

Neriko Musha Doerr and Kiri Lee
Constructing the Heritage Language Learner

Contributions to the Sociology of Language



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Neriko Musha Doerr and Kiri Lee

Constructing the Heritage Language Learner

Knowledge, Power, and New Subjectivities

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To Hanako, Joey, Mio, and Shū,
our “heritage language” speakers

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Being part of the Jackson Japanese Language School ourselves, first as parents of students and secondarily as a substitute teacher (Doerr) and an administrator (Lee), we shared the aspirations, worries, and doubts common to the parents, teachers, and administrators we interviewed. Over time, we have learned much about both the construction of heritage language learners via schooling and the decisions of parents who send their children to weekend schools to learn non-mainstream languages. We conducted our research both within and outside of this language school community.

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All responsibility for the material discussed here remains our own.

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1 Introduction: The heritage language learner?

1.1 The heritage language learner?

“It’s strange to say ‘I cannot speak Japanese but I am Japanese’,” said Anne,¹ who explained that she goes to a weekend Japanese language school to learn Japanese language and culture so that she can say “I can speak Japanese” and “I have two cultures”. Anne did not view herself as a Japanese *heritage* language (*keishōgo* 継承語) learner and thus felt she needed to be in a program for “native” Japanese students living in the United States. Mayumi, in contrast, felt such a program for “native” Japanese speakers “is hard for me to understand because I’m not advanced in Japanese [...] Japanese is their [sojourner students from Japan] native language and it comes naturally to them. For me, Japanese is my second language and it takes a while to think in Japanese [...] In regular [American] school, I know all the language and I can form questions better”. She moved to a program for students brought up in the United States because teachers there “might explain things better”. She viewed herself as a Japanese *heritage* language learner.

Despite their similar family background, Anne and Mayumi, 6th graders at a weekend Japanese language school in the northeastern United States, had diverging views on their positions and school programs. Both were born and raised in the United States, each has one “Japanese” and one “American” parent, and both have attended the same Japanese language school since preschool. However, Anne refused to see herself as Japanese heritage language learner, whereas Mayumi saw herself as a heritage language learner. Despite this difference between the two students’ perceptions, many heritage language education researchers consider both Anne and Mayumi to be heritage language learners because they both grew up speaking a minority language – Japanese – at home in the United States (see Carreira 2004; Valdés 2001). For many researchers, meanwhile, the program designed for “native speakers” of Japanese that Anne stayed in and the program designed for heritage speakers of Japanese that Mayumi moved to both qualify as heritage language programs because they both taught a minority language in the United States (Carreira 2004; Valdés 2001).

Are Anne and Mayumi heritage language learners, or are they not? Are these programs heritage language programs, or are they not? Who decides, and in what context and for what purpose? Why are there different views? What might

¹ All names in this volume are aliases.

we do with these different views? What are the effects of this contestation over the meaning of heritage language? What does this tell us about the notion of heritage language and its effects? In this volume, we ask these questions and investigate the ways “heritage language learners”² are constructed, contested, and negotiated as well as the effects of calling someone a heritage language learner – what we call the “heritage language effect”.

This book is based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out from February 2007 to March 2011 at a weekend Japanese language school in the northeastern United States. This school is unique in its dual structure: within it, there coexist a Japanese government-supported program designed for sojourners who are “native speakers” of Japanese, and a locally designed program for English/Japanese bilingual heritage language learners. Despite administrators’ intentions, some students and parents viewed the difference between the programs as tracking, with the latter being the dropouts’ class; as difference in legitimacy, with the latter being less legitimate; or as difference in how Japanese its students are, with the latter being less so. This setup then made identifying oneself or someone else as a heritage language learner a conscious process of negotiating what constitutes “Japanese language proficiency” and a legitimate way to learn Japanese language, who is “Japanese”, and what it means to call a language one’s “native” or “heritage” language. What each program is for was also contested.

