

**“Perceptions of Heritage Language Maintenance in West African Communities in  
America”**

An Honors Thesis

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2019

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## **Abstract**

Many immigrants come to America and do not maintain their native languages. Some immigrants may not realize or acknowledge heritage language maintenance. Their children sometimes develop complications with their ethnic identity because of the absence of their heritage language. Others feel little to no connection with their ethnic identity and the maintenance of their heritage language. This study aims to find West African perceptions of heritage language maintenance and ethnic identity. 18 individuals were chosen to participate in this study. Interview data suggests that there is a connection between heritage language and ethnic identity.

**Keywords:** heritage language maintenance, ethnic identity, West Africans

## Perceptions of Heritage Language Maintenance in West African Communities in America

More than half of the world's languages spoken today are believed to be in danger of disappearing during this century (Tol & Janse, 2003, p. 9). A heritage language is what one may use to refer to their native, home, or ancestral language (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 238). Language maintenance is when an individual or group continues to use their heritage language after learning a second language (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 290). Many immigrants come to America and do not maintain their native languages. This may be because of the ideology in America; "if you want to be an American you must speak English" (Fillmore, 2000, p. 207). This has led some immigrants to cease the use of their native languages to better assimilate into American culture. But what about their cultures, and the ethnic identity that their children might be missing? How do some ethnic communities feel about heritage language maintenance? Therefore, this study will examine the perceptions of heritage language maintenance and its link to ethnic identity.

### **Review of the Literature**

Filmore (2000) conducted a study, which followed a family of Chinese immigrants. This study showed the family's transition after they moved to America. As the children of the family aged, they understood the social language of America in that time which was, "to be American one must speak English" (Fillmore, 2000, p. 207). So the children learned English, but quickly forgot their native language. The process of language loss and social adaption is recurrent for immigrants. Children instantly learn that if they want to gain access to the social world, they must learn English. However,

they come to believe that the language spoken at home is a barrier to social participation, so they drop it. This can cause another barrier between the children and their parents, if the parents only speak their heritage language or mother tongue.

This research concluded by stressing the importance of parent and teacher participation in the retention of the heritage language. They must provide the children with opportunities to practice their first language at home and support it at school. Parents and teachers should understand the experiences that the children are undergoing as they try to fit in at school. Then, the parents and educators need to push away the stereotypes from society. Last, educators need to inform parents of the importance of community action to help the retention of heritage language.

Genesee (1985) created a literature review of the second language learning immersion programs. Second language immersion programs were originally developed in Canada. These programs were used to help students learn the language of the country they resided in., in this case, French. The children were speaking their original languages (English) until kindergarten. This is when they were instantaneously immersed in French. This enabled most children to learn French proficiently. This method was used in America and had the same results. Immigrant children used this program and excelled in their learning of English. The article gives no insight on the heritage language maintenance for the children who participated in such programs.

Jeon (2008) explored the language ideologies and language practices of Korean Americans. The data came from 23 participants in three different populations: students from a Korean language program at the American University, a community-based ESL program for Korean seniors, and a recently immigrated Korean family. The researcher

found data through interviews, observations, and conversations. Participants were asked questions concerning their beliefs towards learning English and retaining Korean. These answers collected as data for the research.

The results show that the language ideologies of Korean Americans fall between assimilationists and pluralists. Most of the participants are assimilationists, they are part of the English-Only movement. They wanted their children to cease speaking Korean in order for them to successfully speak in English. They believed the multiple myths surrounding bilingualism, such as “learning two or more languages confuses their children” (Jeon, 2010, p. 7). The participants who were pluralists valued both Korean and English. They valued the retention of their native language and how Korean is expressed in the domains of their lives. The researcher also found that most second (individuals born in the U.S) and 1.5 generations (individuals born in a different country who immigrate to the U.S.) relearn Korean outside of their K-12 levels. They have reasons to relearn their language such as, restoring a lost part of their culture. Surprisingly, their assimilationists parents support the restoring because it is not effecting their children’s already learned English.

