

Social Aspects of Bilinguality

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(Received: 8-9-14 / Accepted: 12-11-14)

Abstract

This study examines different aspects of bilinguality and heritage language. An extensive survey was administered to students from five different public and private universities in the United States. Based on their responses the subjects were divided into heritage and non-heritage and fluent and non-fluent bilinguals. It was hypothesized that those participants who have two bilingual parents are likely to learn the foreign language at a faster rate and be more fluent than the subjects who had only one bilingual parent or two monolingual parents. However, the main focus of this study was to determine any possible social influences on maintenance of bilinguality. Parts of the survey dealt with whether or not bilingual subjects have ever been made fun of or felt embarrassed for speaking their second language in public. Further, the sense of pride and comfort in speaking a foreign language was measured among heritage and non-heritage bilinguals. Based on the results of this study, more fluent heritage and non-heritage bilinguals reported a sense of comfort in speaking their heritage language although they also reported having been ridiculed at some point. Heritage speakers seem to also report a stronger sense of pride about being bilingual than non-heritage speakers.

Keywords: Bilinguality, heritage language, social embarrassment, parental influence.

1. Introduction

According to United States census data over 160 languages are spoken in the U.S. and over 20% of the population speaks a language other than English at home (Gordon, 2005). In fact, by 2011 it was estimated that there were over 40 million immigrants in the U.S. and that as many as one out of every five children who live in the U.S. are from immigrant families (Migration Policy Institute, 2012). Even so, the large number of bilinguals in the U.S. is dwarfed in comparison to the number of bilingual and multilingual speakers in the world. Such speakers are estimated to make up over fifty percent of the world population (Shin & Kominski, 2010; Ryan, 2013).

Bilinguality is a matter of both degree and definition. Most true bilinguals are immigrants as they bring their native language to their new found country and use it in the household. Thus, the heritage language is defined as a language that is learned at home and where, at least in the case of the United States, English is not the dominant language of the household. The heritage language is always a minority language used often by first generation immigrants and taught intentionally or inadvertently to their children (Rothman, 2009). It is generally agreed that bilinguals are either simultaneous, who learn both languages during the same

approximate period of development, or they are sequential bilinguals in which case they learn the language that is predominately spoken in the household (heritage language) first and later adopt a second language either during later childhood or adolescence (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994).

Often the process of acquisition of a heritage language in early childhood is interrupted when the child starts their formal schooling and the dominant language is strongly stressed and encouraged both by educators and peers alike. As immigrants often feel the urgency to adopt the language and customs of their new country, they also use the dominant language more at home to the point that the heritage language usage becomes significantly reduced and restricted perhaps just to certain occasions or addressed to only a specific individual. For example the child may only use her heritage language when speaking to her mother.

In the absence of any intervention, the heritage language is at times completely forgotten within three generations (Fillmore, 2000). This phenomenon has been documented among many immigrants including Hispanic Americans (Portes & Schauffler, 1994, 1996). Even when the heritage language is somehow maintained the disrupted development of the acquisition of the heritage language can still result in fossilization or decay of the language. As the first generation of heritage language speakers is exposed to a variety of input in their language by a variety of individuals in many naturalistic settings, the second generation speakers are often exposed to limited input in controlled settings by few selected individuals. This interrupted and restricted exposure often results in fossilized development especially in the area of grammar (Montrul, 2008).

The level of competency of the heritage speakers is also difficult to define or delineate. Some heritage speakers achieve a full level of fluency and mastery of their language with vast vocabularies and accurate pronunciation. However, even such able second-generation heritage speakers seem to lag in the aspects of language which are acquired later during adolescence such as the application of discourse devices and grammatical subtleties and pragmatics (Krashen, 1998). On the other end of the spectrum, less competent speakers have some comprehensive capabilities in their heritage language but are lacking in productive competence in their heritage language (Kondo-Brown, 2006).

The reason some heritage speakers achieve a higher level of competency than others is a difficult question to answer. One possible explanation is a genetic predisposition for second language learning among some individuals. Dale and his colleagues studied 604 pairs of fourteen year old twins in England and Wales. They reported a fairly strong influence of heredity and low influence of environment in second language acquisition. So perhaps some individuals are born better equipped to learn a second language (Dale, Harlaar, Haworth & Plomin, 2010).

