UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Heritage and Humor: An Examination of Armenian Identity, The Role of Humor, and Heritage Language Learning in College Classrooms

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

by

Anahit Ani Yeghyayan

2022

ABSTRAST OF THE DISSERTATION

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University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Alison Bailey, Chair

Given the loss of heritage languages due to assimilation of the dominant English language in U.S. society within three generations of migration to the U.S. (Wiley & Valdés, 2000), it is of paramount importance to examine how we can maintain and enhance heritage languages. Humor is a pragmatic tool which one can utilize to increase communicative competence in a language, allowing one to not only increase the target language skills but also add to general content and cultural knowledge, while also dismantling previously held ideologies about the language. Guided by language socialization theory (Ochs, 1990) and Ethnic Identity (Phinney, 1989; Sellers et al., 1998), in combination with aspects of Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition (1981), this study aims to examine the benefits of using humor to reduce anxiety (affective filter), increase engagement, and make more personal and everyday connections to the use of the language. This dissertation employs qualitative methods through which interviews, classroom observations, and artifact analysis were utilized to understand

students' and professors' perspectives and attitudes towards humor used in the community and in the classroom. This study also examines aspects of heritage language speakers' identity, as well as their sentiments about learning their heritage language in a college classroom. Participants were individuals in Los Angeles who had previously taken an Armenian language course (*N*=17) and Armenian language professors in Los Angeles (*N*=4). The data was thematically coded and three main categories emerged from the data: heritage language speakers' engagement with their heritage language, experiences with Armenian language courses and humor, and pedagogies of Armenian language professors. The findings of this study extend current heritage language pedagogy and humor research to an Armenian population in Los Angeles and provide empirical support on how we can bridge these two bodies of work to help maintain heritage languages in the diaspora. Student participants sought Armenian courses as a way to help them navigate their complex identities, increase their linguistic skills, and build community. Professors support and utilize the humor in the classroom as a pedagogical tool. The implications of these findings apply to heritage language pedagogy in college classrooms and heritage language maintenance in the diaspora.

The dissertation of Anahit Ani Yeghyayan is approved.

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2022

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The handful of years leading up to this moment would not have been possible without the support of my community. Firstly, thank you to the students and professors who participated in this study. I have learned so much from your valuable insight and inspiring stories. To the Armenian studies professors and faculty at UCLA, you have made an impact on my entire academic journey. Throughout the years, I have found a sense of comfort and inspiration in your classes that have encouraged me to continue with this line of research.

I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Alison Bailey. Alison, you have been so supportive throughout my years in graduate school, and I have learned so much from your expertise, approach to research, and immense wealth of knowledge. Your impact has made me a better researcher. I would also like to thank my committee members, Mark Hansen, Rashmita Mistry, and Cathy Sandhofer, who have all played integral roles in my academic career, beginning from my time as an undergraduate all the way to the end of graduate school. I would also like to thank Gerardo Ramirez and Stacy Shaw, for their guidance and mentorship throughout the years. My love for the research process grew exponentially during our lab time together.

To my parents, who instilled a love of learning from early on, thank you for all the sacrifices you have made for me and Angela to get us where we are today. Angela, thank you for making sure I remain sane. To my in-laws and Michelle, thank you for your kind words of encouragement and motivation throughout the years. Lastly, none of this would have happened without my husband, Matt, who believed in me when I didn't believe in myself, who shared in all my victories and failures, and who dedicated countless hours to my successes. Thank you, for inspiring me to strive to heights I thought were unreachable.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

While humor has been known to diffuse a tense situation, lighten anger's heavy load, and act as a means to relieve stress and anxiety, it can also be used as an instrumental tool in heritage language classrooms to help promote positive sentiments and increase student learning. Bringing humor into one's life can positively influence certain behaviors. As such, this dissertation will focus on Armenian heritage language speakers' engagement with their heritage language, while also examining humor's impact on the educational, social, and cultural development of heritage language speakers. This study also examines Armenian heritage language classrooms and how humor, as part of a wider array of pedagogical approaches, can be used by college-level instructors and contribute to the body of knowledge on heritage language pedagogy.

