

Article

Between Worlds: Two Portraits of Language Knowledge, Belonging, and Cultural Connection Among Spanish Heritage Speakers

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Abstract

Heritage speakers' language acquisition is a complex process that is affected by linguistic, social, cultural, and affective factors. Studies on heritage speakers (HSs) have primarily focused on challenges HSs face in the classroom and scarcely investigated these challenges outside of instructional settings. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of two young adult Spanish HSs outside of educational settings through a series of interviews to create personal narratives of their HL and experiences. Through Narrative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (NIPA), three main themes emerged from these narratives: (1) Spanish heritage language (HL) knowledge and language use, (2) emotional factors that hinder language knowledge and language use, and (3) self-positioning towards SHL and culture. The findings indicated that the participants' experiences with their Spanish heritage language (SHL) were profoundly impacted by the nature of language input they received, hostile environments, and negative interactions with members of their communities, which led to emotional distress and communicative avoidance. This situated study also offers potential conceptual and community-based implications for the Spanish HSs.

Keywords: heritage language (HL); Spanish heritage speakers (SHS); identity; emotions; emotional distress; communicative avoidance

1. Introduction

Heritage language (HL) refers to a language spoken by individuals or communities that is different from the dominant language of the society in which they live (Kelleher, 2010). HLs are minority languages acquired naturalistically in the home environment during early childhood; however, because the dominant societal language typically becomes the primary medium of communication in social, educational, and public contexts, HLs are often developed under conditions of reduced exposure and use, which may result in lower proficiency levels and a frequent lack of instruction (Cangelosi et al., 2024; Cervantes, 2021; Prada et al., 2020; Valdés, 2005). These languages are closely linked to cultural and familial identity, and their preservation is influenced by various factors, including community support, intergenerational transmission, and the availability of language instruction (Cervantes, 2021; Parra, 2016). Yet even under similar conditions, research on HL has shown that heritage language learners (HLL) exhibit diverse language development paths



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and proficiency levels due to receiving varied input and producing limited output in their HL (e.g., Rothman, 2009). Furthermore, when receiving formal training in spoken and written HL skills, their production still distinguishes them from monolinguals and other multilingual speakers (Kupisch & Rothman, 2018). Thus, given the linguistic repertoires and distinct educational backgrounds of heritage language speakers, increasing attention has been devoted to developing proficiency, assessment practices, and curricula tailored to their specific linguistic and skill needs.

However, these differences extend beyond linguistic proficiency and skill development to encompass factors such as sociocultural background, language exposure, and affective experiences (Montrul, 2010), which can impact HLLs' language practices, such as language anxiety. In classes with both HL and foreign language (FL) learners, a key distinction rests in the nature of their language-related emotions, as heritage language anxiety (HLA) is considered distinct from foreign language anxiety (FLA), due to its foundation in HL learners' unique circumstances involving issues of identity, cultural connections, and external expectations (see Cervantes, 2021; Jee, 2022; Prada et al., 2020; Tallon, 2011; Xiao & Wong, 2014). The limited research on the emotions of HL speakers has primarily focused on Spanish and Spanish heritage language (SHL) courses. However, little is known about the emotional experiences of SHL speakers who are disconnected from Spanish instructional settings but live in SHL communities. Addressing this gap, the present study aims to: (1) foreground the lived experiences of two HL young adults in the SHL context and (2) offer a more nuanced and comprehensive view of the language-related emotions they encountered when engaging in HL contexts. Recognizing the emotional challenges faced by these two participants could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence their language development (or lack thereof), both inside and outside the classroom. This study intends to explore whether these challenges involve identity conflicts, familial expectations, or sociocultural pressures.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Understanding Second- and Third-Generation Heritage Language Speakers

Studies on HL speakers have gained attention in linguistics and education because they are a part of a growing population in the United States. Valdés (2000) defines Spanish heritage speakers as those raised in homes where a non-English language is spoken and who are to some extent bilingual. Accordingly, HLs are spoken at home or available to children, but are not dominant in the national society. These languages, including Spanish, are viewed as “foreign” by those outside the community but are considered the main languages of communication to those within it (Rothman, 2009).

A broader definition of HL speakers proposed by Potowski (2013) includes individuals who may not speak or understand the language but have strong cultural ties to the community. Heritage speakers acquire their HLs through interactions within their homes and communities, and they come from different socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds. But within the context of a dominant societal language, this diversity, in addition to affective factors, leads to a wide range of proficiency levels in areas like grammar, vocabulary, and literacy (Fairclough, 2005; Valdés, 2001). Despite their abilities to communicate in their HL, heritage Spanish speakers often experience language shaming, as their use of linguistic forms is dismissed as incorrect (Pascual y Cabo & Rivera-Marín, 2021). Pascual y Cabo and Rivera Marín also stated that these perceptions have the potential to negatively affect HL speakers' confidence and identity as bilingual speakers. These bilingual speakers exist along a continuum of linguistic competence (Valdés, 2001). At one end of the continuum are receptive bilinguals, also referred to as passive bilinguals, who possess functional understanding of the heritage language but have limited expressive skills (Montrul, 2005;

Polinsky & Kagan, 2007). These individuals typically demonstrate relatively higher proficiency in comprehension tasks, such as listening, than productive tasks like speaking (Benmamoun et al., 2013; Polinsky & Kagan, 2007), and they may be nearing a shift toward English monolingualism (Beaudrie, 2009). Despite their constrained productive abilities, HSs' receptive skills remain an important predictor of their sense of cultural identification (Hayakawa et al., 2022).