Another explanation may lie in the environment and more specifically, parental influences and family dynamics. Children often only use their heritage language when communicating with their parents. In fact the presence of a bilingual mother, father and/or a sister in the home, appears to increase the probability of maintaining the heritage language for second language learners (Halsted, 2013; Oh & Fuligini, 2007; Park & Sarkar, 2007). Other important factors include the priorities of the parents and their determination to preserve and pass on their native language and culture to the next generation as well as the steps that they take towards achieving this goal. These efforts include mandating that the child should only speak the heritage language at home or sending the child to weekend language schools or even sending the child to their parents' home country in order to improve their linguistic competency (Krashen, 1998). Other influences, such as the existence of heritage language schools in the community and having other people in addition to one's parents to converse with in the heritage language, have also been associated with the preservation of these languages (Shibata, 2000; Dopke, 1992).

One factor that has not been sufficiently explored and examined at the present time is the question of prestige of the heritage languages and the social embarrassment that may be associated with speaking these languages outside the home environment. English is a high prestige language; in fact, it currently enjoys the highest level of prestige and dominance in the world. It is the first language of over 328 million people and is spoken by close to one billion people. English is the primary language of diplomacy, commerce, science and technology, the internet and entertainment; a true *Lingua Franca* of our time. This level of prestige propels non-English speakers all over the world to try to learn English as a second language even if they have no plans to migrate to an English speaking country. Presently, over 90% of students in Europe learn to speak English and countless others all across Asia and Africa are in pursuit of achieving at least some level of English competency (Rubenstein, 2013).

If English is such a dominant language in the world, then why should second generation immigrants learn heritage languages? There are many reasons for an individual to become bilingual. In the past few decades some clear advantages of bilinguality have been documented. These advantages include better recognition memory among older bilingual adults, an earlier development of executive control among the bilingual children and a slower natural decline of these function as a result of aging (Bialystok, 2007; Wodniecka, Craik, Lou & Bialystok, 2010).

Aside from the basic advantages of bilinguality, it seems to be helpful for an individual's social and emotional well-being to preserve at least some competency in their heritage language. In some families the heritage language is the primary tool of communication with some immediate and extended family members. When this communication becomes limited due to language barriers between the old and new generations, many cultural and family traditions are lost with the passing of the elders. In addition, the lack or limited communication or at times miscommunication between old and new generations can result in strained and distant inter-generational relationships and ultimately lead to lower self-esteem and isolation among immigrant children (Anderson, 2004; Cho & Krashen, 1998; Han & Hong, 2010; Portes & Hao, 2002; Tseng & Fuligni, 2000). In fact there seems to be more family cohesion and communication between adolescents and their parents when they speak the heritage language. In addition, adolescents who are able to speak their heritage language seem to have higher aspirations and better academic outcomes (Portes & Hao, 2002; Chen, Benet-Martinez & Bond, 2008).

On the other hand, at times first and second generation immigrants in the United States feel that their language is considered to be of a lower value and prestige by the American society (Valdes, Fishman, Chavez & Perez, 2006). There may be a sense of shame associated with being a speaker of a lesser language and it could be a hurdle in the path toward full assimilation into the American society. This effect is partly regional as French is more desirable in parts of Louisiana and Spanish more accepted in California. Nevertheless, this is an undeniable influence that often pushes the children and adolescents to abandon their heritage language (Caldas & Caron-Caldas, 2002; Macedo, 2000). This form of linguistic chauvinism causes even an evaluative judgment of accents. A British accent is often considered more sophisticated and polite whereas an Indian or Hispanic accent is considered less desirable and the speaker judged as to be less capable or knowledgeable (Ladegaard, 1998; Lippi-Green, 2012; Wang, Arndt, Singh, Biernat, 2009).

Another hurdle in the path of second generation heritage speakers is the constant correction and at times ridicule of more competent speakers. The process of learning any language includes mispronunciations, grammatical mistakes, semantic errors so on. When these errors are met with critical remarks of the more fluent speakers, young heritage learners can become discouraged and be more likely to give up on any effort to preserve their heritage language (Krashen, 2000).