Brown’s (2009) case study presented a different cause of cultural disconnect. It showcased the relationship between heritage languages and ethnic identities. This study questions whether or not heritage language is linked to ethnic identities. The participants of this study were four Korean-American college students with high levels of heritage language proficiency. Data was collected through interviews and digital voice recorders. Through this, three themes were found; “dual identity is not necessarily a volunteering choice” (Brown, 2009, p. 7), people with a strong heritage language proficiency do not

always have a high level of heritage, and the source of heritage language speakers relate to negative stereotypes. Even with their high knowledge of their native language, they still have a block towards their ethnic identities.

Most of the participants seemed to believe they were Korean because they looked Korean. Their happiness of knowing Korean was not because of the ethnic reasons, but to fit into stereotypes. The participants believed that because they looked Korean, they had to speak and understand the Korean culture to fit society's expectations. However, there was a participant who said that his high level of Korean "helped him learn more about himself" (Brown, 2009, p. 9). Another participant believed that her heritage language was similar to any other that she learned. It was "just another language" (Brown, 2009, p. 9) to her. Negative perceptions are pushing immigrants away from understanding their own ethnic identity. The researcher believed that identity conflicts of immigrants will change, once "society stops associating people of ethnic backgrounds with negative stereotypes" (Brown, 2009, p. 11).

Moreover Nesteruk's (2010) study examined the process of heritage language maintenance and loss in "immigrant professionals" from Eastern Europe. The study provided a detailed look at parents' attitudes and efforts towards heritage language maintenance and transmission. The researcher defined transmission as, passing the language to their children, meanwhile maintaining heritage language is developing what has been transmitted. 50 participants were interviewed in this study and they were all parents. The participants in this study were educated and legal professionals who had high level jobs. The interview questions pertained to their perception on heritage language maintenance and how it effected their families.



The results showed that the participants had a positive attitude toward language maintenance. They wanted their children to know their language. They wanted their heritage language to “facilitate communication across generations” (Nesteruk, 2010, p. 278). Most of the participants summed up their attitudes towards heritage language maintenance in one phrase; “the more languages you speak, the smarter you are” (Nesteruk, 2010, p. 279). Some of the participants’ strategies for maintaining language included constant exposure. They read children’s books in their native languages, told folk stories from their culture, and even put on T.V shows that spoke in their main language. They also used community resources such as, schools, language classes, and community centers. However, they had their barriers. The parents could transport their heritage language to their firstborn but had difficulty with their other children. Even though the firstborn could speak their heritage language, they spoke more English because that was the language used in their schools. The younger siblings became more exposed to English because more people in the house spoke it. This continuous exposure to English seemed to diminish their children’s heritage language skills. Sometimes their children’s decline was caused by a need to rebel and argue, which was just another stage. Some participants had put an abundance of time and money into their children’s language maintenance, but the outcome was still English dominance. The study concluded that, even with some success stories, “the reality for many immigrant families is a gradual loss of heritage language as English become the dominant language” (Nesteruk, 2010, p. 285).

Budiyana (2017) constructed a study that aimed to find the attitudes of the parents of Chinese students at a specific college. The researcher wanted to study these parents’ attitudes toward heritage language maintenance and create strategies to help them

maintain it. This was hard to do because of the restrictions on Chinese culture, such as the ban on Mandarin at schools. As time passed, those bans were lifted, but the effect of them was still there. Children could no longer master their heritage language, leaving them to lose touch with their own culture. This left the researcher to raise the question; “do parents still consider it important for their children to learn their heritage language” (Budiyana, 2017, p. 195)? 68 participants were interviewed in this study. They were all parents of students from a specific college. Data was collected with closed questionnaires. The researcher’s findings showed how important parent participation is in language maintenance. “Praise is closely connected with effort and achievement” (Budiyana, 2017, p. 197). However, the findings showed that only a small percentage of participants actually praised their children. The participants also believed that their children’s knowledge of the history of China had a connection to heritage language maintenance. Efforts for maintenance included intense communication, language instruction at school, and church activities. Researchers noted that the responses were mostly positive, which concluded that participants showed positive attitudes towards their children’s heritage language maintenance and development.