One of the unique challenges HL speakers face is the discrepancy between the informally acquired HL at home and the formal academic expectations of that language. This discrepancy can magnify emotions such as language anxiety or language rejection when heritage speakers feel that their language abilities are inadequate compared to instructed native speakers and FL learners (Torres & Turner, 2015), potentially creating conflict and alienation among heritage speakers with their surroundings (Alshihry, 2024). These challenges are particularly salient for second- and third-generation HL speakers—defined in sociolinguistics as the children and grandchildren of immigrants, respectively (Escobar & Potowski, 2015), whose heritage language maintenance and identity formation are shaped not only by parents' linguistic practices at home but also by the level of support they receive from the broader community, which creates complicated family and community dynamics (Chao, 2006; Wiley & Lukes, 1996). While the quantity of language input is a key variable in HL development, research increasingly recognizes the need to consider emotional and motivational factors, such as socioemotional well-being and parental attitudes (Cangelosi et al., 2024). As Montoya (2024) emphasizes, the decision to maintain a heritage language is often a collective political act of resistance against societal hegemony. For instance, the lack of input in the HL may reflect how a family's linguistic loyalty is constrained by a dominant one-nation-one-language ideology that pressures immigrants to shift toward the dominant language for socioeconomic survival. Also, immigrant families' financial status and the second- and third-generation HL speakers' experiences in the host country can affect the relationship between language proficiency and identity (Suárez-Orozco, 2017). For example, Portes and Rumbaut (2001) observed that participation in cultural activities strengthens SHL speakers' sense of cultural identity. Such engagement not only facilitates their involvement in meaningful cultural events but also fosters connections with older generations who primarily use the heritage language, providing a platform for self-expression rooted in their cultural heritage. Maintenance of HLs requires the support of a speech community, a cohesive geographical area where shared values and meanings are reinforced through interaction (Montoya, 2024). In addition to their involvement with the community, according to Phinney (2003), a strong sense of belonging to one's ethnic group is positively associated with immigrant children's retention of their ancestral language. Suárez-Orozco (2017) states that the process of identity formation nurtures a strong sense of self and appreciation for one's cultural roots. Moreover, Alshihry's (2024) study showed significant positive associations reported between an individual's competency in their HL and their sense of belonging. A deeper sense of community emerges when individuals successfully integrate themselves into the host society while preserving their cultural heritage (Schwartz et al., 2007). This integration underpins feelings of acceptance and inclusion, which are closely tied to belonging (Alshihry, 2024). Building on this, Phinney (2003) contends that a cohesive HL community fosters unity and a shared cultural identity.

HL speakers' language development is influenced by community attitudes toward the language, which can lead to experiences of identity-related dissonance (Montrul, 2023). HL speakers often experience a level of dissonance between their home language and the dominant language, which subsequently affects their linguistic development and identity (Parra, 2016; Torres & Turner, 2015). As a result, this avoidance can create a feedback loop, where less language practice leads to reduced proficiency (Sevinç & Backus, 2017).

Moreover, another crucial factor influencing HL development is the pressure to assimilate into the dominant language culture, which can lead HL speakers to have fragmented linguistic abilities and linguistic insecurity (Zhou & Liu, 2022). Similarly, they may feel torn between adhering to their cultural identity and the pressure to assimilate linguistically into the dominant culture. These pressures may lead to linguistic insecurity, where HL speakers, particularly those from later generations, may experience shame or frustration regarding their HL abilities (Sevinç & Backus, 2017). This may result in a gradual loss of the language, which can strain social and family relationships and make it more difficult for individuals and families to actively support the continued use and transmission of the heritage language (Guardado, 2002).

2.2. Speakers' Emotions

Anxiety, in relation to language, can be understood as the sense of apprehension an individual feels while using a given language (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993). Anxiety among HL speakers stands out as one of the most prominent emotional experiences tied to language use. Unlike FLA, HLA is shaped by the personal and cultural connections SHL speakers have with the language, connections that often heighten feelings of self-consciousness or inadequacy, particularly in contexts where the academic or prestigious variety is expected (Cervantes, 2021; Prada et al., 2020). Furthermore, research on majority language anxiety (MLA) has investigated language anxiety experienced by immigrant or minority community members in the language of the majority of the population in a national context. For instance, Jee (2022) found that heritage speakers' anxiety is rooted in both their HLA as well as its relation to the dominant language. By comparing these two forms of anxiety, they found that language anxiety is complex and related to broader socio-emotional factors, including linguistic insecurity, language or social inequality, and language pride and panic (e.g., Dewaele et al., 2008; García de Blakeley et al., 2017; Santos et al., 2017). HLA can shape the lived experiences of immigrants and influence their linguistic development and social integration. This form of anxiety, rooted in the emotional and cultural ties speakers have to their HL, can contribute to language shift or loss in subsequent generations and even lead to social isolation among first-generation immigrants. Because HLA often arises in everyday contexts beyond the classroom, it can profoundly affect processes of identity formation and belonging.

The aforementioned factors may affect the development of the HL speaker's language knowledge and language use. Language knowledge refers to an individual's underlying linguistic system, while language use is concerned with the ways in which this knowledge is deployed in real communicative contexts. Effects, such as linguistic insecurity, can be viewed as a form of anxiety that can also hinder language development by discouraging learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) (Tallon, 2009), which is linked to fear of negative evaluation, linguistic insecurity, and social expectations within both heritage communities and mainstream societies (Cervantes, 2021; Jee, 2022). HL speakers may experience anxiety in contexts where their linguistic abilities are judged against those of instructed monolingual language norms, leading to feelings of inadequacy or shame (Prada et al., 2020). They also indicated that this is exacerbated by the societal pressure to conform to dominant language standards while simultaneously dealing with criticism from within their own communities, where their HL skills may be perceived as insufficient or "broken" (p. 93). As a result, HL speakers can feel caught between two linguistic worlds, which heightens their anxiety (Jee, 2022).