In light of these various factors that can influence the use and preservation of heritage language by the second-generation speakers, it is important to further explore the social impacts of peers and society in general on young immigrants' linguistic choices and how social pressure and fear of embarrassment may deter this population from using their heritage language in front of non-speakers. In the present study, it was predicted that in answering an extensive questionnaire about their second language, those speakers who have both parents speak the heritage language, are much more likely to be fluent in their second language and learn the language at an earlier age in comparison to the speakers who only have one or no bilingual parents.

Another hypothesis of this study addressed the social pressures against bilinguality. It was predicted that all bilinguals would feel a sense of shame or ridicule about being bilingual at some point in the course of their development. This was expected to result in some hesitation in using their second language in public. However, the heritage and more fluent speakers were expected to cope better with these pressures and feel less embarrassed and more confident about using their second language. That is, a lack of fluency may lead to more insecurity about using one's heritage language.

2. Methodology

2.1. Subjects

The current study is a part of a larger research project where 122 English-speaking college students responded to a 100-item multi-scale online survey. From this larger subject pool only a subset of 57 participants who reported being able to speak a second language was used for the current study. This subset included both heritage and non-heritage bilinguals. Consistent with the prior definitions in the literature, for an individual to be considered a heritage speaker he or she was expected to come from a non-English speaking home or from an environment where both their parents were non-native speakers (Valdes, 2001). All the subjects were students from four public and private universities and one community college in the states of North Carolina and Tennessee. These students participated in the present study in exchange for extra credit points. Subjects spoke English and their second languages included Spanish, French, Polish, Farsi and German.

The subjects ranged in age from 18 to 42 with a mean age of 22 years and a median age of 21 years reflecting the average age of the undergraduate populations in the participating community college and universities. A total of 81% of the subjects were female. The larger number of female participants in this study is also a direct reflection of the larger proportion of females in psychology classes of the five institutions who were part of the subject pool for this study. Specific characteristics of the subjects are reported in **Table 1**.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participant groups

Characteristic	Non-heritage	Heritage
Number of participants	28	29
Mean Age (years)	21.2	21.9
Mean Age of second language acquisition (years)	12.2	3.0
% born in US (or in English-speaking countries)	89%	55%
% with mother born outside US ^a	7%	83%

% with father born outside US ^a	7%	83%
% learning second language before age 5	4%	86%

a. In non-English speaking countries.

2.2. Procedures and Measures

An online 100-item in-depth questionnaire of bilinguality presented in English was designed for this study. The questionnaire asked for demographic information about the subjects, and additionally it required the participants to provide their self-ratings about their level of competence in speaking, reading and writing a second (non-English) language. Furthermore, other questions dealt with schooling, background, hobbies and interests that involved the second language of the subjects. The survey also included many in-depth questions about all the members of the subject's household and the languages that are spoken by various family members. In another section, the participants were asked about the level of embarrassment and comfort of the bilinguals in speaking their language in public and whether or not anyone had ever made fun of their speaking in their second language.

3. Results

3.1. Parental Influence

Of the 57 subjects in this study who reported being able to speak a second language, 42% described themselves as fluent speakers of another, non-English language. The remaining 33 subjects stated they could speak a second language “not very well” (14%), “pretty well” (26%) or “very well” (18%).

Subjects had provided information about the presence of other family members in the home who spoke a language other than English while they were growing up. Subjects fell into two groups: “non-heritage,” where everyone at home spoke only English (49%) and “heritage” where one or more other languages were spoken at home (51%). For each of the 29 subjects in this study with non-English speakers at home, those family members always included the mother, the father or both parents. Moreover, in all but one case the subjects' “second” language was the same as the native language of one or both parents. That is, for 97% of this group the “second” language was the same as one or both parents' original heritage language. As might be expected, there was a strong association between those who had one or more heritage language family members and level of self-reported fluency in subjects' second language, Chi-square = 20.0, df = 3, $p < .001$. Figure 1 shows the percent of subjects in the heritage and non-heritage groups who reported each degree of second language fluency.