Existing research on heritage language education, a relatively new field of investigation, rarely addresses such negotiation and construction. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s notions of knowledge and power, and Mitchell Dean’s reworking of the Foucauldian notion of governmentality, we investigate the construction of heritage language learners by (1) researchers who identify and seek knowledge about heritage language learners; (2) government officials, school administrators, and teachers who design programs and mold behavior, desire, and available subject positions differently for “native speakers” and heritage language learners in the classroom; and (3) students and parents who choose, resist, negotiate, and contest the newly available subject position of heritage language learners, reflecting their view of what constitutes legitimate “Japanese language”, relationship to Japan as the (ancestral) homeland, future aspirations, family background, linguistic proficiency in Japanese, and position in classroom dynamics. We thus analyze heritage language learners as (1) a new object of investigation for researchers, (2) a new target for whom language programs are established, and (3) a new subject position constructed in a context of increas-

² As “heritage language learner” is a constructed notion under contestation and negotiation rather than an agreed-upon category of individuals, the term heritage language learner ought to be in quotation marks. However, for the sake of readability, the quotation marks around the term are omitted throughout this book.

ing hope and anxiety about a globalizing world. That is, this volume is not about language education *per se* but about social practices that construct new subjectivities in the name of language education. What we investigate then is not whether or not one is a heritage language learner but how one came to be considered a heritage language learner and what are the effects of being considered so: the “heritage language effect”.

In what follows, we review existing research on heritage language education, give some background on Japanese language schools in the United States and the notions of *kokugo* 国語 (national language/language art) and *keishōgo* (heritage language), explain the analytical tools we use in this volume, discuss three ways heritage language learners are constructed corresponding to the chapters in this volume, describe the collaborative process of this research, and summarize this volume’s structure.

1.2 Research on heritage language learners

Studies about heritage language learners derive from two fields of research. One is what once was called maintenance bilingual education – retaining minority languages to empower the minority language communities and secure students’ self-esteem. For example, Joshua Fishman (2001: 95) argues that promoting heritage language proficiency “will not only give us more individuals proficient in these languages, it will also dignify our country’s heritage language communities and the cultural and religious values that their languages represent” (also see Cho 2000; Moses 2000). For Fishman, promoting minority languages – what he calls “Reversing Language Shift (RLS)” – is about “cultural reconstruction and for greater cultural-self-regulation” (Fishman 1991: 17). Regarding the self-esteem of minority language speakers, reports indicate that early heritage language education can positively impact the personal and collective self-esteem of minority language students. Because school acts to legitimize the dominant group’s cultural arbitrariness (including language) and devalue minority groups’ knowledge (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), the use of the heritage language (i.e., minority language) as the medium of instruction at school helps elevate the value and status of the heritage language and its speakers (Cho 2000; Moses 2000; Otcu 2010a, 2010b; Write and Taylor 1995). We rename this field of study the self-esteem approach.³

³ This line of research developed to focus more on the sense of self of heritage language learners in general, spawning research on individuals’ shifting connections to the language (Creese et al. 2006; Curdt-Christiansen 2006; 2008; He 2006; Otcu 2010a; 2010b) or to other speakers (Jo 2001; Martínez 2003; Oriyama 2010; Valdés 1981).

Another field of heritage language research focuses on individuals' linguistic proficiency and on positioning them within a continuum from "native speaker" to "foreign language learner". It grew out of a concern in the foreign language classroom about students who, though their family background provided them with more knowledge about the language than first-time learners had, were still less proficient than "native" speakers. The notion of heritage language learner was introduced to cater to their specific needs (Campbell and Peyton 1988; Chevalier 2004; Douglas 2005; Draper and Hicks 2000; Kanno et al. 2008; Kondo-Brown 2003), and research in this field treats pedagogical issues specific to heritage language learners, such as curriculum and assessment (e.g., Kondo-Brown and Brown 2008). We call this the linguistic-proficiency approach.