Additionally, studies have found that HLA is influenced by factors such as the level of exposure to the HL during childhood, self-perceived proficiency, and the frequency of language use in daily life (Jee, 2022). For instance, speakers who had less consistent

exposure to their HL at home or who frequently received feedback on their mistakes may develop heightened levels of anxiety when using the language in formal or public settings (Cervantes, 2021). Moreover, HL speakers often report feeling anxious in situations where they are expected to use the HL with more proficient speakers or in academic settings, particularly in tasks involving speaking, writing, or grammatical accuracy (Prada et al., 2020). These anxieties are often intensified by the perceived gap between their home-based language skills and the linguistic expectations placed on them in educational environments or with their own communities outside the classroom (Cervantes, 2021). Such pressure can undermine their confidence, contributing to avoidance behaviors and reluctance to use the HL in situations where they fear judgment or failure (Jee, 2022).

In summary, HL speakers' emotional responses to Spanish as a language and culture are influenced by both external societal pressures and internal perceptions of linguistic inadequacy. It manifests in various forms, including agency shifts, fear of negative evaluation, insecurity about language proficiency, and the tension between cultural identity and linguistic performance (Prada et al., 2020; Cervantes, 2021) that may be associated with HLA.

2.3. Theoretical Framework: Complex Dynamics Systems Theory

Complex Dynamics System Theory (CDST) was selected because it highlights the flexible interplay among individual factors influencing learners and acknowledges the naturally occurring, dynamic shifts within L2 learning contexts. Complexity theory reshapes our understanding of strategic learning by moving beyond a narrow focus on isolated language learning strategies, such as social, cognitive, or affective strategies, toward a more comprehensive perspective in which L2 learning is seen as emergent and dynamically interconnected with its surrounding environment (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). A complex system is not only dynamic but also inherently situated within a specific spatial and temporal context. Rather than relying on reductionist approaches to understand such complexity, there is a need for more holistic, ecological, and relational system perspectives, at least as a complement to traditional models (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). From this point of view, a complex system comprises interacting elements whose self-organization gives rise to emergent patterns, much like the coordinated movements of a flock of birds, which arise not from centralized control but from the local interactions among individuals.

At the individual level, people are shaped by a constellation of interrelated personal traits, including self-concept, learning preferences, motivation, and emotional dispositions such as anxiety, as well as by broader identity dimensions rooted in their roles within family structures, community affiliations, cultural backgrounds, and belief systems (Amerstorfer, 2020). These factors collectively influence how they engage with their heritage language. Learners and teachers each bring distinct cultural backgrounds (Mercer, 2016) and interact with their learning environments in mutually adaptive ways (Ushioda, 2015), shaped by dynamic exchanges among social, psychological, and environmental factors. These relationships are fluid, evolving over time (Amerstorfer, 2020).

CDST offers a powerful lens for examining the complexity and fluidity of heritage speakers' emotional experiences and social positioning within their SHL communities. It integrates cognitive, social, psychological, and environmental processes (Larsen-Freeman, 2017), allowing us to make sense of what may appear chaotic by exploring how individual traits interact with contextual factors. CDST is particularly well-suited for this investigation because it helps us understand how interconnected sub-systems, such as identity, emotion, and community engagement, function collectively, emphasizing that the behavior of the whole system cannot be understood by isolating its individual parts (Mercer, 2011). Another tenet of CDST that is essential to understanding SHL participants is the notion of agency as

a dimension of an individual's relation with the world and "derives from the ways in which we establish, lose, and re-establish meaningful interactions between ourselves and our environment" (Buhrmann & Di Paolo, 2017, p. 216). Apart from it being relational, it can also be situational. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) noted that agency can be impacted by the past, engagement with the present, and orientation to the future. This means that agency can be temporally situated and "both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations" (p. 970). Nonetheless, even though agency is involved with the past and the future, it can only ever be acted out in the present (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Furthermore, Mercer (2012) noted that "viewing agency holistically also implies considering it as temporally situated, connecting the dynamics of a person's ongoing life history, including their past and present experiences as well as their future goals, expectations and imaginations" (p. 57). Finally, there is the notion of multidimensionality of agency, which is seen to be interlinked with a range of intrapersonal factors such as her emotions, beliefs about language learning, self-belief, personality, and motivation. For the current study, agency concerns the emotional connection with participants' SHL, and how such a connection affects the decisions that multilinguals make in how they deploy their available language resources (Keysar et al., 2012).

2.4. The Current Study

While previous studies have explored heritage learners' identity (Parra, 2016; Zhou & Liu, 2022), belonging (Cervantes, 2021), and classroom-based emotions such as anxiety (Prada et al., 2020), there is limited research on how young adult Spanish heritage speakers in Texas, USA, perceive and experience their linguistic and cultural environments. In particular, little is known about how they navigate language knowledge and language use, their interpersonal relationships, their emotional positioning toward the Spanish language and their cultures, and factors that shape their sense of agency and engagement with the broader community. In fact, less is known about what factors outside the classroom impact HL speakers' desire or lack of desire to continue speaking the language in social contexts. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the narrative of the experience of two Spanish heritage speakers, offering a nuanced perspective on how language anxiety manifests in real-life contexts beyond instructional settings. By centering the participants' narratives in the analysis, this study aims to offer a deeper understanding of how two young adult heritage language speakers perceive and interpret their connection to Spanish and their communities. Thus, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Spanish heritage language speakers perceive and experience their linguistic and cultural environments in relation to language knowledge, language use, and interpersonal relationships?
2. How do Spanish heritage language speakers position themselves regarding the Spanish language and culture in the area? That is, how do heritage language speakers' emotions impact their agency and relationships with the community?