Heritage language speakers are most commonly defined as individuals raised in a home where a language other than English was spoken to varying degrees and who have some proficiency in that heritage language and English (Valdés, 2000). As a result of lack of exposure to their heritage language outside of the home, heritage language speakers generally have many gaps in their linguistic abilities (Polinsky, 2008), which leads them to potentially develop negative attitudes towards their heritage language (Karapetian, 2014). In addition, linguistic assimilation of heritage languages to English happens within three generations, if not sometimes sooner (Wiley & Valdés, 2000). Humor, a possible salve to remedy this situation, has been shown to construct positive ideologies about minority languages and facilitate a connection between language and heritage (Leung, 2014). The multifaceted functions and use of humor can dismantle or uphold identities while negotiating boundaries and belongingness.

Humor may also serve as a form of emotional management in social settings. Humorous acts, along with comprehension, require skilled cultural performance, which can strengthen, reinforce, or restore the reaction norms of a situation. As such, this can create amusement in a situation, thus generating positive sentiments among members of an interacting group by bonding them and/or reducing an external threat (Francis, 1994). These affirmative connections between situations and norms become something that heritage language speakers can use to face insecurities they have about their ethno-linguistic identity as well as language abilities in the heritage language. Thus, humor allows people to reflect on their social and moral sensitivities (Leung, 2014). Humor also gives younger generations a reason to fit Armenian into their everyday lives.

Humor is an interdisciplinary phenomenon (e.g., linguistics, psychology, sociology) and is often defined based on its immediate context of use. Humor has been shown to facilitate a connection between language and heritage (Ziyaeemher & Kumar, 2013). It can also be used to construct positive ideologies about minority languages. While humor is often overlooked in the language education field, research finds that it can be an impactful device for second language learning (Ziyaeemher & Kumar, 2013). This dissertation will examine how humor can be used as a tool for heritage language maintenance by shining a light on this novel interdisciplinary area.

Armenian is a diglossic language, which means there is a complementary distribution of the literary and vernacular codes (Hudson, 2002). Diglossia is when a language has two standardized forms: the H (high) level, and the L (low) level. Both are used and accepted by society; however, each is dominant in its own set of domains. Diglossia is a social construct, however it is important to clarify it is not individual, it is when a society, as a whole, has two languages that are related but have different functions (Pym, 2019), and are relatively stable

(Ferguson, 1959). The H variety and the L variety serve different functions and differ in grammar, phonology, and vocabulary, as well as other societal characteristics, e.g., means of acquisition, domains, and institutional support. Often, speakers and community members regard H as the "real" language and use it in formal/official environments but acquire L as the native tongue, which feels most like home. The H variety is used for written and formal conversation, but is not used in any community for ordinary, daily conversation. An example of a diglossic language would be German, where Swiss German is spoken in the streets and on television while standard German is taught in schools. English, for example, is a result of a diglossic situation where Old French was considered the H variety, and Anglo-Saxon varieties considered the L variety (Pym, 2019). English became the language it is today due to the L variety absorbing the H variety (Pym, 2019). Heritage language speakers typically acquire the colloquial variant as their native language (at home) and are later introduced to the formal, literary standard through formal education (Ferguson, 1959; Hudson, 2002). H is the official written language and L is the spoken language, the vernacular social language. The H standard is considered the official variety and used in formal discourse in the homeland and taught in a language classroom, however, it is the L standard that is typically spoken in the home. Heritage speakers are typically only exposed to the features of the language most appropriate for intimate, private, and everyday interactions that take place in the home among family and community members. Due to the nature of diglossia and the distribution between the literary and vernacular codes (Hudson, 2002), Armenian runs the risk of attrition since it is not used in everyday life.

Importantly, identity is often enacted through language. Belz (2002) argues that identity, self, and agency are linguistically constructed and negotiated. Scholars argue that language is the source of identity interpretation, identity construction, and identity negotiation (Crawshaw et al.,

2001; Joseph, 2006; Shi, 2006, Warschauer, 2000). Identities, while not fixed, are constantly formed and shaped through socio-historical contexts, some of which include ideologies, power relations, and institution policies (Leeman, 2015). College is a time for exploration, to develop a more acute understanding of reality, and a time for adolescents to position themselves through the historical lens that is their identity. Carreira and Chik (2014) argue that there are at least three reasons why a heritage language speaker chooses to study their heritage language. It includes (1) to gain a better understanding of themselves through their cultural and linguistic history, (2) connect with family and friends, and (3) to meet a language need/course credit (Carreira & Chik, 2014). In relation to heritage language development, He (2006) argues that identity is the centerpiece rather than something occurring in the background.