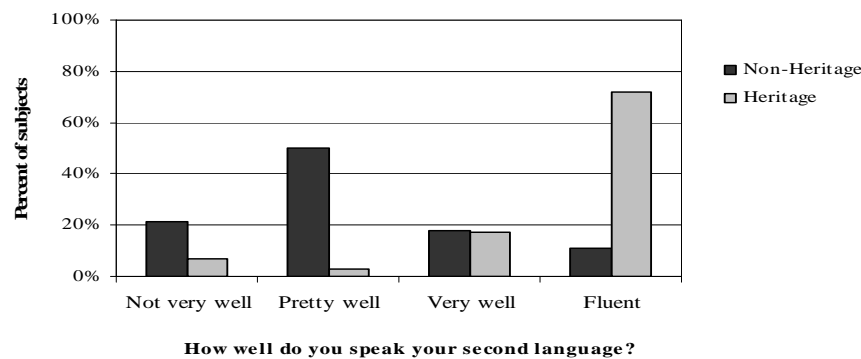


Fig. 1. Fluency for heritage and non-heritage speakers

In addition, the age when subjects reported learning their “second” (i.e., non-English) language was strongly related to having one or both parents who spoke that heritage language at home. Figure 2 shows the average age of second language acquisition as a function of the number of parents who spoke the heritage language. For those where both parents spoke a heritage language at home the average age of language learning was two years. For the subjects with either a mother or father (but not both) who spoke the heritage language the average age was eight years, and for subjects with parents who only spoke English the mean age for starting to learn a second language was twelve years, $F(2,54) = 48.8$, $p < .001$. So in this study the most fluent speakers of a second language had one or more other family members who spoke that same heritage language and began learning that language prior to or at about the same time as they learned English.

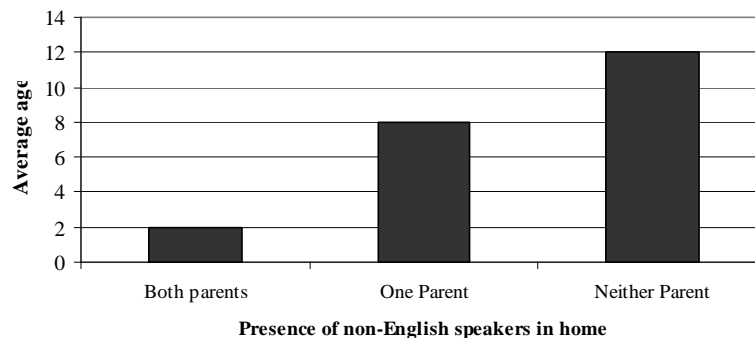


Fig. 2. Age of second language acquisition

3.2. Social Ease

Spearman rank order correlations (ρ) were used to assess the relationship between the ordinal measure of language fluency and a set of ordinal measures assessing social aspects of language use. Looking at social ease regarding public use of the second language, there was a strong association between degree of fluency and comfort level speaking the second language in public, Spearman ρ (57) = 0.76, $p < .001$. This association was found for both those with heritage speakers at home (Spearman ρ (29) = 0.62, $p < .001$) as well as those from English speaking homes who started to learn the second language only as teenagers (Spearman ρ (28) = 0.62, $p < .001$). Overall, 33% of the subjects across both groups felt “very comfortable” speaking their second language in public. Figure 3 shows the relationship between comfort level and degree of fluency.

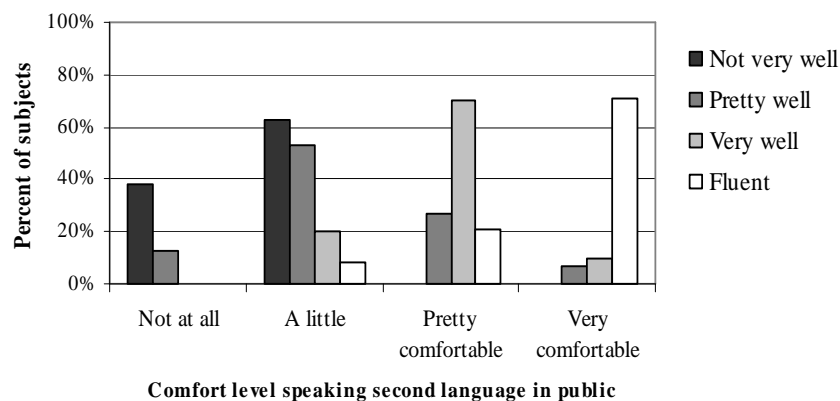


Fig. 3. Comfort level and degree of second language fluency

Similarly, there was a significant association between being proud to speak a second language and degree of competence in that language (Spearman rho (56) = 0.63, $p < .001$). The association held up for both subgroups: heritage (Spearman rho (28) = 0.57, $p < .002$) and non-heritage (Spearman rho (28) = 0.45, $p < .015$). Overall, 48% of subjects reported being proud “all the time” of being able to speak a second language. Figure 4 shows the relationship between pride and degree of fluency.