3. Methodology

3.1. Context

The study was conducted in Texas. According to Trujillo (2024), in Texas, subtractive views of bilingualism remain influential despite the state's linguistic diversity and large Spanish-speaking population. There is still a persistent belief that bilingualism may hinder development, particularly for children with developmental differences, leading some professionals to advise families to prioritize English at home. Because these providers are viewed as authorities, such recommendations can shape family language policies and weaken heritage language use, affecting intergenerational communication and cultural continuity.

These dynamics are reinforced not only by institutional structures but also by community attitudes. Although Spanish is widely spoken in Texas, English is often associated with academic and economic success. As a result, heritage language speakers may experience stigma or judgment in schools, professional environments, and even within their own communities, leading some to shift toward English while still facing expectations to maintain their HL as part of their cultural identity. Educational institutions and communities therefore play a key role in either reinforcing subtractive ideologies or supporting additive bilingualism and heritage language maintenance.

3.2. Participants

The current study includes two participants: Antonio, a male Spanish heritage speaker, and Laura, a female Spanish heritage speaker. Antonio is a 21-year-old third-generation SHL speaker from the southern part of Texas. He studies at a large public university in the Southwest of the United States. He is a receptive bilingual who predominantly speaks English but experiences difficulty producing Spanish accurately and fluently, the former in institutionalized educational settings, and the latter within their community. Laura, 22 years old, is a second-generation SHL speaker from northern Texas. She is not attending any university in the United States. She also shows a receptive bilingualism where she speaks English and understands Spanish but lacks oral fluency in it. She learned Spanish from her community. Both had language knowledge of Spanish, meaning that they understand the language but only received instruction in Spanish during high school.

These participants were chosen because they are heritage speakers of Spanish and did not pursue Spanish language study after high school. Both understand the language to an extent, but they prefer using English. Both had knowledge of Spanish, meaning they understand but do not produce it. Participation was voluntary, and the participants agreed to participate in the study, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board at a (Southwest) university in the United States. Participants were notified of their freedom to withdraw at any time during the data collection process. The participants' names and identifying information have been replaced with pseudonyms and pseudo-identifiers.

3.3. Instruments

This study adopts the Narrative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (NIPA) approach (Thomas, 2024) to investigate the lived experiences of Spanish HSs. NIPA is a methodology that draws on phenomenology, double hermeneutics, ideography, and narrative. Phenomenology explores how individuals make sense of their experiences as they perceive them (Smith et al., 2009). A central concept of this approach is also hermeneutics, which emphasizes that understanding is achieved through interpretation. This means that participants' narratives are examined considering their linguistic, cultural, and social contexts, with the acknowledgement that meaning is co-constructed between the participants and researchers (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The analysis is further shaped by double hermeneutics, the process through which participants interpret and articulate their experiences, which are then interpreted by the researcher (Smith et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). NIPA extends Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Grounded in phenomenology, particularly the works of Heidegger (1927) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), IPA centers on the subjective, situated nature of experience and the personal narratives through which individuals interpret the world. Narrative theorists such as Ricoeur (1983/1984) and Bruner (1991) argue that human experiences are most intelligible in story form, and Polkinghorne (1995) emphasizes that meaning is constructed as people organize experiences into coherent narratives. Building on this foundation, NIPA foregrounds narrative as both an object and a pathway to analysis, treating participants' stories as the primary site

where interpretation, meaning-making, and self-positioning within sociocultural contexts unfold. In doing so, NIPA offers a robust framework for exploring the complexity of lived experiences, here, the narrative dimensions of Spanish use as a minority language in the United States.

Participants' narratives were gathered through a semi-structured interview designed to prompt recollection and reflection on personal experiences. Questions were intentionally crafted to elicit detailed accounts of lived experiences while allowing flexibility in responses. Primary questions were open-ended and narrative-driven, encouraging participants to relate their life stories to their identity and their experiences as Spanish heritage speakers. Sample interview questions included how the participants reflected on their earliest memories of feeling uncomfortable using Spanish and considered whether such experiences had influenced how they use the language today, and in what ways.

The rationale for using a semi-structured interview was that qualitative interviews are typically open-ended, allowing participants the freedom to construct and express their experiences in a way that was unique to them. Furthermore, this approach enabled researchers to adapt to the participants' responses in real-time, fostering a more dynamic and responsive interaction (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The semi-structured interview started with brief introductions and simple background questions to help the participants feel comfortable before sharing their experiences in greater depth. Participants were then asked specific questions about their experiences with their heritage language. Based on their answers, follow-up questions were posed to encourage further elaboration. Ultimately, the primary goal was to conduct the interview independently of an established taxonomy of themes, allowing the participants' unique experiences to shape both the direction of the conversation and potential subsequent questions.