The phenomena of heritage language maintenance in the diaspora brings to surface nuanced intricacies and sensitivities in ethnic communities. Language retention seems to be especially critical for second and later generation immigrants (Phinney et al., 2001), as research shows that by the third generation, a heritage language speaker is assimilated to speaking the majority language (Wiley & Valdés, 2000). Similarly, this pattern is also seen in the Armenian community, as there are differing perceptions of the Armenian language in those that are foreign-born children and those that were born in the U.S. (Imbens-Bailey, 1996). Therefore, language maintenance is important for students who come from a home where a language other than English is spoken (i.e. a heritage language speaker) and it is crucial to understand how we can maintain heritage languages into and beyond the third generation. Much of the literature in this field looks at more wide-spread minority languages like Spanish. Few studies examine language loss in other minority languages in the U.S., such as Chinese, Korean, German, Japanese, and Armenian (Douglas, 2005; Potowski & Carreira, 2004). Specifically, to date, no study has looked

at humor as a pedagogical tool with Armenian heritage language learners in the United States. There have, however, been studies on Armenian comedians in the U.S. (Pogossian, 2019), and studies on Armenian heritage language speakers and learners in Los Angeles (Karapetian, 2014). With the population of the Armenian diaspora (seven million) larger than the population in the Republic of Armenia (three million), with an estimated one and a half-two million residing in the United States (Kiprop, 2019), the Armenian diaspora population becomes a large part of the history of immigrant groups and warrants necessary research. In addition, the research on using humor in the classroom examines those who are learning a second or foreign language, which is different from those in a heritage language classroom. In order to address the gap in the field, this dissertation will address the multifaceted aspects of humor and heritage language learning and identity, including the role of humor as a pedagogical tool to foster heritage languages.

Problem Statement

Heritage language speakers of the Armenian diaspora in Los Angeles are affected by two fundamental issues: language maintenance beyond the third generation and the nature of Armenian as a diglossic language. While Los Angeles houses many different dialects and standards of Armenian, younger generations are starting to view Armenian as a language of the past (Karapetian, 2014), and not one of the future. In this dissertation, I argue that the consumption of ethnic humor acts as a tool for identity display and creates situations where students can practice their heritage language safely, while also helping reduce and lessen tensions, increase positive classroom climate and provide a safe space to build community and camaraderie in heritage language classrooms.

While the benefits of humor have been studied in the realm of psychological development, and some studies examine humor in the realm of second language learning, this

dissertation will examine heritage speakers' identity and how the placement of humor, and the extent of it, affects heritage language learning and maintenance. This study approaches humor as a benefit in strengthening heritage identity display and linguistic skills. The mixed nature of heritage language speakers' attitudes about their heritage language, in combination with the multifaceted aspects of humor, echo the complexity of the phenomenon of language maintenance in the diaspora. Furthermore, these connections have not been empirically established in the Armenian community.

Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The goal of this study is to establish an empirical basis for the connections between identity, humor, and heritage language learning. The aims of this study are a deep, qualitative, purposeful study where I aim to describe in detail student perceptions of their identity, of Armenian language teaching, and professor pedagogy used to encourage engagement and promote relevancy and relatability to the Armenian language in Armenian language courses. A portion of this dissertation focuses on Armenian heritage language classrooms and how a wider array of pedagogical tools, including humor, used by professors can contribute to the body of knowledge on heritage language pedagogy. As such, this dissertation will address the following questions:

1) How are bilingual students of Armenian heritage engaging with their linguistic heritage in the community and in the classroom?

2) How are students experiencing Armenian humor, both as a community member and as a heritage language student?

3) What pedagogical tools are professors using in their classrooms to facilitate heritage language learning and maintenance in university-level heritage language courses, including the use of humor?