While the latter approach focuses on pedagogical issues, the former is based on an understanding that language education is really about relations of dominance (Bourdieu 1991; Cummins 2001; Fishman 1991; Heller 2003). Relations of dominance in society are often reflected in the school culture, which subordinates the experience, knowledge, and beliefs of minority cultures (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Cummins 2001; Giroux 1989; Giroux and McLaren 1989). Even when the minority language is taught, the language practices are often placed in the matrix of the dominant language, sending a covert message about the inferior and marked status of the minority language, overriding overt support for the minority language, and perpetuating the hierarchy between languages as well as their speakers (Meek and Messing 2007).

Such studies, however, view individuals' linguistic identification as stable and static and tend to start with the assumption that who heritage language learners are is a never-changing, objective fact, as mentioned. They also assume and further perpetuate reified views of the language, linguistic community, and language speaker. Existing theories have devoted little attention to ethnographic investigation of individuals' perceptions of what the term heritage language learners means, how individuals come to see themselves as heritage language learners, and how it affects daily interactions as well as institutional settings.⁴ This volume shows diverse ways individuals' relations to a language as a "heritage language" are established, negotiated, and subverted by schooling processes that highlight differences in students' family backgrounds, future aspirations, linguistic proficiency, and positionalities.

⁴ While analysis of such processes via tracking has been much discussed in education research (Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls 1986; Oakes 1985), little space has been devoted to the ways schooling processes construct heritage language learners in terms of their sense of self and development of linguistic proficiency.

1.3 Weekend Japanese language schools in the United States

Japanese language instruction for children of Japanese immigrants in the United States began in Hawaii in the 1890s, shortly after Japanese immigration to the United States started. However, the type of schools discussed in this volume, *hoshūkō* 補習校,⁵ were not established until the early 1960s, when Japan's economic development led to increasing numbers of companies sending employees and their families to the United States for short-term assignments, thus creating a need for the schools (Sato 1997).

As of October 2012, there were seventy-eight *hoshūkō* (weekend supplementary Japanese language schools approved by the Japanese government) in the United States.⁶ These schools provide “Japanese” children in the 1st to 9th grades (the compulsory period of education in Japan for students aged 6 to 15) who attend local or international schools during the week with part of the education they would have received in Japanese compulsory education, using Japanese government–certified textbooks and curricula based on guidelines – the Course of Study – established by the Japanese government. The schools aim to enable these children to continue in the Japanese school system upon their return to Japan (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [hereafter MEXT] 2008). The main subject is *kokugo* (language arts/Japanese national language). Some schools offer mathematics, science, and social studies in addition to *kokugo*.⁷ *Hoshūkō* often offer preschool/kindergarten programs for children planning to enroll in *hoshūkō*, as well as high school programs for *hoshūkō* graduates. The Japanese government endeavors to provide children of Japanese citizens overseas with access to part of its compulsory education by subsidizing some school expenses⁸ and deploying some teachers to *hoshūkō* with more than 100 “Japanese” students. These efforts accord with Article 26 of the Japanese Constitution, which guarantees free compulsory education for Japanese children between the ages of 6 and 15 (MEXT 2008).

Since the 1990s, these *hoshūkō* have accommodated a growing diversity of students. To cater to students whose aims in studying Japanese differ from the purpose of the *hoshūkō*, *keishōgo* (heritage language) programs were developed in some US cities (Chinen 2004; Douglas 2005).

5 Because the Japanese language does not pluralize nouns, we follow that convention throughout this volume.

6 <http://www.joes.or.jp/g-kaigai/gaikoku03.html>. Accessed 12 November 2011.

7 <http://www.joes.or.jp/g-kaigai/gaikoku03.html>. Accessed 4 October 2012.