3.4. Procedure of the Interviews

Each participant completed two interviews. To minimize social stressors (e.g., multiple interviewers), a single researcher conducted the interview at the participant's preferred, comfortable location. Sessions lasted 40–90 min and were recorded on a mobile device. The first-round interviews were transcribed verbatim, checked by the research team, and then streamlined into a descriptive narrative from the raw transcripts following NIPA procedures (Thomas, 2024). A second interview was conducted to secure participants' approval of the first streamlined narrative and to further elaborate on questions that emerged during the development of the narrative.

3.5. Analysis

After producing a descriptive narrative and validating it with participants, the researchers rewrote the account in third person and then interpreted the dataset. Then, the researchers proceeded with an analysis of emergent themes from the participants' narratives. The texts were analyzed, and key themes were systematically coded to ensure reliability. All researchers agreed on the themes.

The analysis illustrated three main themes: (1) HL knowledge and language use, (2) emotional factors that hinder language knowledge and language use, and (3) self-positioning towards SHL and culture. As illustrated in Table 1 below, NIPA of the data unveiled several experiential themes and subthemes for our participants' experiences. Supplementary A and B (see Supplementary Materials) include the full narratives of the participants.

Table 1. A summary of the experiential themes of the descriptive narrative of the participants.

Theme	Code
Theme 1	HL knowledge and language use
1a.	Lack of opportunities to communicate (input and output)
1b.	Knowledge of the language (capacity to understand)
1c.	Ability to communicate
Theme 2	Emotional factors that hinder language knowledge and language use
2a.	Hostile interactions in the heritage language
2b.	Fear of judgement
2c.	Language anxiety
Theme 3	Self-positioning towards SHL and culture
3a.	(Dis)connection (language, culture, and community)
3b.	Acceptance of the situation
3c.	Self-exclusion from situations
3d.	Avoidance
3e.	Fluidity of belonging
3f.	Identity

4. Findings

As mentioned above, the three overarching themes, namely language knowledge and language use challenges, emotional barriers, and complex self-positioning, unfolded across the participants' narratives of their lived experiences as HL speakers of Spanish. Both Laura's and Antonio's stories reflected unique individual circumstances yet interconnected experiential elements. The following narratives illustrate how these themes unfold within each participant's context. The complex interplay of identity, belonging, and language knowledge that shape HL speakers' relationships with their HL and community emerges through these detailed accounts.

Both Laura and Antonio were raised in predominantly Spanish-speaking environments during early childhood. Although Spanish was Laura's first language, she perceives it as her second language, as she has few, if any, memories of using it during her formative years (Theme 1, subtheme 1b.),

Spanish never really felt like my language. I was told that my first words were in Spanish, but I honestly do not remember ever speaking it as a child. It just does not make sense to me that Spanish was my first language. If it were truly my first language, wouldn't it have stuck with me? (Laura, lines 1–5)

Antonio, on the other hand, was surrounded by Spanish during the first three years of his life. However, upon entering school, his exposure to English increased notably, and Spanish gradually began to recede from his daily life (Theme 1, subthemes 1a.),

For the first three years of my life, I spoke Spanish, and that's all I spoke, actually. But when I started going to school, we only learned English. Spanish wasn't really promoted, so I didn't get to practice it, and I guess after that I just kind of lost the language entirely. (Antonio, lines 1–3)

During the school period, Antonio spent considerable time at his grandfather's ranch. Although his grandfather was a Spanish speaker, he viewed their interactions as an opportunity to practice his English with Antonio. As a result, Antonio had limited opportunities to engage with him in Spanish (Theme 1, subtheme 1a.),

Whenever I was at his ranch, we would only speak English. Everyone else spoke Spanish to me, but I always replied in English because it was easier for me, and

everyone understood. I could understand Spanish, but I felt like I could never find the words fast enough, so I just stuck to speaking English because it was more convenient. (Antonio, lines 21–24)

Laura's exposure to Spanish was rekindled when she began high school. Laura reflected that earlier exposure (i.e., had her mother spoken Spanish to her during childhood) might have facilitated a more natural and effortless acquisition of the language (Theme 1, subtheme 1a.):

My mom mainly spoke to me in English when I was young. . . As I grew older, it seemed like she started speaking more Spanish, which felt odd. I would think to myself, "Why did she not speak to me more in Spanish when I was younger?" By the time I was in high school, she used more Spanish at home, but by then, I was already accustomed to using English only. (Laura, lines 6–11)

Both Laura and Antonio enrolled in Spanish classes during high school. They did not find the coursework particularly challenging, as it focused primarily on basic grammar and vocabulary. However, Laura observed a noticeable difference (Theme 1, subtheme 1b.):

We learned basic greetings, the alphabet, numbers, and some grammar. I noticed, however, that the Spanish we learned at school was quite different from the one my mother spoke at home. The Spanish we learned at school was formal, while my mother's was casual and full of slang. (Laura, lines 12–15)

Despite belonging to a Spanish-speaking community, both Laura and Antonio emphasized the limited opportunities they had to use Spanish in their everyday lives (Theme 1, subtheme 1a.). Antonio noted that his interactions with Spanish speakers were largely confined to brief encounters, such as visits to the grocery store:

We did not talk much to people in the community unless it was for business, like at the grocery store. We had neighbors who would wave at us, but that was it. I did not talk to anybody outside of customer service or my neighbors. There is a big Spanish-speaking community in that area, but I would not say that I speak Spanish. (Antonio, lines 14–17)

Laura noted that she struggled with the idea of using Spanish over a prolonged period of time (Theme 2, subtheme 2c.),

When it comes to forming complete thoughts or asking questions [in Spanish], I struggle. I think a big part of the problem is that I am just not used to it. I have never spent a full day speaking only Spanish, and the idea of doing so feels overwhelming. (Laura, lines 48–51)