Researcher Position Statement

It is important to reevaluate my positionality and identity as a researcher in this study. As an Armenian heritage language speaker, I try not to project my own experiences in this community onto my participant's experiences, however, my emic positionality gives me insight that strongly speaks to my data. By the same token, I try not to minimize my participant's words into my experiences, but instead try to use my knowledge of this community as a strength to give more power to my participant's words. As an individual who grew up in an Armenian speaking home and took Armenian language courses throughout her life, I share a great deal of experience with my participants. In addition to this, I also taught Armenian language to elementary school children at a local Sunday School in the community. As a lifelong student and learner of the language, and an occasional teacher, I undertook this research in order to contribute knowledge to the wide field that is Armenian as a heritage language and heritage language pedagogy, including humor in heritage language classrooms.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is informed by three bodies of literature: heritage language speakers and identity formation, humor in social settings and in the classroom, with an emphasis on ethnic humor, and Armenian in Los Angeles. I will begin by reviewing the literature on heritage language speakers by defining them and providing examples, then I will introduce how humor can be beneficial in the language classroom. Lastly, I will situate the study in Los Angeles by providing examples of what the Armenian language looks like in Los Angeles. I will conclude with an argument based in the literature as to why humor can be beneficial within the community and in the Armenian heritage language classroom to help aid in maintaining heritage languages in the diaspora and how we can improve our heritage language courses.

Heritage Language Speakers

Heritage languages have been divided into three groups: indigenous heritage languages (e.g., Navajo), colonial heritage languages (e.g., French), and immigrant heritage languages (e.g., Spanish) (Fishman, 2001). This dissertation will focus on immigrant heritage languages, specifically Armenian. As such, a heritage language has a particular familial and/or personal relevance for the individual (Fishman, 2001, Hornberger & Wang, 2008). While heritage language speakers are, to some degree, bilingual in their heritage language and the majority language, the concept of a heritage language learner needs to be placed within a larger national policy perspective (Deusen-Scholl, 2003). There are many such Armenian heritage speakers in Los Angeles for whom this holds to be true as Armenian becomes the language first acquired and English becomes the second language acquired, but then surpasses Armenian in dominance. Heritage language speakers also have a lot of gaps in their linguistic abilities because of their

inability to fully acquire the language before beginning school in the host country where the dominant language is different from the heritage language (Polinsky, 2008; Web & Miller, 2000). Heritage speakers are very developed in their "kitchen talk", but do not have formal proficiency beyond topics that are mostly spoken in the home. Some of the differences in knowledge and competence include phonology, grammar, vocabulary, sociolinguistic rules, culture, literacy skills, and motivation (Polinsky, 2008; Webb & Miller, 2000). As a means to fill these gaps in their heritage language, heritage speakers will enroll in and take a course in their heritage language. This now makes them heritage language learners.

There are two ways to define a heritage language learner; broadly or narrowly. The broad definition states that heritage learners are those who have been raised with a strong cultural connection to the language (Fishman, 2001). These learners typically lack linguistic proficiency but have some personal or ancestral connection to the language. The narrow definition entails those who have been exposed to the language in childhood, however, did not learn the language to its full capacity as another language became dominant (Valdés, 2000). Those that are narrowly defined come into the classroom with some proficiency in the heritage language. In their classroom, they receive formal instruction in the heritage language, which may lead to them having difficulty accepting the foreignness of their heritage language. As such, it is important to distinguish this difference between heritage language learners and second language learners in a language classroom. Individuals who are learning a second language, may come into the classroom with little or no prior knowledge in the target language, with a diverse range of backgrounds, and proficiency in other languages. An example of a second language learner is someone who speaks a language other than the dominant language of a society and is learning the dominant language of said society. For example, someone dominant in Spanish learning

English within the United States. Similarly, this differs from a foreign language course, where someone takes a language other than that spoken by the people in that region, for example, someone in France taking courses to learn English.