As immigrants face the social pressures to assimilate, heritage language programs appear to preserve the unique languages and cultures. When designing a heritage language program, many actions were taken into consideration such as community strength and community cultural wealth. Hinman & He (2017) focused on an “analysis of critical incidents in one Spanish heritage language program” (Hinman & He, 2017, p. 1). Community based heritage language programs were not known by the mainstream society. When a program became unrecognizable, they did not receive the attention

needed to gain resources. This reduced their preservation. The participants for this study were, 14 parents and 14 middle school students. Heritage language sessions were observed and recorded. Data was analyzed, and the theme was found. This study resulted in participants understanding the challenges they faced concerning their heritage language. They also recognized the importance of learning spaces between communities and schools. Researchers concluded the study by stating how valued community and cultural resources are.

The presence of heritage language learners is becoming a trend. More people know about them. Montrul (2010) described them as adults of immigrant families who wish to learn, relearn, or improve their “current level of linguistic proficiency” (Montrul, 2010, p. 3) in their family languages. Postsecondary foreign language classes are becoming a trend because of the presence of heritage language learners. This encouraged a new sense that “minority languages are worth preserving and maintaining, rather than suppressing or ignoring” (Montrul, 2010, p. 3). The researcher also gave ideas for future studies regarding this area. They believed that heritage language learners could reach native –like competence because of their cognitive and linguistic potential. They also shared different approaches that should be used in the future such as, psycholinguistically oriented studies of adult heritage speakers, longitudinal studies of children, and controlled studies of parental input throughout a lifespan. Researchers believed that this would help the audience understand the role of family and community in the shaping of heritage language.

Parent’s attitudes toward heritage language maintenance is highly important. It is a significant factor to the functional aspects of their child’s progression in maintaining

their native language. Liang (2018)'s study focused on parental perceptions toward heritage language maintenance in Canada and the United States. They found that parental perception varies because of different degrees of expectation, emphasis, and reason. Most of the parents held a positive attitude towards their children's heritage language learning and maintenance. However, the parents faced some challenges because of their children's attitudes towards language maintenance. Researchers found that children have changing language practices as well as a resistance to continuing their education at heritage language schools. Researchers believed that when indifferent organizations come together, they will be able to produce "harmony and diversity in our society" (Liang, 2018, p. 80).

Another article focused on parental perception of heritage language maintenance and strategies is Kwon's (2017) study. It examines the belief of Japanese and Korean immigrant mothers and their support towards heritage language maintenance. Six participants were used in this study. They were all mothers who had immigrated to the United States. Three of the participants were from Korea, while the other three participants were from Japan. Researchers collected data, by using formal and informal interviews, observations, documents, and artifacts. The perceptions were shared in three views. First, parents wanted their children to be able to communicate with their grandparents, and to highly value their heritage language. Then, parents saw the heritage languages as an asset. They believed that there were more career opportunities for their children if their children were bilingual. Lastly, parents were concerned with the challenges of balancing the learning of English and their native languages. Researchers also found heritage language maintenance through the experience of the participants,

such as transitional mass media and access to books in the heritage language. The researcher stated the importance of parental contribution to heritage language maintenance, but also shared the significance of collaborations between parents, teachers and society to support the maintenance of heritage languages.

These articles have shared a positive attitude toward heritage language maintenance. Most of the participants in the studies believed that there was a relationship between heritage language maintenance and ethnic identity. However there were some participants who felt no connection between those heritage language maintenance and ethnic identity. Most of the participants used in previous studies are from Asian or Hispanic descents. The purpose of this study is to analyze the perceptions of heritage language maintenance in West African communities in America.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

A total of 18 participants were chosen for this study. They are all over the age of 18. Their ages ranged from 18-29. 16 participants spoke their heritage language, 1 participant was bilingual, but does not speak their heritage language, and 1 participant only spoke English. They were all skilled in speaking and understanding English. All of the participants were West African or are from surrounding countries. The participants were classified as first, 1.5, and second-generation immigrants. Jeon (2008), defines the different generations as follows: first-generation immigrants were born outside of the United States, 1.5 generation immigrants were born outside of the United States and immigrated to the United States below their teenage years, second-generation immigrants

were born in the United states to first-generation immigrants. They are all in college or receiving post-secondary school education. The participants for this study were recruited by personal contacts of the researcher. Children were not interviewed.

