Review of Spanish as a Heritage Language in the United States

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SUMMARY

The fifteen chapters included in this volume address a variety of topics pertaining to current research trends concerning Spanish as a heritage language (HL) in the context of the United States. The introductory chapter, written by Sara Beaudrie and Marta Fairclough (the editors of this volume), lays the foundation for the remainder of the book by presenting a general review of Spanish heritage speaker bilingualism in the US. As such, the authors discuss broad topics such as the history of the Hispanic presence in the US, the terms heritage speaker (or heritage learner) and heritage language and Spanish as a heritage language. The chapter concludes by presenting the scope and organization of the volume.

The remainder of the book is conveniently organized into four main units (and an afterword), each one dealing with an important subfield of study within Spanish HL research. Covering topics such as language policy, language maintenance, and codeswitching, Part I (Chapters 1 to 4) offers a general overview of the field. Part II (Chapters 5 to 7) focuses on current trends in empirical research on linguistic aspects of Spanish as a HL. Issues such as motivation, attitudes, and identity are analyzed in Part III (Chapters 8 and 9). Finally, Part IV (Chapters 10 to 13) focuses on pedagogical perspectives.

Below is a chapter-by-chapter summary of the remaining 13 chapters (and the afterword).

In Chapter 1, “Spanish Heritage Language Maintenance: Its Legacy and Its Future”, Susana V. Rivera-Mills offers a comprehensive overview of the past, present and future of Spanish HL maintenance and shift in the United States. In her discussion, Rivera-Mills notes the heterogeneity and dynamism of Spanish speaking communities and makes a strong claim in favor of increased interdisciplinary research to connect the social, ideological, political, educational, and linguistic dimensions.

In Chapter 2, Jennifer Leeman explores the complex and multifaceted topic of language ideologies and their relationship with other social phenomena (e.g., gender, race). Referring to the five levels of organization that characterize...
In Chapter 11, “Meeting the Needs of Heritage Language Learners: Approaches, Better our Educational Practices.

In Chapter 10, “Research on University-Based Spanish Heritage Language Programs in the United States: The Current State of Affairs”, Sara Beaudrie provides a comprehensive review of the field of post-secondary education programs of Spanish as a HL across the United States. Although Beaudrie notes that the interest and research focusing on HL education has experienced vast improvement since the 1970s, she calls for the need to continue widening the scope and methodologies of research so as to enhance our understanding and better our educational practices.

In Chapter 9, “Identity and Heritage Learners: Moving beyond Essentializations”, by Kim Potowski, examines some of the concepts that underlie theories of identity-formation (e.g., performativity, hybridity, communities of practice) to then explore the ways in which Hispanics in the US deal with or perform being bilingual English-Spanish speakers. Potowski focuses her discussion on the role that the (Spanish) dialectal variation and proficiency play in the complex process of construction, perception, and negotiation of identities in the Spanish HL classroom.

In Chapter 8, “SHL Learners’ Attitudes and Motivations: Reconciling Opposing Forces”, Cynthia Ducar compares and contrasts the nature and the role of students’ motivations/attitudes from a HL orientation, as opposed to a second language orientation. After reviewing the literature on foundational constructs, such as anxiety, attitude, and motivation, Ducar emphasizes that in order to better understand these complex and multidimensional psychological (and physiological) states, future research should aim to incorporate a socioculturally informed perspective and to use more qualitative and mixed-methods methodologies.

In Chapter 7, “Code-Switching: From Theoretical to Pedagogical Considerations”, Ana Carvalho explores the social and linguistic dimensions related to the alternation of languages within a single discourse or sentence. Not only does she challenge the commonly-held misconception that views this phenomenon negatively, but she also examines its social functions and linguistic constraints to reveal its systematic and rule-governed nature. Consistent with this premise, Carvalho advocates the need for a better understanding among language educators (and researchers) of code-switching and discusses the best ways to incorporate it into the HL classroom.

In Chapter 6, “Pragmatics and Discourse: Doing Things with Words in Spanish as a Heritage Language”, Derrin Pinto reviews studies that have focused on pragmatics and other discourse-related phenomena. Some of the topics discussed in this chapter are speech acts (e.g., direct/indirect requests, compliments, responses, and expressions of gratitude), pronoun usage (e.g., ‘tú/usted” “informal you/formal you”) and discourse markers (e.g., ‘nomás” “just/only”; ‘entonces” “so/then”; ‘tú sabes” “you know”).

In Chapter 5, “The Grammatical Competence of Spanish Heritage Speakers”, Silvina Montrul provides a thorough overview of studies that examine knowledge and use of Spanish heritage speakers from a formal linguistic point of view as well as from a sociolinguistic perspective. Pointing to the similarities (and differences) between HL learners and second language learners, the second half of the chapter is devoted mainly to discussing classroom-oriented research.

