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Editorial

Advances in Heritage Russian Bilingualism Across the Lifespan: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Research on Russian as a heritage language has played a central role in the development of heritage language studies. Broadly defined, a heritage language is a minority language spoken at home or within a particular community, which is learned before or alongside the dominant language of the larger society and is often superseded by it both in use and proficiency. Building on a rich legacy of linguistic scholarship on Russian, heritage Russian has emerged as one of the most extensively investigated empirical domains within the field of heritage bilingualism. Over the past three decades, studies of heritage Russian have not only deepened our understanding of Russian as a global language but have also informed broader theoretical debates on the nature of heritage grammars, the interaction between linguistic knowledge and bilingual experience, and the relationship between language structure, input, and multilingual environments.

Several factors have contributed to the prominent role of heritage Russian in this rapidly expanding field. Heritage Russian is spoken across a wide range of multilingual settings, including long-established immigrant communities in North America and Israel, more recent diasporic communities across Europe, and emerging multilingual populations shaped by contemporary migration (Brehmer, 2021). These diverse sociolinguistic contexts encompass speakers with different migration histories, educational experiences, language dominance profiles, and patterns of language use, creating exceptional opportunities to investigate how bilingual grammars develop under varying conditions of input and language contact. At the same time, Russian itself has featured prominently in contemporary linguistics, providing researchers with a robust theoretical and descriptive foundation against which bilingual outcomes can be evaluated. The combination of extensive linguistic documentation, methodological innovation, and diverse bilingual populations has established heritage Russian as one of the principal empirical domains for advancing broader theories of bilingualism.

Research on heritage Russian has contributed substantially to several major areas of heritage language studies. Morphosyntactic investigations have advanced our understanding of grammatical resilience and vulnerability under conditions of reduced input, while studies of syntax–discourse and syntax–semantics interfaces have provided important evidence regarding the representation of structural dependencies and the licensing of abstract interpretative choices in the bilingual mind (see Laleko, 2024; Polinsky, 2018). Experimental psycholinguistic research has further expanded the field by examining real-time sentence processing, lexical access, predictive mechanisms, and the cognitive architecture of bilingual language use (see Ivanova-Sullivan, 2023). Some studies have shown that heritage speakers deploy anticipatory mechanisms based on morphosyntactic cues, but



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that their prediction strategies may be modulated by input frequency, reliability of formal cues, and cross-linguistic interference (Fuchs & Sekerina, 2025). These findings align with broader models suggesting that predictive processing in bilinguals is gradient and experience-dependent.

Beyond experimental research, corpus-based investigations and variationist sociolinguistics have demonstrated that heritage grammars are shaped not only by structural properties of language but also by patterns of language use and multilingual environments (Kisselev, 2021; Nagy, 2024). Growing attention to external factors affecting linguistic outcomes of heritage bilingualism and serving as predictors of heritage language vitality (Laleko, 2013) underscores the need to conceptualize heritage grammars not merely as reduced-input systems, but as socially embedded linguistic ecologies. Collectively, this body of work has helped move heritage language research beyond deficit-oriented perspectives toward a more nuanced understanding of heritage grammars as internally consistent linguistic systems.

This Special Issue reflects both the breadth and the continued evolution of this research tradition. Spanning empirical contexts from North America, Europe, and Israel, the volume showcases a wide range of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, including variationist sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics, psycholinguistics, experimental syntax, literacy research, discourse analysis, and language acquisition. Although the studies address diverse linguistic phenomena and employ different methodologies, they are united by a common goal: to better understand how bilingual grammars emerge, develop, and adapt across changing multilingual environments. Rather than treating heritage Russian as an isolated object of inquiry, the contributions collectively demonstrate how research in this domain continues to illuminate broader questions concerning bilingual grammatical systems, language processing, language variation, and multilingual development.

The Special Issue also reflects the changing landscape of heritage Russian research itself. Earlier work was primarily concerned with documenting the structural properties of heritage grammars and comparing them with monolingual baselines. Contemporary research increasingly situates heritage Russian within complex multilingual ecologies, recognizing that bilingual development is shaped by the interaction of linguistic structure, language experience, literacy, educational opportunities, and broader sociocultural contexts. Recent geopolitical changes and new migration patterns have further transformed Russian-speaking communities worldwide, creating new opportunities to investigate bilingual language development across increasingly diverse settings.