Pseudonyms	Age	Education	Interview Date
A	23	College	4/12/2019
B	18	College	4/12/2019
C	21	College	4/12/2019
D	22	College	4/12/2019
E	21	College	4/13/2019
F	18	College	4/15/2019
G	24	College	4/16/2019
H	25	College	4/16/2019
I	20	College	4/16/2019
J	24	College	4/16/2019
K	22	College	4/16/2019
L	19	College	4/17/2019
M	21	College	4/17/2019
N	29	College	4/17/2019
O	23	College	4/18/2019
P	19	College	4/18/2019
Q	23	College	4/18/2019

R	19	College	4/19/2019
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### *Data Collection*

A qualitative research methodology was used in this research to make sure participants could fully express themselves about the topics mentioned in this article. Data was collected by interviews; these questions are listed in Table 2. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews in English. The surveys were in English. The interviews were transcribed verbatim within a few days of completion. The most significant themes in the interview data were identified in the results.

Table 2: Interview Questions for Research Participants

1. How old are you?
  - a. 18-29
  - b. 30-39
  - c. 40-49
  - d. 50-59
  - e. 60-69
2. To which gender identity do you most identify with?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. N/A
3. How many languages can you speak?
4. What languages do you speak?
5. What motivated you to learn English?
6. There are 2 types of language ideologies- assimilationist and pluralist- which one do you fall under? Assimilationists believe that immigrants should adopt cultural traits from their host country and should be absorbed into society. Pluralist believe in equality of opportunity for all people, respect for human dignity, and the conviction that no single pattern of living is good for everyone (Koppelman, 2014).
7. Please identify your ethnicity.
8. Are you first generation, second generation, third generation in the United States?
9. What type of connection do you feel, if any, between your heritage language and ethnic identity?

10. Do you believe that the person who you are is authentic or made from cultural stereotypes?
11. What language(s) do you speak at home?
12. Do you have any kids?
13. How do you promote your heritage language at home?
14. What language is more beautiful?

### **Data Analysis**

#### ***Motivation to Learn English***

Most of the participants grew up learning English in their home countries. However, English is mixed with their country's language to create pidgin, which is different from the "standard English" spoken in America. One of the participants believed that her peers' perception of her was low because of her accent. She spent a lot of time working on it, which caused the accent to disappear unless she was in a comfortable environment. Another participant said that her father made sure her, and her siblings were learning American English, so that they did not develop an accent. Her father believed that an accent-rich English would be a barrier to employment and a proper education.

#### ***Assimilationists vs. Pluralists***

These two language ideologies are at 2 different ends of the spectrum. To put it into simple terms, assimilationists believe in change and pluralists believe in no change. 56% of participants sided with pluralist, 11% of participants sided with assimilationists, and 33% of participants agreed with both ideologies. None of the participants adhered strongly to either ideology. Most of the pluralists did believe that immigrants should not have to change who they are to fit into another country's standards. However, they did



believe that assimilating into the American culture inevitably happens. It may not be a full assimilation, but part of one's character changes when in a new environment. One of the participants explained the intersectionality of the ideologies like this:

“My accent is my identity. Everybody is different. Me coming with another cultures is my difference. So, I'm not willing to lose that and be like a slave. But, you should adapt and take the good parts of the host country to make yourself better. You should never sell who you really are or where you come from (Participant J).”

One of the participants who agreed with both ideologies, had more forced reasons to believe in both. She said:

“Sometimes me coming here I feel like I don't belong here unless I do certain things. Like talk the same way you guys do, for you to be able to understand what I say. I don't want to lose my culture completely but then I want to be to blend in. I don't want people to look at me and say ‘oh she's African she has an accent. I won't talk to her because she's African.’ Sometimes it gets hurtful (Participant G).”

The assimilationists participants believe that the only way to advance in America is to be able to relate to American people and learn the American culture. They understand the pluralists, but believe that pluralism is “good in theory, but terrible in practice (Participant E).”

