

# Exploring the Heritage Status of Korean Language

## Learner

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### Abstract

Despite its strong relevance in the contemporary US, research on heritage languages is still at the early development stage (Draper & Hicks, 2000). Moreover, most research in this topic within the US has been done in relation to Spanish. The present study was an initial attempt to empirically integrate the demographic and the heritage language status of Korean language learners. As the result of the systematic classification based on the learners' ethnic/linguistic background information, the three criteria of heritage status of learners were examined: high-, moderate, and none-heritage status. This study has significance for its unique contribution to the field of heritage language and helps extend the heritage language paradigm to less commonly taught languages.

### Introduction

More than 175 languages other than English are spoken in the US (Brecht & Ingold, 2002). Ironically, while the number of residents speaking a language other than English at home is on the rise, their shift to English dominance appears to be proceeding even faster. Much of that bilingualism appears to be subtractive rather than additive. That is, the acquisition of the second language (English) replaces the first language that is spoken at home (Romaine, 1995). Indeed, English proficiency among first and second generation Americans are generally accompanied by loss of heritage language competence (Valdes, 2001). This trend away from heritage language competence and toward host culture language is quite evident in Korean immigrant families (Cho, 2000; Cho & Krashen, 1998, Jo, 2001; Lee, 2002). There is a growing recognition among language professionals and policymakers that the nation's non-English languages and their speakers are valuable resources for assuring diverse types of knowledge and values (Brecht and Ingold, 2002; Wang and Green, 2001). Heritage languages in the U.S. must not be permitted to become obsolete.

What is striking is the way in which the distribution of non-English speaking residents of the US does not fully correspond to current foreign language teaching trends in the country. Of the 162 foreign languages for which enrollment data were reported in recent survey (Welles, 2004), Korean was marked as the fifteenth. Although only 0.4% of all modern FL students (5,211) were studying Korean during the fall of 2002, the number of students studying Korean at US universities has increased by more than three thousand percent since 1960; more recent increases include a doubling of Korean language learners (KLL hereafter) between 1990 and 2002 (Welles, 2004). Therefore, while overall number of students taking Korean language courses is still comparatively small, enrollments are rising. In addition to the report on how many US college and university students studying each modern FL, it would be interesting to further examine demographic information on who studies each language, especially those comparatively less commonly taught languages. Little attempt to integrate these two perspectives—that is, the demographic and the heritage language status of learner—has been made with respect to learners of such languages.

Besides complex issues regarding identity loss and recovery, it is known that heritage language learners possess a variety of distinctive characteristics, needs and expectations for learning the target language that differ dramatically from those of non-heritage learners. Nonetheless, little empirical research actually examines who are heritage language learners and non-heritage learners at the university level.

The problem that prompted this study is twofold: (1) There is still little attention paid to HL learners, even though the number of heritage language learners exceeds that of foreign language learners in some school and college language departments (Peyton, Ranard & McGinnis, 2001), and (2) there is little consensus on what it is meant by the term heritage language and heritage language learner (Kondo-Brown, 2001). Ostensive definitions of heritage language encompass all non-English languages for some authorities (Valdes, 2001; Wiley, 2001), while the concept of heritage language is reserved for ancestral languages for others (Fishman, 2001). In this study, heritage language is defined as the language of one's home or ethnic community that is not the majority of high status language in a particular national context. As it relates to the term heritage language, defining the term heritage language learners is not an easy task. One thing clear is that considering the nature of the American heritage language-learning population, an attempt to define heritage language learners should be made in a multivariate and nuanced manner. The present study, then, is an initial attempt to empirically investigate the complex ethnic and social identities of Korean language learners and define the heritage and non-

heritage language learners. The study administered questionnaires to a larger group of students to ascertain Korean language learners' prior exposure to Korean language and culture, identity entailments with the target language.

## Method

### ***Subjects***

Data were collected from a total of 141 students who were enrolled in the Korean courses in Korean language programs conducted at two Carnegie Research I universities located in the Southeastern U.S. during fall semester of 2004.

### ***Instrument***

A learner questionnaire used in this study to provide information on Korean language learners' background information consisted of two: (A) personal background and (B) experiences with the target language.

## Results

The following sections discuss the distributions of participants by age, class year, gender, major, GPA, grade expected, nationality, birthplace, first language, parental birthplace and first language, Korean proficiency, previous exposure to Korean, and heritage status across institutions.