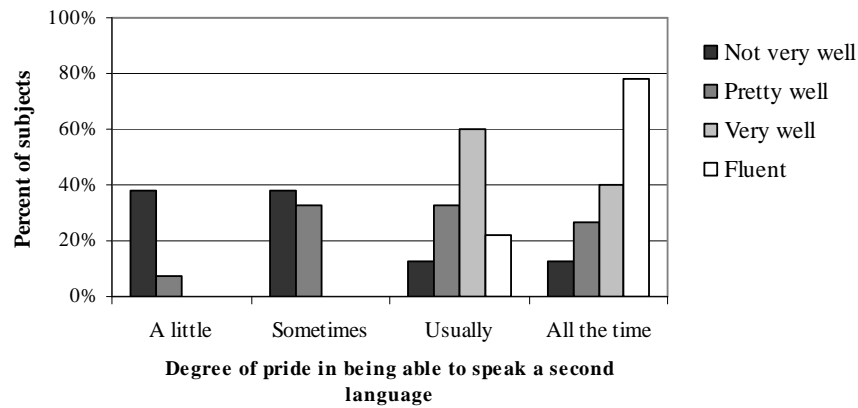


Fig. 4. Pride and degree of second language fluency

3.3. Social Ridicule and Embarrassment

For the question “Has anyone ever made fun of you speaking your second language?” 54% of the subjects said yes (at least once in a while or more often). Across all of the subjects there was a significant positive association between ever having been made fun of and language competence (Spearman rho (55) = 0.29, $p < .031$). However, with both smaller subgroups the associations were not statistically significant: heritage (Spearman rho (27) = -0.07, ns); non-heritage speakers (Spearman rho (28) = 0.34, ns). Figure 5 shows the relationship between social ridicule and degree of language fluency.

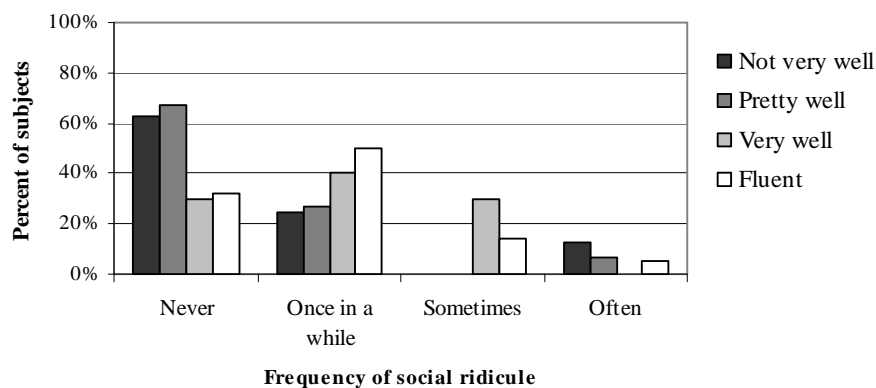


Fig. 5. Social ridicule and degree of second language fluency

Looking at social embarrassment, 46% of the subjects said that at least “once in a while” they felt embarrassed speaking their second language in public. This embarrassment was significantly associated with lower language competence (Spearman rho (55) = -0.45, $p < .001$). Although directionally the same association was found for both heritage and non-heritage speakers, with both smaller subgroups the association was not statistically

significant: heritage (Spearman rho (28) = -0.23, ns); non-heritage (Spearman rho (27) = -0.36, ns). Figure 6 shows the relationship between embarrassment and degree of language fluency.