Antonio recounted an experience in which he wished he had stronger Spanish proficiency. He had a positive rapport with a coworker, but his limited ability to communicate in Spanish hindered the development of a deeper relationship (Theme 1, subtheme 1c.),

One time [in which] I really wanted to speak Spanish was with a coworker who only spoke Spanish. He was a nice guy, but we couldn't communicate well. I regret not talking to him more. There were times we were alone, and I wished I could hold a conversation with him, but I just could not. (Antonio, lines 63–65)

Laura described similar experiences in the workplace where she wished she had stronger Spanish skills. While living in a town with a large Spanish-speaking population, her inability to communicate effectively in Spanish created challenges in her professional interactions (Theme 1, subtheme 1c.),

There were moments when I wished I knew Spanish better. When I lived in El Paso for three months, right on the border of Mexico, I constantly encountered people who only spoke Spanish [. . .] Sometimes people would ask me for help

in Spanish. I could not understand them, and they could not understand me.
(Laura, lines 38–41)

In the few instances when Laura and Antonio attempted to speak Spanish with their close and extended families, their efforts were often met with criticism (Theme 2, subtheme 2a.) or judgment, which discouraged further use of the language (Theme 2, subtheme 2b.). Antonio characterized his family's attempts to teach him Spanish as "intimidating":

My family tried to teach me later in my childhood, but it was intimidating [. . .] They would just be mad at me for not being good enough. It did not feel like my parents ever encouraged me to speak Spanish. Instead, they would punish me when I messed up. . . They would make me feel bad for not knowing Spanish, thinking that would motivate me. Well, it did not. . . They just would intimidate me to learn Spanish. (Antonio, lines 56–62)

Laura expressed similar feelings regarding her interactions with family members in Spanish. She reported feeling judged whenever she made mistakes, which contributed to her discomfort using the language (Theme 2, subtheme 2b.). Notably, she emphasized that even if her Spanish proficiency improved, she believed the judgment would persist, suggesting that the issue extended beyond linguistic accuracy to broader familial or cultural dynamics (Theme 2, subtheme 2a.),

I often felt judged and sometimes degraded by my family for my inability to speak Spanish fluently, no matter how hard I tried. Even my sister, who has been studying Spanish up to the graduate level. . . still faces criticism from one of my aunts, who still tells her she does not know how to speak Spanish. It feels like no matter how much effort we put in, it is never enough for them. (Laura, lines 30–34)

These negative experiences while attempting to learn and use Spanish fostered a persistent fear of judgment (Theme 2, subtheme 2b.) that shaped their avoidance of communicating in their HL (Theme 3, subtheme 3d.). Antonio chose to exclude himself from conversations with Spanish-speaking family members due to prior discouraging interactions concerning his language proficiency (Theme 3, subtheme 3d.). Although he expressed feelings of guilt for not engaging with them, his attempts to do so were met with further criticism, reinforcing his reluctance to speak Spanish:

I do not talk to them [my family] . . . There is one time I felt bad for not talking to them, so I tried to speak to my uncle in Spanish, and it did not turn out so well.
(Antonio, lines 43–44)

Laura similarly noted that her family's criticism of her Spanish (Theme 2, subtheme 2a.) led her to withdraw from situations where she might feel linguistically vulnerable (Theme 3, subtheme 3d.).

I know my family relationships would probably be better if I were fluent, but the pressure and the criticism make it harder for me to want to learn. Sometimes, it feels easier to just exclude myself from conversations rather than struggle to find the right words. (Laura, lines 55–57)

Antonio's sense of disconnection from his community is closely tied to the intrinsic relationship between language and culture. Within his community, speaking Spanish is regarded as a key means of preserving cultural identity and continuity as a minority group. Consequently, not speaking the language is often perceived as a loss of a significant part of that cultural heritage (Theme 3, subtheme 3a.):

I think people in my hometown see speaking Spanish as a way of keeping the culture alive. If you do not speak it, they think you are becoming too Americanized.

They look down on you if you can't speak it. . . My Spanish is not good enough to be accepted by my community. (Antonio, lines 78–80, 91)

Although Antonio continues to engage with other aspects of his cultural heritage, he feels that these efforts are insufficient for full acceptance within his cultural community (Theme 3, subtheme 3a.). This perception reinforces his sense of not belonging and deepens his feelings of social disconnection:

It feels like not speaking Spanish means you don't belong. I still love Mexican food, music, and dancing, but it doesn't matter to them. Even though I have all other aspects of the culture, speaking Spanish is what makes you part of the community, and without it, I feel disconnected. (Antonio, lines 86–88)

Both Laura and Antonio expressed similar sentiments regarding the idea of “re-learning” Spanish (Theme 3, subtheme 3e.). They identified the prospect of having children as a strong motivation to improve their own proficiency and to pass the language on to the next generation. Antonio, in particular, emphasized that he would not want his child to undergo the same negative experiences he faced with his family concerning language use and judgment:

The one thing that would motivate me to continue using Spanish would be that if I have a kid, I don't want them growing up having to go through what I went through. (Antonio, lines 121–123)

I want my children to be bilingual and speak Spanish to communicate with my family, and hopefully at that point I'll be doing that as well. (Laura, lines 44–46)

Despite being a member of his SHL community, Antonio's limited Spanish proficiency has created a sense of distance between himself and his social environment. This linguistic barrier contributes to his perception of being an outsider, i.e., both in the eyes of others and in his own self-concept (Theme 3, subtheme 3b.),