In Chapter 4, “Key Concepts for Theorizing Spanish as a Heritage Language”, Andrew Lynch questions previous theoretical assumptions that have long been at the heart of previous studies focusing on Spanish as a HL, and presents a discussion of theoretical constructs relevant to the future of the field (e.g., diglossia, register, proficiency, agency, and generation). Such a discussion is aimed at generating critical theoretical dialogues so as to develop a working framework (and a mutual theoretical understanding, therefore) across and within the different subfields of study.

In Chapter 3, “Policy Planning Research for Spanish as a Heritage Language: From Language Rights to Linguistic Resource”, Glen Martinez reviews previous work on language policy/planning to illustrate how past approaches to Spanish as a HL (i.e., as a problem, as a right, and as a resource) have influenced, and continue to influence, current research and pedagogical practices. With an eye on the future, Martinez points to several important areas that research should address (e.g., the role of administration in the educational integration of Spanish HL learners and their subsequent emergence as leaders in the academic achievement of Latino youth).

In Chapter 2, “From Language Rights to Linguistic Resource: The Role of Language Policy in the Federal Framework (and a mutual theoretical understanding, therefore) across and within the different subfields of study.

In Chapter 1, “Meeting the Needs of Heritage Language Learners: Approaches, Better our Educational Practices.”
Strategies, and Research”, Maria Carreira elaborates on a variety of theoretical as well as practical issues related to the teaching of Spanish as a HL. After an initial review in which prior developments are discussed, Carreira highlights the socioaffective needs of HL learners and provides a realistic picture of the multifaceted task that is teaching Spanish as a HL. Among others, Carreira discusses important topics such as mixed classes, learner diversity, input differences, literacy and schooling, attitudes, motivation, and identity.

In Chapter 12, Cecilia Colombi and Joseph Harrington shed light on the specific needs (and challenges) that Spanish heritage learners are facing nowadays in US educational contexts. Upon considering a number of theoretical models (i.e., The Autonomous Model, The Ideological Model, Systemic Functional Linguistics, and The Continua Model), Colombi and Harrington present an overview of the sociocultural and linguistic perspectives that weigh in on the development of (Spanish/English) advanced biliteracy in the US.

In Chapter 13, “Language Assessment: Key Theoretical Considerations in the Academic Placement of Spanish Heritage Language Learners”, Marta Fairclough examines traditional as well as current language assessment tools and discusses their implications for HL research and education. Despite recent advancements in the area of HL assessment (e.g., Blake et al. 2008; Fairclough 2011; Potowski et al. 2012), Fairclough concludes her chapter by calling for the need for further research and development in placement procedures.

The volume closes with Guadalupe Valdés’ afterword in which, after briefly summarizing antecedent chapters, she explores future research directions for the field of (Spanish) HL education in the United States. Among other things, Valdés focuses her attention on the complex and multifaceted nature that characterizes this broad area of research to point out the significant benefits that can be obtained by incorporating developments from all related subfields.

EVALUATION

In the context of the US, the increasing interest in the study of Spanish as a HL is of no surprise given that the Spanish speaking population has exponentially increased both in number and in socioeconomic importance over the last 20 years or so (e.g., Field 2011; Potowski 2010; Roca 2000; Valdés, Fishman, Chávez, and Pérez 2006). Despite this growing interest, the field of (Spanish) heritage speaker bilingualism remains in its initial stages when compared to other areas of linguistic study. Evidence of this is the relatively scarce number of volumes and manuscripts that are dedicated strictly to current research on Spanish as a HL in the US (see e.g., Roca 2000; Roca and Colombi 2003; Roca and Lipski 1993 for most recent comparable publications). In light of this, Beaudrie and Fairclough’s edited volume is therefore a very welcome contribution, as it fills a much needed gap in the field.

Designed mostly as a reference tool for researchers and (graduate) students alike, this book provides the reader with a comprehensive picture of research trends on Spanish as a HL in the US. Although not a text-book, per se, this volume could definitely be used in (under)graduate courses that focus on bilingualism and Spanish in the US. Also, because it recognizes the central role of education within the field, its content will be of tremendous value to anyone who is (or is training to be) a Spanish teacher in the US. That said, those expecting to find more about formal approaches to Spanish HL acquisition will perhaps be somewhat disappointed since, with the exception of Montrul’s chapter, the discussion of HL grammatical competency seems, to a certain degree, muffled; especially in comparison to the other areas of inquiry with a larger presence. This is perhaps the only shortcoming of this volume.

In my opinion, and to the editors’ credit, one of the strongest assets of this volume is that it brings together a wide array of contributors (all top scholars in the field) from different backgrounds and diverse interests to successfully represent current research trends in a coherent fashion. Each chapter guides the reader through a well thought-out (interdisciplinary) approach to an area of major growth in this field and addresses questions that (i) outline the current state of knowledge and (ii) offer future lines of research (8-9). Furthermore, not only do these chapters offer important insights into the history, development, and current state of the various subfields that make up this emerging discipline (e.g., language policy/planning, language ideologies, language assessment, pragmatics, attitudes/motivations), but they also provide the reader with the necessary background information to further explore and develop a greater understanding of the issues that are of relevance to each of those lines of research.

REFERENCES