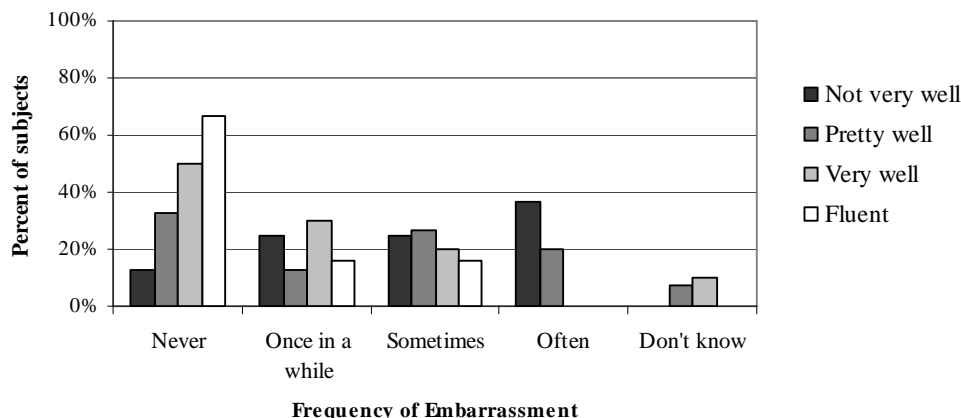


Fig. 6. Embarrassment by degree of second language fluency

4. Discussion

4.1. Second Language Acquisition

This study was designed to look at parental influence on the age of acquisition and level of fluency of speaking a second language in both heritage and non-heritage speakers. Further, it aimed to provide some insight about the level of fluency of second language speakers and their sense of self-confidence in their linguistic abilities. Additionally, in order to determine the influence of social pressure on bilinguality, the level of social embarrassment and ease of using a foreign language in public was measured. Finally, the feeling of pride about one's heritage language was investigated.

Based on the results of this study, those subjects who had one or more heritage language speaking parents were more likely to be fluent in their second language and to have acquired their second language at an earlier age in comparison with the subjects whose parents were monolinguals. The participants with two bilingual parents acquired their second language around age two, the ones with only one bilingual parent around age eight and those with monolingual parents acquired their second language around age twelve.

This result is consistent with the notion that the heritage speakers are more likely to have been exposed at home and within family conversations to their heritage language. In addition, the linguistic environment of heritage speakers is a natural setting where a wide variety of language samples are heard. In order to interact fully with their parents the children are encouraged to acquire and use their heritage language. When there are two heritage speaking parents at home the opportunities to use and practice the heritage language is higher so it is reasonable that the age of acquisition of those subjects would be found to be earlier than the one heritage parent group.

Aside from linguistic practice and opportunity, with the heritage speaking subjects there is often a system of support at home for the acquisition and maintenance of the heritage language. This includes supportive parents who wish to teach their heritage language to their children and promote their heritage language by not only emphasizing the use of heritage language at home but at times sending their children to second language schools on the

weekend to ensure the survival of the heritage language in their family (Arriagada, 2005; Shin, 2010).

Another possible reason for the better and earlier level of fluency among the heritage speakers is a sense of ethnic pride and cultural identity which naturally necessitates the preservation of heritage language. A sense of belonging and identity with a cultural group can often motivate an individual to make efforts to fit in with their ethnic group which is very difficult without being able to speak their language. This desire to belong and to be accepted by the other members of the culture is a strong motivation to master one's heritage language. So perhaps the level of motivation is one of the factors that sets bilingual and heritage speakers apart. After all, it is one thing for an individual to undertake learning another language out of interest or necessity but it is an entirely different endeavor to try to master a language in order to preserve one's cultural identity and maintain ties with a cultural group (Tse, 2000). Ultimately all of the above factors (family structure, cultural identity and more available linguistic opportunities in heritage families) play a part in enabling the heritage speakers to master their second language earlier and more completely.

Another point to consider is the diverse nature of the second languages spoken by the participants of this study. All were from of the Proto-Indo-European family of languages, though of different branches of this language tree. French and Spanish were from the Italic (Romance branch) while German is from the Germanic branch and Polish from the Balto-Slavic branch. Finally Farsi is from the Indo-Iranian branch of the Proto-Indo-European family of languages. One reason for choosing individuals with different heritage languages was to see whether or not some languages were more likely to survive as a heritage language while others would be less likely to be maintained. This study included more Spanish speaking individuals consistent with the linguistic landscape of the United States. However, even with the limited sample of this study there seemed to be no particular language related effect. Seemingly, different languages of different sub-branches with different writing systems could all still be maintained by the heritage speakers.