I just understand that I'm not part of the community. I feel like in my eyes, I know I'm an outsider, like I don't belong there. Because of that, it makes it easier just to tell myself that it's not them, it's me. (Antonio, lines 99–102)

Similar to Antonio, Laura has come to accept her position as an outsider within her cultural community due to her limited ability to speak Spanish (Theme 3, subtheme 3b.). She has resigned herself to the current state of her relationship with Spanish as a heritage language, acknowledging the distance it has created between her and her cultural identity:

At this point, I have accepted that I might always feel like an outsider when it comes to Spanish. . . I wish things were different, but for now, this is where I stand with my heritage language. (Laura, lines 54–58)

Antonio also expressed a similar perspective regarding his relationship with Spanish as a heritage language. While he believes that it is possible for him to learn the language, he feels that external factors, such as his accent, would still subject him to judgment from members of his community (Theme 2, subtheme 2b.). This perception contributes to his hesitation and reinforces his sense of exclusion (Theme 3, subtheme 3c.),

I lost all confidence speaking Spanish, so I just don't bother speaking it anymore. I mean, I know I can. Sometimes I could actually speak sentences, but, at the end of the day, even if I do say the right words, I'm still going to sound like I don't speak Spanish. That's still enough for people to give me those looks. So, no matter what I do, I'm stuck in this spot. (Antonio, lines 107–110)

Throughout themes 1 and 2, the two participants recounted their lived experiences with Spanish as HL, tracing their trajectories from childhood to adulthood. From an early age, experiences of judgment from family and community members regarding their HL

proficiency contributed to a growing sense of disconnection from both the language and the associated cultural practices. Nevertheless, despite these negative interactions and feelings of alienation, both participants continued to identify Spanish as their heritage language (Theme 3, subtheme 3e.). Their narratives underscore the complex, evolving, and deeply personal nature of heritage language relationships.

5. Discussion

Adopting an ecological and complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) perspective, we interpret participants' experiences as emerging from interacting subsystems: linguistic, emotional, familial, educational, and community-based, situated in specific spatial and temporal contexts. Their family and community environments and their histories with Spanish influenced how they made decisions about the language in the present and how they imagined their futures with it. From this view, their perspectives on heritage language development arose from a relational, context-dependent process rather than a linear path. Their agency, when, how, and with whom they use Spanish, is dynamic and multidimensional, shaped by prior experiences, current affordances and constraints, and projected futures. Self-concept, motivation, emotions, and family and community identities come together in an ecological configuration that continuously shapes and is shaped by their HL practices and sense of belonging.

5.1. RQ1: Perceptions of Linguistic and Cultural Environments

The findings of this study revealed a profound tension rooted in linguistic performance and external judgment. For both participants, Spanish was not promoted at home, nor after they entered high school, meaning that reduced early input and a lack of continued schooling resulted in later abandonment of the HL. This suggests that early input interruption that is embedded in a specific spatial and temporal context may have impacted long-term language knowledge. This aligns with previous research showing that when bilingual input is reduced at an early stage, language loss is more likely (Montrul, 2023). Additionally, the participants' linguistic trajectories demonstrate how HL development is emergent and dynamically interconnected with its surrounding ecological environment, echoing Shin's (2017) emphasis on the role of schools and community structures in supporting HL use.

These findings also reflect Connaughton-Crean and Duibhir's (2017) argument that HL challenges are shaped by the broader sociolinguistic ecology, particularly when daily interactions, schooling, and literacy development occur primarily in English. Due to these restricted ecological contexts of HL use, participants experienced uneven exposure and limited opportunities for sustained engagement. This supports studies showing that limited use leads to structural deviations from monolingual norms and underdevelopment of literacy and the academic prestigious variety (Cervantes, 2021; Kupisch & Rothman, 2018).

Importantly, the participants' emotional responses were tied to how they positioned themselves within interrelated personal, family, and community subsystems. Laura and Antonio narrated emotional discomfort resulting from judgment within their own families and communities. Rather than receiving encouragement, they internalized criticism, resulting in anxiety and avoidance, which demonstrated how self-concept, emotional dispositions, and motivation interact dynamically with linguistic environments.

Experiences of exclusion from conversations revealed how participants' identities were shaped not only by linguistic ability but also by broader identity dimensions rooted in family roles, cultural expectations, and community norms. This supports prior work showing that HL speakers' relationships with community members influence the quality and frequency of HL interactions (Jee, 2022; Alshihry, 2024). Our findings extend this work by highlighting the emotional quality of input as a crucial, yet often overlooked,

factor. A key source of anxiety arose from the mismatch between school Spanish and home Spanish. HL speakers are typically judged at school for vernacular features (Román et al., 2019), but in the current study, Laura stated that her sister's Spanish, as well as hers, which was learned in instructional settings, was criticized by her aunt. This dual marginalization reflects the ecological complexity of HL development, where learners must navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting, linguistic norms across contexts.

5.2. RQ2: Positioning, Emotion, Agency, and Relationships with the Community

The experiences of Laura and Antonio revealed a persistent tension between linguistic performance, community expectations, and identity. Their narratives demonstrate that feelings of belonging are situational, relational, and shaped by interactions within interconnected ecological subsystems (family, school, community). For them, maintaining Spanish was intrinsically linked to cultural identity; limited proficiency was interpreted as becoming too 'Americanized,' contributing to their self-positioning as outsiders. This aligns with research showing that proficiency, identity, and belonging are intertwined (Phinney, 2003; Alshihry, 2024).