The contributions to this Special Issue illustrate these developments through complementary perspectives on grammatical representation, language processing, literacy, discourse, and language variation. Considered together, they demonstrate the breadth of contemporary heritage Russian research while highlighting several common themes concerning grammatical resilience, bilingual processing, and the interaction between language structure and multilingual experience.

Nagy and Petrosov adopt a variationist sociolinguistic framework to examine case-marking variation in Heritage Russian, comparing speakers in Toronto to those in Russia. Using sociolinguistic interviews and corpus data, they analyze prepositional noun phrases across three generations of Russian speakers to assess the extent of morphological leveling in these varieties. Their results show that, while later-generation heritage speakers exhibit slightly more case mismatches, their case marking remains more stable than previously reported. Generation since immigration emerges as the strongest predictor of variation, while lexical frequency plays a lesser role. The study draws attention to resilient domains in heritage language transmission and highlights the importance of methodological differences in contextualizing previous research.

Kisselev, Dubinina, and Paquette examine orthographic errors in Russian heritage learners, focusing on adjectival endings in handwritten essays. Using a corpus-based approach, they identify error patterns linked to phonological and morphological influences, highlighting gaps in heritage learners' underlying metalinguistic awareness. Their findings suggest that these writers struggle with spelling despite their advanced oral proficiency, and that orthographic challenges persist across proficiency levels. The study underscores the need for targeted instructional strategies and contributes to a deeper understanding of heritage language literacy development.

Martynova, Zuban, Gagarina, and Szucsich analyze the use of embedded clauses in Russian among 195 speakers across three groups: monolinguals in Russia, heritage speakers in the U.S., and heritage speakers in Germany. Using semi-spontaneous spoken and written data, they find that all groups use embedded clauses more frequently in formal than informal contexts, while mode (spoken vs. written) shows no effect. These results suggest that heritage speakers retain register awareness despite reduced exposure to formal Russian. This study underscores the influence of communicative situations on language use in heritage bilinguals.

Parshina, Ladinskaya, Gault, and Sekerina examine how Russian heritage speakers predict morphosyntactic features while reading, comparing their performance to that of L2 learners and monolinguals. Using a cloze task and eye-tracking, they find that heritage speakers predict more effectively in lower-demand tasks, particularly with reliable cues like word class and number. However, in more complex tasks, they struggle with gender-based prediction. The study highlights how task demands and literacy experience shape predictive processing in heritage language reading.

Kupersmitt, Fichman, and Armon-Lotem investigate how Russian–Hebrew bilingual children express causal relations in narratives in both languages. Using the Frog Story picture book, they analyze episodic components, causal links, and cohesion strategies. Their findings show that children produce more episodic components in Hebrew but rely more on enabling relations in Russian. Lexical cohesion emerges as the primary strategy in both languages, with cross-linguistic variation in syntactic cohesion. The study sheds light on bilingual narrative development and the role of proficiency in shaping discourse structure.

Clasmeier and Anstatt examine subjective frequency estimates of Russian verbs among Russian–German bilinguals, comparing heritage speakers, late bilinguals, foreign language learners, and monolinguals. Using a frequency estimation task with 447 participants, they find that, despite reduced exposure, bilinguals' subjective frequency ratings correlate with corpus frequency similarly to those of monolinguals. However, heritage speakers rate verbs lower overall, reflecting reduced activation in their mental lexicon. The study contributes to research on bilingual lexical processing and frequency effects.

Meir and Polinsky investigate the production of numerically quantified phrases in heritage Russian by comparing monolingual and Hebrew-dominant bilingual speakers. Using an elicitation task, they find that bilinguals rely on default forms and phonetically salient endings, leading to case errors. Accuracy correlates with the amount of Russian exposure, suggesting input-driven variation. These findings align with cross-linguistic studies on heritage grammar restructuring and highlight the role of morphological complexity in bilingual acquisition.

Finally, Koval, Malamud, Rosenblum, and Borzov investigate the acquisition of the morphologically complex *-sja* suffix among 13 monolingual and bilingual Russian-speaking children. Using longitudinal corpus data, they track the emergence, distribution, and productivity of five distinct types of argument-structure alternations. Their findings reveal a shared productivity hierarchy across both groups, with impersonal structures consistently delayed due to structural complexity and low input frequency. Crucially, bilingual children

do not exhibit early developmental disadvantage relative to the monolingual baseline and even show earlier emergence of *-sja* types overall. These findings suggest that structural divergence reported for adult heritage speakers may be a post-childhood phenomenon driven by input reduction.

