What is a heritage language?

Ann Kelleher, University of California, Davis

The term "heritage language" is used to identify languages other than the dominant language (or languages) in a given social context. In the United States, English is the *de facto* dominant language (not an "official" language, but the primary language used in government, education, and public communication); thus, any language other than English can be considered a "heritage language" for speakers of that language. (See articles by Joshua Fishman, Guadalupe Valdés, and Terrence Wiley in Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001, for discussion of definitions.)

In the United States, languages other than English are often thought of and referred to as "foreign" languages. However, many people who live in the United States have cultural connections to and know languages other than English. These languages are not "foreign" to particular individuals or communities; instead, they are *familiar* in a variety of ways. Some people may be able to speak, read, and write the language; others may only speak or understand when spoken to. Some may not understand the language but are part of a family or community where the language is spoken. The term "heritage" language can be used to describe any of these connections between a non-dominant language and a person, a family, or a community.

The term "minority language" has also been used to refer to languages other than English in the United States. However, there are at least two concerns with the term "minority language". First, while "minority" in a demographic sense tends to mean "smaller in number" or less than 50% of a group (as opposed to a numerical majority), many negative social connotations accompany the term. Second, in a particular community or social setting in the United States, a language other than English may in fact be spoken by a numerical majority. (See the Introduction to Peyton, Ranard, & McGinnis, 2001, for discussion.)

Alternative terms to "heritage language" have been and are being used in the United States and in other countries. These terms include "community language" (Baker & Jones, 1998; Corson, 1999; Wiley, 2001, 2005) and "home language" (e.g., Yeung, Marsh, & Suliman, 2000).

Joshua Fishman identifies three types of heritage languages in the United States (Fishman, 2001). These categories emphasize the historical and social conditions of other languages relative to English.

1. **Immigrant heritage languages** are any of the languages spoken by immigrants arriving in the United States after it became an independent country. Immigrant heritage languages may overlap with colonial heritage languages; for instance, Spanish was a colonial heritage language, and it is now an immigrant heritage language of great importance in the United States.

2. **Indigenous heritage languages** are the languages of the peoples native to the Americas. Many of these languages are now extinct, some are spoken by a very few elders and are at risk of being lost, and a very few are being maintained within communities of speakers through strong educational efforts. For a book-length account of educational efforts to maintain Navajo within a community on the Navajo Reservation, see McCarty (2002).

3. **Colonial heritage languages** are the languages of the various European groups that first colonized what is now the United States and are still spoken here. These include such languages as Dutch, German, Finnish, French, Spanish, and Swedish.

References

Baker, C., & Jones, S. P. (1998). *Encyclopedia of bilingual education and bilingualism.* Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Corson, D. (1999). Community-based education for indigenous cultures. In S. May (Ed.), *Indigenous community-based education* (pp. 8-19). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Fishman, J. (2001). 300-plus years of heritage language education in the United States. In J. K. Peyton, D. A. Ranard, & S. McGinnis (Eds.), *Heritage languages in America: Preserving a national resource* (pp. 81-89). Washington, DC & McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics & Delta Systems.

McCarty, T. L. (2002). *A place to be Navajo: Rough Rock and the struggle for self-determination in indigenous schooling*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Peyton, J. K., Ranard, D. A., & McGinnis, S. (Eds.). (2001). *Heritage languages in America: Preserving a national resource*. Washington, DC & McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics & Delta Systems.

Valdés, G. (2001). Heritage language students: Profiles and possibilities. In J. K. Peyton, D. A. Ranard, & S. McGinnis (Eds.), *Heritage languages in America: Preserving a national resource* (pp. 37-77). Washington, DC & McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics & Delta Systems.

Wiley, T. G. (2001). On defining heritage languages and their speakers. In J. K. Peyton, D. A. Ranard, & S. McGinnis (Eds.), *Heritage languages in America: Preserving a national resource* (pp. 29-36). Washington, DC & McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics & Delta Systems.

Wiley, T. G. (2005)*. Literacy and language diversity in the United States*. (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.

Yeung, Y. S., Marsh, H. W., & Suliman, R. (2000). Can two tongues live in harmony: Analysis of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS88) longitudinal data on the maintenance of home language. *American Educational Research Journal, 37*(4), 1001-1026.

Visit us online at www.cal.org/heritage