Emotional factors profoundly impacted the participants' agency, understood here as emergent, dynamic, and influenced by the past, present, and orientations to the future. Although they reported relatively low anxiety in the classroom, supporting Tallon's (2009) findings, their anxiety increased in community settings, where negative interactions led to avoidance behaviors. Their fear of being judged for "broken" Spanish (Prada et al., 2020) constrained their willingness to communicate, demonstrating how agency is affected by self-beliefs, emotions, and perceived language knowledge, all of which are central intrapersonal dimensions shaping multilingual behavior. Both participants' HLA were intertwined with their sense of identity and autonomy. As dynamic systems theory suggests, agency is multidimensional, shaped by emotions, motivation, personality, past experiences, and anticipated future possibilities. For Laura and Antonio, repeated criticism disrupted their agency, producing a pattern of withdrawal that reduced opportunities to use their HL in real-world ecological contexts. Their linguistic resources remained available, but their agentive choices, whether to speak, when, and with whom, were shaped by emotional histories and social pressures.

Ultimately, both participants resolved this tension by accepting their self-positioning as outsiders. This resignation functioned as a coping mechanism, allowing them to navigate the persistent dissonance produced by community judgment. Antonio stated that he felt he was "not a part of the community," while Laura shared that she had accepted that she "might always feel like an outsider when it comes to Spanish." These insights reflect how agency is not static but fluid, influenced by emotional experiences, relational dynamics, and perceived future possibilities.

6. Implications

This study offers conceptual implications in relation to data from two HLSs from Texas, USA. The main finding that HLA is deeply rooted within "fear of judgment" stems from factors outside of the classroom that provide further support for conceptualizing HLA. Additionally, the theme of hostile language input necessitates the framing of these experiences as language shaming (Pascual y Cabo & Rivera-Marín, 2021). These experiences stem from pervasive monolingual language standards that may lead to social marginalization of HL varieties, which may threaten HSS' sense of belonging. The study also highlighted that simple exposure to the language is insufficient. It showed that the nature of linguistic input is critical. Implications suggest requiring a nuanced examination of input. Moreover, the observation that both Laura and Antonio chose to totally avoid communication reinforced

that avoidance behavior is a primary manifestation of HLA in relation to low willingness to communicate.

Another important implication of the study is the critical need for community and familial intervention programs to address negative linguistic input. The findings strongly indicate that negative feedback, criticism, and punitive responses from family members and the wider community can create significant emotional barriers that hinder language knowledge and language use. Therefore, there is a necessity to develop educational resources and training focused on sensitizing parents and older generations within the heritage language community. These experiences are not merely individual or interpersonal but are shaped by broader linguistic ideologies, which are socially constructed beliefs about language that assign value to certain varieties while stigmatizing others (Reagan, 2009). In multimodal communities such as those in Texas, dominant language ideologies often privilege English and position Spanish as less valuable or less legitimate, which can influence how family members and community members perceived and respond to heritage language use.

At the same time, fostering language loyalty, a commitment to maintaining the heritage language as a core part of one's cultural identity, can serve as a protective factor against language shift and loss (Lee, 2014). When families and communities promote supportive attitudes and affirm the value of Spanish, they help strengthen heritage speakers' emotional connection to the language and encourage its continued use across generations. Therefore, educational resources and training programs aimed at raising awareness among parents, older generations, and community members are essential to counteract negative linguistic ideologies and promote environments that support heritage language maintenance and positive identity development beyond formal educational settings. These ideologies, shaped by historical, political, and social contexts, may lead to corrective or judgmental practices that discourage heritage speakers' engagement with the HL. Therefore, there is a clear need to develop educational resources and training programs aimed at raising awareness among parents, older generations, and community members about the impact of linguistic ideologies on heritage language maintenance and identity. By promoting more informed and supportive perspectives, community- and family-centered initiatives can help reduce stigma and create environments that foster positive emotional experiences and sustain engagement with the heritage language, even beyond instructional settings.

7. Conclusions and Limitations

This study investigated the challenges heritage speakers face through the lens of Spanish heritage speakers living in the United States. The participants narrated their lived experiences acquiring Spanish as a first language and using it at home, alongside the majority language, English, at school, and in the workplace. Using NIPA as a helpful tool to examine their narratives in depth, three main themes emerged: (1) lack of positive interactions in the HL, (2) language anxiety and fear of judgment, and (3) a sense of disconnection. The findings indicate that exposure alone is insufficient; negative experiences in a language can hinder development and foster disconnection. Moreover, although the source of anxiety might differ from those experienced in the language classroom, these heritage speakers experienced language anxiety in their HL even when they did not report anxiety in their classroom contexts. The study also found that the participants chose to exclude themselves from situations where they had to use their HL. This acceptance of their position as outsiders created an escape from the reality of their situation. By acknowledging these affective dimensions, educators, families, and community members can play a critical role in helping students build coping strategies that reduce stress and foster a more inclusive,

supportive environment, one that promotes not only academic success, but also personal and linguistic growth (Young, 1991).

By design, this study centers on two heritage speakers living in the United States to provide rich, contextualized accounts of experience. The emphasis is on depth and analytic generalization, not population-level claims. Future research should also consider language input outside academia, where exposure may occur under hostile or negative conditions that constrain development.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/languages11030059/s1>, Supplementary A: Antonio’s Narrative; Supplementary B: Laura’s Narrative.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

HL	Heritage Language
SHL	Spanish Heritage Language
HS	Heritage Speaker
HLA	Heritage Language Anxiety
FLA	Foreign Language Anxiety
NIPA	Narrative Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
WTC	Willingness to Communicate

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