### ***Connections between Heritage Language and Ethnic Identity***

Most of the participants did feel a similar connection between their heritage language and ethnic identity. Their heritage language brings them closer to their family and gives them a sense of community. It keeps them connected to their culture and gives

them a sense of pride. There were participants who did not feel any connection between their heritage language and ethnic identity. One of the participant's perceptions of language was more of a situational need, than emotional need. He said "I learn languages because of the environment I am in. It is the way to go. A way to survive in the country or school system (Participant E)." He learned one language because it is the official language of his country, another language to communicate with others outside of school, and English to get an education.

### *Authenticity vs. Cultural Stereotypes*

56% of participants said they were authentic, 17% of participants said they were influenced cultural stereotypes, and 27% of participants said that they fell into both categories. The participants that said they were authentic, did not like the idea of their identity manifesting on cultural stereotypes. Some believed that denying the cultural stereotypes of their country and not blindly following traditions made them authentic.

The participants that were made from cultural stereotypes believe that they are somewhat authentic but are still affected by cultural stereotypes. One of the participants does not believe in authenticity. She believes that everything someone does depends on their environment and family. Another participant believes that our technologically-oriented world has caused people to have "goals of sameness (Participant N)."

### *Promoting Language at Home*

Two participants have brought up the idea of marrying someone from their country to maintain their heritage language. They planned to talk to their children in their heritage language as much as possible. English will be for school, but their heritage

language learning will start at home. A recurring theme was to engulf the child into their culture. A very simple but important answer was to normalize heritage language maintenance. It should be made as part of their culture. The participant would not make it seem like they are learning another language and create a very natural atmosphere.

### *The Beautiful Language*

Most of the participants interpreted question 14, what language is more beautiful?, as “what language sounds the best?” Some participants chose their heritage language because it was rhythmically pleasing and sounded like music. Most of the participants enjoyed their heritage language when communicating with other people. They found beauty in that. Three participants would rather speak English or believe that English is easier to communicate with.

### **Discussion**

I expected the participants to say that they learned English to fit into American society. I thought that they would want to assimilate into the country, but that was not the case. In Brown (2009), the participants’ decisions were linked to the perceived expectations of society. People fail to realize that there were countries in Africa that were colonized. Those colonized by the British have roots of English in their language. So, most of the participants were not forced into learning a new language. It was already in their curriculum during their education and birth.

I wanted to add the language ideologies to see the participants’ views on assimilation. I expected all of the participants to have strong pluralist beliefs. None of the

participants were on the extreme ends of the spectrum for the language ideologies. They could see the positive and negative sides of both parties.

Most of the participants felt a connection with their heritage language and ethnic identity. It gave them a way to feel closer to their community. The connection did not change because of certain factors such as in Brown's (2009) study. In Brown's study findings showed that there was no guarantee that the higher the proficiency in heritage language, the more positive perceptions of ethnic identity. I found this true in my study. The level of heritage language proficiency did not effect the participants' perceptions of ethnic identity.

The word authentic is attractive. It shows uniqueness. There is always a fight for individuality, especially for college students. Whereas, stereotype is an unattractive word. It has a negative connotation. It defies authenticity because it is described as widely held beliefs of a person or thing. I was surprised that some participants said that they were made from cultural stereotypes. Not a lot of people would put themselves in the same category as stereotypes.

When asking the participant "what language is more beautiful?" I was hoping to elicit responses that show which culture they loved more as Jeon (2008) did in her study. Some of the participants took this question and interpreted it as; "what language sounds better?" They chose the 'more beautiful' language by how it sounded. Most of the participants chose their heritage language. The ones who chose English as more beautiful did so because it is easier to communicate with.

### **Continuing Research**

I would like to further this research by changing the population. I would like to have a more adult perspective on heritage language and ethnic identity. I would also include children in this study. The 1.5 generation and second-generation immigrant participants are not as proficient in English as the first-generation immigrant participants. I want to discover if the progression in immigrant generations connects to a rise or fall in the perceptions of heritage language.

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