### ***Demographics of Learners***

The 141 participants in this study ranged in age from 18 to 30 (mean = 20.42, median = 22, mode = 19 and SD = 2.05). There were 22 first year students, 53 second year students, 34 third year students, and 32 fourth year students. The distribution of self-reported gender was 52.5% (n=74) males and 47.5 (n=67) females. A wide range of majors was represented. Students self-reported 38 different major categories including "undecided." The single largest major category was "engineering" major (22%). The second most popular major was business (13%) (including finance, management, accounting, international business). Ninety one participants (64.5%) reported that their GPA was 3.0 or above. Almost all (98.6%) expected B or higher grade from the Korean class they were taking.

110 (78%) of the participants were US citizens and another 21 (14.9%) were permanent residents. Only 10 participants were holding a foreign student visa, so-called F-1, and all of them were Korea citizens. Eighty-six participants (61%) were

born in the US and 50 (35.5%) in Korea. The 5 (3.5%) participants who were born outside other than Korea and the US were from Japan (2), China (1), England (1), and Argentina (1). Eighty-six participants (61%) were born in the US and 50 (35.5%) in Korea. The 5 (3.5%) participants who were born outside other than Korea and the US were from Japan (2), China (1), England (1), and Argentina (1). Of the 50 participants who were born in Korea, the average length of stay in the U.S. was 11.3 years ( $SD = 5.40$ ). The range was 2-20 years, while the median was 11.5 years and the mode 13 years. Eighty six participants were born in the US and of the remaining 55 participants, the average age of arrival in the U.S. was 9.1 ( $SD = 6.26$ ). The modal age was 7, the median 8, and the range 0.2-26. To the question about participant's first language, 63 participants (44.7%) responded that their first language was Korean, whereas 71 (50.4%) participants said that their first language was English. The remaining seven (5%) participants reported a variety of language as their first language. Those miscellaneous first languages were: Chinese (4), Vietnamese (1), Thai (1), and Spanish & Kiswahili (1). Among those participants who answered that their native language was Korean, two also marked Chinese as a first language and one claimed Spanish as a first language as well as Korean.

In self-assessing their proficiency in Korean, participants rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Very well" in terms of comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The average Korean proficiency across the four skills was 3.12 ( $SD = 1.12$ ). The mode was 3, the median 3, and the range 1-5. Over half (53.2%) of the participants said they understood Korean "well" or "very well", whereas nearly a third (32.8%) reported that they understood Korean "a little" or "not at all." In contrast, only about one-quarter (23.4%) of the participants said that they wrote Korean "well" or "very well", whereas 46.1% of the participants said that they write Korean "not at all" or just "a little." Thirty-nine percent of the participants said that they spoke or read Korean "little: or "not at all." Similarly, just over one-third of the participants reported that they spoke and read Korean "well" or "very well", respectively.

### ***Heritage Status of Learners***

An attempt was made to determine learner language heritage status in a multivariate and nuanced manner. Three personal information items from the survey questionnaire were selected and compiled on the assumption that they collectively reflected learner's heritage. The items were (1) first language backgrounds of the parents, (2) parental birthplace, and (3) patterns of Korean language use in childhood and adolescence.

**Parental First Language**

The Korean first language background of participants’ parents is shown in Table 1. Thirty-seven participants (26.2%) had both non-L1 Korean-speaking father and non-L1 Korean-speaking mother: among these, a Spanish father and a Spanish/Kiswahili mother (1); Arabic father and English mother (1); English father and Greek mother (1); Chinese father and mother (4); English father and Chinese mother (1); Thai father and mother (1); Urdu father and mother (1); Vietnamese father and mother (1); and both English father and mother (26). The participant whose father was born in Japan and whose mother was born in the US reported that English was the first language of both parents. Eleven participants (7.8%) had a-L1English-speaking father and a-L1 Korean-speaking mother; and one participant (0.7%) had a native English-speaking father and a native Korean-speaking mother. Of the total of 141 participants, 92 (65.2%) participants had two native Korean-speaking parents. There was one participant whose father and mother were both born in Korea, but their first language was Chinese.

*Table 1*  
*Cross-Tabulation of Maternal and Paternal L1, Classified as Korean or not Korean*

		Mother’s L1		
		Not Korean	Korean	Total
Father’s L1	Not Korean	37 (26.2%)	11 (7.8%)	48 (34.0%)
	Korean	1 (0.7%)	92 (65.2%)	93 (66.0%)
Total		38 (27.0%)	103 (73.0%)	141 (100%)

**Parental Birthplace**

Parental birthplaces are shown in Table 2. Ninety-three participants (66%) had two Korean-born parents and 24 participants (17%) had both parents born in the U.S. 3 participants had an American mother and a non-American father (Israeli, Japanese, Korean), whereas 13 participants had an American father and a non-American mother (Chinese, Greek, English, and 10 Koreans). One participant had a Korean mother and an English father. The other 7 participants had parents whose birthplace was neither Korea nor the US. Among these, the parents’ ethnic background varied: Jamaica, Panama, Pakistan, Burma, Malaysia, Vietnam, Taiwan, China, and Thailand.