Taken together, the studies in this Special Issue demonstrate that heritage Russian is a productive empirical domain for understanding how bilingual grammars adapt under conditions of variable input, shifting communicative demands, and diverse sociolinguistic ecologies. Across methods that tap production, perception, literacy, real-time processing, and socially situated language use, the findings converge on a view of heritage Russian as a patterned and ecologically rational linguistic system. By jointly illuminating how resilience and innovation coexist within heritage grammars, these contributions push the field toward a more nuanced understanding of bilingual language development, one that recognizes heritage Russian not merely as a linguistic variety in need of documentation or intervention through pedagogical support, but as a valuable lens for addressing core questions of linguistic organization, stability, variation, and change.

Although the contributions collected in this Special Issue demonstrate the breadth and methodological sophistication of contemporary research on heritage Russian, they also highlight important questions that remain open. The volume focuses primarily on structural, psycholinguistic, and discourse-related aspects of bilingual language development, leaving outside of its scope topics of language policy, assessment, community language maintenance, and the sociolinguistic consequences of recent geopolitical displacement. Likewise, despite representing speakers from multiple countries and dominant-language environments, the studies cannot fully capture the remarkable diversity of Russian-speaking communities worldwide. Addressing these questions will require broader geographic coverage, greater integration of community-based research, and continued attention to the rapidly changing multilingual ecologies in which heritage Russian is acquired and used.

At the same time, the studies presented here point toward several promising directions for future work. One of the greatest strengths of heritage Russian research lies in the exceptional diversity of its sociolinguistic settings. Russian is maintained in tightly knit, geographically concentrated communities, such as Brighton Beach in New York (Laleko & Miroschnychenko, 2022), as well as in dispersed family-based contexts where no cohesive heritage speech community exists. Comparing these settings offers valuable opportunities to disentangle the effects of community structure, family language practices, formal instruction, and peer networks on bilingual development and language maintenance. As Russian-speaking communities continue to diversify, research across these distinct multilingual ecologies will provide increasingly nuanced insights into the social dimensions of heritage language acquisition and change.

The global dispersion of Russian-speaking communities also creates unique opportunities for comparative bilingual research. Heritage Russian has been extensively studied in contact with typologically diverse majority languages, allowing researchers to investigate how dominant-language properties interact with bilingual experience to shape heritage grammars. For example, studies in the United States have documented substantial restructuring of the Russian case system among low-proficiency speakers (Polinsky, 2006), whereas research in Germany suggests greater morphological stability, potentially reflecting structural similarities between systems in contact (Anstatt, 2011). In Israel, where Russian occupies a much more prominent role in public life, research has revealed distinct patterns of morphosyntactic and pragmatic development shaped by intensive bilingual language use (Avramenko & Meir, 2023; Fridman et al., 2023). Expanding these comparative perspectives to newly emerging diasporic communities will further illuminate how language

contact, input, and multilingual experience interact to shape bilingual development across different sociolinguistic environments.

More broadly, future research will benefit from increasingly integrated approaches that bring together structural, cognitive, sociolinguistic, and educational perspectives on bilingualism. Combining experimental, corpus-based, longitudinal, and variationist methodologies will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how heritage grammars develop and continue to evolve across the lifespan. Such interdisciplinary approaches will be particularly important for investigating the rapidly changing multilingual ecologies created by contemporary migration and displacement, where traditional assumptions about heritage language transmission are being reshaped by new patterns of mobility, integration dynamics, and community formation.

The contributions to this Special Issue reinforce a central insight that has increasingly shaped heritage language research over the past three decades: heritage grammars are not incomplete versions of monolingual systems, but fully structured contact-based systems emerging from the complex interactions among grammatical principles, language experience, literacy, and multilingual social environments. Research on heritage Russian has been instrumental in advancing this perspective and continues to serve as one of the principal empirical domains through which broader theories of bilingual development, grammatical representation, and language change are tested and refined. We hope that the studies presented in this Special Issue will stimulate further interdisciplinary research, encourage new cross-linguistic and cross-community comparisons, and continue to position heritage Russian research at the forefront of heritage language scholarship.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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