4.2. Social Influences

The second aim of this study was to investigate the social aspects of bilingualism and the influence of social pressure on bilingual individuals. There was a significant correlation between the level of fluency of a second language and subjects' comfort level in speaking their second language in public. If the level of comfort is determined by the ability to speak the language in a correct and efficient way then it is not surprising that the most fluent speakers are more comfortable speaking their language in public. On the other hand, if bilinguals are concerned about social bias against a foreign language use and a fear of social rejecting and not "fitting in," then the level of fluency should not influence the level of comfort. However, that was not found to be the case in this study.

A different explanation could be that with more fluency come more ease of conversation and a sense of self-confidence that for the most part overcomes worries about the judgment of others. Additionally, previous research has shown that more fluent heritage speakers tend to overcorrect or even make fun of less competent speakers (Krashen, 2000). If that is indeed the case then it would also explain this particular finding that less competent speakers were more hesitant to speak in front of other more fluent bilinguals.

One basic question was whether or not bilingual speakers had ever been made fun of for the use of their language in public. Approximately 54% of the subjects in this study reported having been made fun of for their second language usage. This was the case for both heritage and non-heritage speakers. In fact the more fluent subjects were more likely to have been made fun of than the less fluent participants. On the one hand, this might be expected based

on the sheer frequency of their second language usage. The fluent speakers more frequently use their language in public so they are more likely to have had instances when others, perhaps monolinguals, made fun of them.

On the other hand, if social pressure and a desire to assimilate into Western culture is a strong force against the maintenance of heritage language, then it seems many bilinguals are able to overcome this negative pressure. Despite being occasionally ridiculed, they still continue to use and practice their second language to the point of achieving fluency. It is important to point out, that there was a directional but non-significant finding indicating that heritage speakers were less likely to have been made fun of than non-heritage speakers. This lack of significance is likely due to insufficient number of subjects in each subgroup. So if the directional results are any indications, heritage speakers reported fewer instances of being ridiculed. Similarly, in this study the more fluent speakers were less likely to have ever been embarrassed to speak their language in public than less fluent speakers. Finally, the more fluent speakers seemed to have a stronger sense of pride about speaking their second language.

Taken together there seem to be a lack of embarrassment and a stronger sense of pride associated with heritage and fluent speakers compared to the non-fluent group. Whatever influence public ridicule has on the acquisition and usage of a second language seems to have less effect on the heritage speakers and fluent bilinguals. There are many possible explanations for these findings. One argument is that if occasionally these subjects were made fun of while they spoke their second language it may have been too infrequent and minor to have had any lasting impact on the attitude of the subjects about their foreign language. On the other hand, at least for the heritage group, their language is an important part of their ethnic and cultural identity so the support of their family and friends can be a strong force in being able to overcome occasional ridicule. Consequently, these bilinguals are comfortable in speaking their second language in public and are proud of their bilinguality.

For the non-heritage group it is more difficult to estimate why negative social pressures against bilinguality and the absence of any systematic support of family and ethnic group have not hindered their gaining mastery of a second language. One possible explanation is this group does not feel any pressure to assimilate into the United States culture and society because they are already a part of it. If so, then any degree of negative pressure they may experience about learning a second language is not deemed important.

To help confirm the answers this study has provided to the questions on the importance of social influence on second language acquisition, additional research with larger samples of heritage and non-heritage bilinguals is needed. If in fact heritage speakers are less likely to be made fun of or be embarrassed about their heritage language than non-heritage fluent speakers, perhaps there is more cultural sensitivity rather than merely respecting linguistic differences at work here. Alternatively, they may be exposed to the same level of pressure as non-heritage speakers but have a better system of support and a sense of pride to overcome these pressures.

5. Conclusion

One of the main aims of this study was to see if there are fundamental differences between heritage and non-heritage bilinguals. The findings supported the notion that fluent heritage speakers have a strong sense of confidence and pride about their language which can overcome minor social pressures. Many children of heritage language households face strong social forces against learning their heritage language and are unable or unwilling to maintain the heritage language of their parents. However, it seems that the fluent heritage speakers in

this study have a stronger sense of commitment and social and cultural support which together can help keep their ancestral language alive.

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