*Table 2  
Cross-Tabulation of Maternal and Paternal Birthplaces Classified as Korea or not Korea*

		Mother’s Birthplace		Total
		Not Korea	Korea	
Father’s Birthplace	Not Korea	36	11	47
	Korea	(25.5%)	(7.8%)	(33.3%)
	Korea	1	93	94
		(0.7%)	(66.0%)	(66.7%)
Total		37	104	141
		(26.2%)	(73.8%)	(100%)

**Previous Exposure to Korean**

The information concerning the participants’ exposure to Korean language in the past was elicited and presented in Table 3. Notable patterns among those participants who “usually” used Korean for communication were observed. Within the family, these well exposed youths used Korean predominantly in communicating with parents/grandparents, whereas they used Korean less prevalently with their siblings. Those exposed to Korean in their youth tended to use Korean in communicating with

their mothers more so than with their fathers; and their overall use of Korean seemed to decline as they grew older. In contrast, of those participants who “sometimes” used Korean in communicating, there was a trend toward increased reliance on Korean as they entered their adolescence. Especially, within social contexts, the occasional users of Korean with neighbors, teachers, classmates, and friends dramatically increased. On the other hand, those participants who never used Korean in childhood rarely changed from that pattern.

Considering the distribution of rating mean scores of the receptive/productive use of Korean in the past (childhood and adolescence) across the participants, participants can be divided into two distinctive groups in terms of their language use history: active and passive.

*Table 3*  
*Distribution of Two Language Use Groups*

Language Use	Frequency	Percent
Passive	52	36.9
Active	89	63.1
Total	141	100.0

Tripartite divisions of parental first language data and birthplace data (recoded as 0 (neither parent), 1 (either parent), or 2 (both parents)) was collated with prior exposure to Korean language (recoded as 0 (passive) and 1 (active)) based on the mean scores that were distributed in a bimodal fashion. Table 4 displays the distribution of students into the 18 possible combinations of these three indices.

*Table 4*  
*Distribution of KLL Participants’ Tripartite Indices*

Category	Parents’ L1	Parents’ birthplace	Language use	N
1	0	0	0	
2	0	0	1	

3	0	1	0	
4	0	1	1	
5	0	2	0	
6	0	2	1	
7	1	0	0	
8	1	0	1	
9	1	1	0	
10	1	1	1	
11	1	2	0	
12	1	2	1	
13	2	0	0	
14	2	0	1	
15	2	1	0	
16	2	1	1	
17	2	2	0	
18	2	2	1	

In terms of relative positioning along a non-heritage/heritage continuum, the six categories would be arranged in Figure 1, as follows:

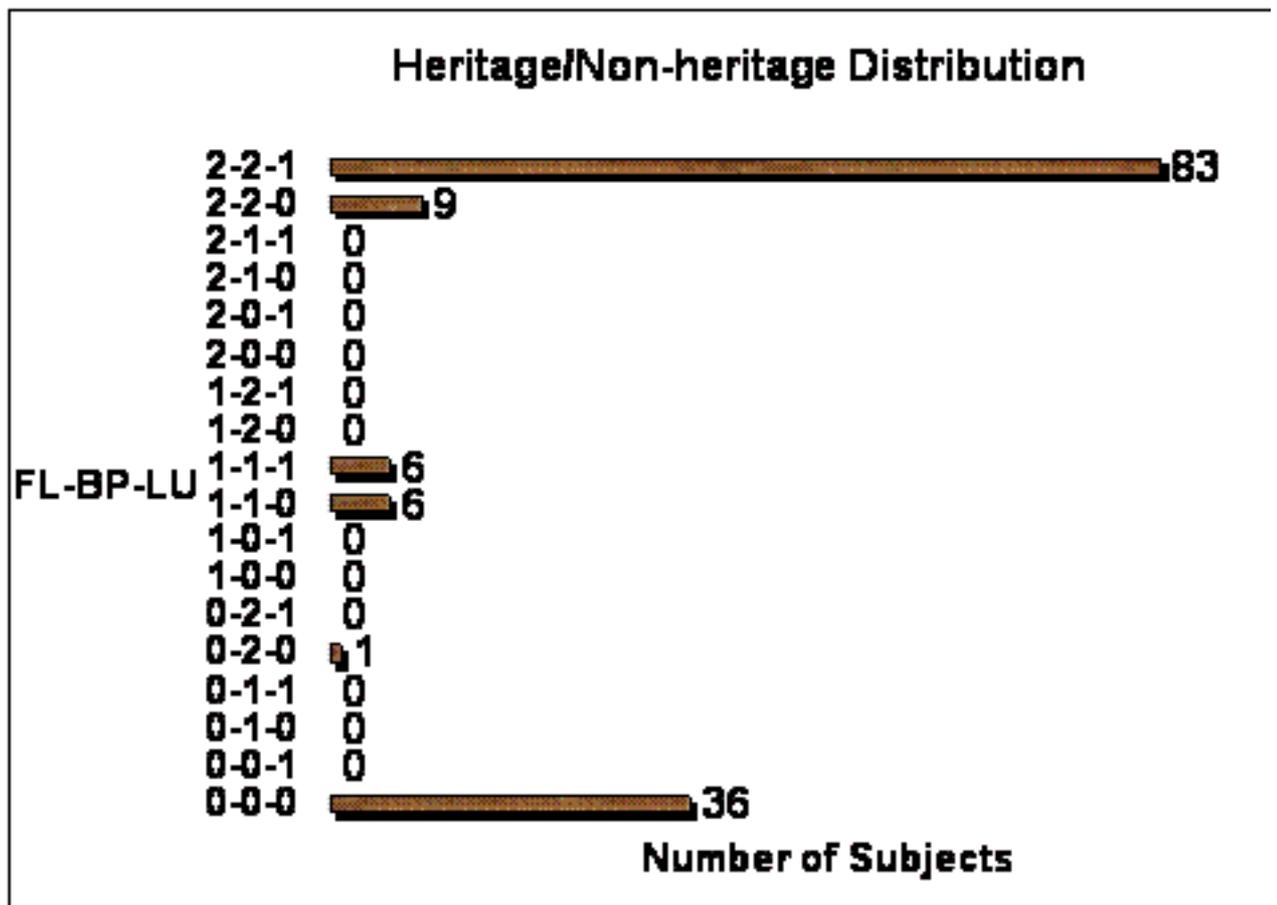


Figure 1.

*Continuum of Heritage and Non-Heritage of KLLs*

Each participant fell into one of the three heritage groups: none, moderate, and high-heritage. The none-heritage group was comprised of 37 learners (26.2%) of the total sample who had a passive Korean language use in their youths and their parents were not native speakers of Korean were born outside Korea. Also, it includes one learner of a passive Korean language use whose parents were born in Korea, but with no proficiency in Korean. The moderate-heritage group was comprised of 21 (14.9%) learners who had one parent born in Korea as a native speaker of Korean. Six of them had active Korean language use history and the other six had passive language use history. Nine of these learners had both parents born in Korea as native speakers of Korean but reported that they had been passive Korean language users in childhood and adolescence. The third heritage status group is the largest, high-heritage, comprised of 83 learners (58.9%) with both parents born in Korea as native speakers of Korean and with active Korean language use histories.

## Conclusion

Heritage language status is likely to exert very powerful effects on L2 learners' language learning that may affect heritage language learners differently than non-heritage language learners such as learner outcomes and their initial motivations for learning Korean as an additional language.

In this study, in addition to demographic variables of interest that were often investigated in previous second language acquisition/foreign language learning research such as age, gender, first language, major, parental first language and birthplace, self-assessed language proficiency (e.g., Jo, 2001; Kondo-Brown, 2001; Lee, 2002) the variable unique to this study, heritage language status of Korean language learners was empirically investigated.

By far, within the context of the American Korean-learning population, the largest group of Korean heritage language learners is made up of Korean-Americans, both those who were born in the US and raised by their Korean-speaking parents and those who were born in Korea but immigrated to the US, often at a young age (Silva, 2004). Besides these learners, a small number of learners who are of mixed parentage (Korean and non-Korean) may be considered heritage learners. In this regards, this study considered three personal factors on the assumption that they collectively reflected learner's heritage status. The three factors were (1) first language backgrounds of the parents, (2) parental birthplace, and (3) patterns of Korean language use in childhood and adolescence. In this study, the term heritage language learners was understood within the following three levels of intensity: (1) high- heritage language learners with active Korean language use histories who had both parents born in Korea as native speakers of Korean, (2) moderate- heritage language learners who had one parent born in Korea as a native speaker of Korean, and (3) no- heritage language learners who had passive Korean language use histories in their youths, and their parents born outside Korea were not native speakers of Korean.

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