8 The grants come from both the MEXT and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Japan.

1.4 *Kokugo* vs. *keishōgo* education and the “heritage language effect”

Kokugo and *keishōgo* education differ in two ways. First, they have different political connotations, as the former is strongly linked to Japan’s nation-building. In the nineteenth century, in line with the “one nation, one language” model, the Meiji administration chose a linguistic variety used by educated people in its capital city, Tokyo, as a standard language and imposed it on Japan’s citizens as the only legitimate one through compulsory *kokugo* education in an effort to create a homogeneous “Japanese” nation (Lee 1996; Yasuda 2003). Toshiaki Yasuda thus defines *kokugo* as “one of the institutions used to create and unify a nation in modern nation-states” (Yasuda 2003: 22; our translation). *Kokugo* education, like other subjects taught in the compulsory education in Japan, currently follows the Course of Study set by MEXT and uses MEXT-certified textbooks. *Kokugo* can be translated as “national language” or “language art”. This convergence of nationhood and education is at the heart of the notion of *kokugo*. *Keishōgo* education does not link to the nation-state in this way and is not required to follow the MEXT Course of Study or use MEXT-certified textbooks. Thus, *keishōgo* provides a space outside the nation-state yet is linked to Japan.

Second, *kokugo* and *keishōgo* education differ in the expectations and aims of students’ linguistic proficiency. While *kokugo* education presupposes full attainment of daily use of the target language – what Cummins ([1996] 2001) calls “Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)”⁹ – *keishōgo* may not. Based on this assumption, *kokugo* education provides education in academic Japanese, or what Cummins (2001) calls “Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)”.¹⁰ *Kokugo* education sets rigid goals at each grade level, including the *kanji* 漢字 (Chinese characters) to be learned in each grade. *Keishōgo* education also aims at attainment of CALP, but a more flexible time frame than that designated in *kokugo* education accommodates its students’ considerable individual differences in BICS¹¹ (Kondo-Brown 2003).

⁹ Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are a set of communication skills facilitating the day-to-day or practical oral communication needed to interact socially with other people (Cummins 2001).

¹⁰ Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) refers to language skills needed to succeed in formal academic learning, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing about subject area content. Attained through the language of the classroom, CALP requires the learner to understand abstract ideas, rely on fewer nonverbal cues, and master more complex structure, while BICS can be acquired through face-to-face conversation dealing with simply structured everyday language (Cummins 2001).

¹¹ Language instruction that does not expect BICS of students is called *Nihongo* (Japanese-as-a-foreign-language) education.

It should be noted that the practice of calling a language either one’s “national” or “heritage” language is not neutral or automatic but often politically loaded, affecting relationships with one’s own linguistic practices, other individuals, linguistic citizenship, and the imagined (ancestral) homeland¹² (Doerr 2010; Whiteside 2009). In recent studies, heritage is understood as multi-vocal processes that transform relationships between individuals and what they do, awakening a meta-cultural awareness of their daily acts. For example, once playing a card game like *karuta* comes to be considered as a part of passing on Japanese heritage, the card game is approached differently, as practicing and passing on “Japanese heritage”. Heritage is thus better conceptualized as a practice (of considering and treating *karuta* as heritage) than as an artifact (the *karuta* cards themselves). Such heritage interventions change how people understand their culture, themselves, and the fundamental conditions for cultural production and reproduction (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2006; Smith 2006). This volume shows that choosing to call a language either one’s national or heritage language is such a practice.¹³

This effect of calling a language one’s heritage is little addressed in existing studies of heritage language education, which have relied on the premise that the heritage language learner already exists, as mentioned. The heritage language learner is often defined without critical discussion of what it means to suggest a definition. The central topic in defining the heritage language learner is to achieve more “accurate” definition, as will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

In this volume, instead of asking what the best definition of the heritage language learner is, we suggest exploring the “heritage language effect” – the ways individuals’ actions and sense of self are affected by being called a “heritage language” learner – drawing on the notion of heritage practice as well as Foucault’s idea of truth effect. Foucault argues:

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 1972: 131)

12 Other scholars discuss similar ambiguities regarding “mother tongue”, which can be defined as: (1) the language(s) one learns first; (2) the language(s) one knows best; (3) the language(s) one uses most; or (4) the language(s) one identifies with (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1989). See Chapter 2 for more discussion.

13 Diverse ways to inherit Japaneseness understood in this framework were analyzed in Doerr and Lee (2010).