not need to learn.”\textsuperscript{71} While Cisneros is performing her identity to prove her belonging to the community of heritage speakers, Santiago is performing her identity for those \textit{outside} of the community, hoping they see her as belonging to her heritage.

Performance can also be seen in its literal context: presenting the connection to heritage through the production and performance of music and dance. The Cajun communities of Louisiana are very active and creative in that aspect, which allows them to keep a minimal linguistic connection to French via their music. Music and dancing are public acts that allow even those with little to no experience with the culture to become involved. Cajun culture as a public celebration is connected to the origins of Cajun music and dance in public halls in rural communities, and is reincarnated today as a way of preserving that identity.\textsuperscript{72} During the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, at the same time that French began to regain traction in Louisiana, French Cajun musical forms gained popularity in their own right, expanding national attention to the

\textsuperscript{70} Pérez Firmat, \textit{Tongue Ties}, 142.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 140.
cultural products of these communities. These popular connections to culture have encouraged the continuation of cultural programs that promote authentic production of music from the community, allowing those with any language ability to participate in enjoying the cultural products of Cajun French.

Regardless of the strength of the relationship the heritage speaker has with their culture, the performance of this identity for others (and possibly for themselves) can be exhausting. This is because performing heritage is work: for those who have a heritage that comes with the baggage of exile (Haitians, Cubans) or with a language that is seen as not respectable in public (Chicanx, Native Americans), embracing heritage often becomes a political act in defiance of the dominant culture. The political dimension and sheer exhaustion of choosing a heritage language is well expressed in “Je suis cadien” (“I am Cajun”) when contemporary poet Jean Arcenaux says, “Why not just go ahead and learn English [sic]. / Don’t fight it, it’s much easier anyway. / No bilingual bills, no bilingual publicity. / No danger of internal frontiers.” Outside pressures claim that it is easier to join the majority, to not fight for bilingual education and involvement, and to just give up and ignore the language and the culture. “Giving in” is presented as an end to “internal frontiers,” reflecting the borderlands allegory that Gloria Anzaldúa maintains throughout her book Borderlands/La Frontera to describe her multicultural conflict of feeling forced to “choose” between the various parts of her heritage. Anzaldúa, like Arcenaux, experiences

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73 Ibid., 16.
74 To learn more about this, see Stivale, Disenchanting Les Bon Temps.
75 Jean Arcenaux, “Je suis cadien,” 207.
an “inner struggle” because “integration” has not yet taken place, but both take pride in the fact that they are able to maintain their cultures. Anzaldúa struggles to accept and demonstrate all aspects of her identity, similar to how Arcenaux “will not speak French on the schoolgrounds,” but writes about it in both French and English and is faced with constant barrages from his environment to perform one of his identities while repressing the other.

Language as a performative act remains helpful, however, for constructing the heritage speaker’s identity because it demonstrates an internal process of producing the heritage that confronts the external expectations of language. Because it is a choice, it aids in the preservation and ongoing change of heritage cultures and practices, and gives the heritage speaker a stronger sense of agency vis-a-vis their heritage and identity. The task for a heritage speaker who is learning and testing their performance of the heritage identity is to first understand it themselves. Then, this identity can be shared with others. When the heritage speaker has become comfortable with their language and heritage performance, the task becomes choosing whether or not they wish to pass on the heritage. This can be done through communicating with family members, mentoring in the community, raising a family of their own, or other forms of interacting within the heritage speaker community that would give the heritage speaker influence over the language and cultural abilities of other heritage speakers.

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Anzaldúa, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” 44.
The first opportunity for passing on language comes from the family. It is a very personal choice to impart the heritage language whether via daily immersion, partial immersion, or to withhold it entirely. Many families have chosen not to pass on the language because it is hard work that requires time (and sometimes money) to teach a child another language without the support of the community and society at large. Teaching and maintaining an additional language is work, and without any help, it is exhausting. As Hudson says, “sometimes we are too tired to engage in it.”77 Without a large support system, the family then becomes solely responsible for ensuring the success of their child in both of their languages, making it difficult to continuously reinforce the heritage language. Passing on the language within the family is also a continuous but fragmented process, as it often involves many players who will enable different aspects of the heritage and its language to be shared with the learner.

The personal relationship cultivated with the language and heritage as related to their family’s connections to the language and heritage community affects the heritage speaker’s decision regarding their continued use or disuse of the heritage language and the incorporation of the heritage into their life. While heritage speakers of all levels of perceived fluency may not find a peaceful point with their language ability and connection to their heritage culture, they usually lie somewhere on a spectrum between overall acceptance and overall rejection of the language and the culture. Choosing to pass it on comes from a place of security in their identity, being able to acknowledging themself as a person with

77 Hudson, Sociolinguistics, 113.
a heritage language background. Choosing not to pass on the heritage can come from a place of insecurity in identity or an unwillingness to share an amount of knowledge about the heritage or heritage language that the speaker sees as insufficient. For some heritage speakers, engaging with their heritage language can entail formally studying the language (e.g. in a university or in independent language courses). It can be hard work and expensive for heritage speakers to choose to learn the language outside of the home or community because of the diglossic relationship between what they have learned at home and the form of language that they would learn in a classroom. This is prominent in Chicanx communities, where someone who “grew up speaking Spanish daily in her home community” can become “embarrassed when speaking Spanish with Mexican nationals and in her Spanish classes.”

This issue of language prestige within the community of Spanish speakers can have a huge effect on the decision of whether or not to pass on the language, as it sets up internal conflicts about whether to use the familial language or the “proper” form of the language for fear of passing on the anxiety and shame.

Whether the heritage speaker embraces the “kitchen” Spanish or French used at home, or the official, “proper” language learned at school or university (if that option was available), they must ask themselves the question of what they wish to do with the heritage that is embedded in the language. Both formal institutions such as ACTFL and authors such as Pérez Firmat hold themselves to the fact that bilingualism is inseparable from biculturalism, causing them to

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ignore the heritage speakers who have low practical fluency but who still wish to claim their culture. By confounding the two, they perpetuate the harmful myth that continuously plagues heritage speakers that by not being good enough in their heritage language, they are not capable of sharing the culture. Culture, thought, and language often go together, but this tripartite relationship needs revisiting to emphasize the possibility of a symbolic connection with the language. After all, writing about experiences with the heritage and incorporating linguistic elements into one’s writing can be a way of accepting any amount of connection to the heritage. In her brief memoir, La Gringa, Gabby Arias comments on her desire to have ownership of her parents’ stories of Colombia, their immigration to the United States, and their ability to achieve the American Dream while always feeling like a “gringa,” or stranger. She often feels excluded from her parents’ stories and from their culture because she does not embody it in the same typical ways that they do. Eventually, however, she finds her own way of overcoming her deep and difficult shame of not being good enough at Spanish by writing about it in English, hoping to use this language to pass these stories along to her children.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{79} Arias, La Gringa (Unpublished).
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