The implications for an Armenian heritage language speaker learning Armenian in a classroom in comparison to someone who is a second language learner enrolling in Armenian class is vast. For example, research shows that self-esteem of heritage language speakers increases after enrolling in their heritage language course (Wright & Taylor, 1995). We also know that higher linguistic proficiency in the heritage language results in a stronger sense of ethnic identity, something that is not applicable to second language learners (Oketani, 1997). These reasons might be a contributing factor as to why heritage language speakers decide to enroll in heritage language classes. Heritage language learners have a strong cultural and familial connection to their heritage language, something that a typical second language learner does not have, which becomes critical in understanding humor in the heritage language, as these heritage speakers likely grew up with a connection to the culture. As a result, humor can be leveraged to increase the connection heritage language learners, but not second language learners, have with the language, thus aiding in increasing the linguistic skills of heritage language learners as they are built up in the classroom.

However, many heritage speakers are also illiterate in their heritage language which may cause a divide between these cultural roots and possible leverage points and the heritage language (Karapetian, 2014; Polinsky, 2008). Illiteracy is one of many reasons why a heritage speaker may choose to enroll in a beginner language class, thus becoming a heritage language learner. Research has also shown that heritage language speakers are often subjected to harsh criticism of their heritage language abilities (Carreira, 2000; Krashen, 1998; Rodríguez Pina,

1997; Karapetian, 2014). As a result, heritage language speakers are often insecure about their linguistic abilities, which can hinder learning (Gardner, 1982). Incomplete acquisition, ridicule, and struggles with the linguistic proficiency of their heritage language may also lead to heritage learners and speakers compartmentalizing the domains in which they access their heritage language (Carreira & Kagan, 2011; Karapteian, 2014), meaning the use of the heritage language is only for specific things (e.g., kitchen talk, topics in the home), therefore obscuring their view of the language as a global entity. Not only might they compartmentalize, but in instances where access to materials in the heritage language are scarce, like in Armenian, causes heritage speakers to see Armenian as a language of the past and English as the language of the future (Kouloujian 2012; Karapetian, 2014). They consequently limit the use and the access of their heritage language on media platforms that are normally associated with "hip, cool, and fun" attitudes, such as books, comic books, cartoons, television, and music. However, the functions and use of hip, cool, and fun entities, like humor to name one, can dismantle or uphold identities while negotiating boundaries and belonging. These realities become something that heritage speakers can use to face insecurities they have about their ethno-linguistic identity (Leung, 2014), thus deconstructing the negative ideologies and sentiments that they may be facing towards their ethnolinguistic heritage and identity.

Language and Identity

This next section elaborates on the important factors that heritage language speakers face with their bilingual and bicultural identities. Children from immigrant backgrounds often find themselves stuck between their American identity and culture and their parents' ethnic background and traditions (Phinney, 1989, 1990). Given that Armenian heritage language speakers in the United States primarily receive their education in the English language, many

students do not get the chance to study or further their parents' language, values or customs (McCoy, 1992). Between the two cultures, these children are left with many ambiguous gaps in areas such as cultural practices, language use, and friendships (Roberts & Phinney, 1999).

Those who do identify with their parent's cultural heritage and background reap protective benefits such as higher self-esteem, greater sense of belonging, and protection from discrimination (Cabrera, 2013). There are many other factors that help heritage language speakers achieve stronger identification with their ethnic group, such as ethnic language proficiency. Phinney et al. (2001) focuses on various factors that influence adolescents' ethnic identity, including ethnic language proficiency. Their research shows that having a higher ethnic language proficiency level positively correlates with a stronger ethnic identity, as it provides a link to the culture in which the children's parents were raised. Furthermore, Rumbart (2005) indicated that third and fourth generation immigrants' knowledge and usage of ethnic language is significantly less than that of first- and second-generation family members; therefore, later generation immigrants exhibit weaker ethnic identities. This also shows that linguistic assimilation happens within three generations. Similar patterns have been observed in the Armenian community as higher linguistic proficiency is associated with more positive thoughts about the culture, while those that are least proficient tend to have more negative thoughts about the Armenian language (Imbens-Bailey, 1997).

One of the most common social functions of humor is the construction of commonality and in-group identity. Humor can be a flexible discourse strategy used to construct meticulous aspects of social identities by focusing on a particular feature of it (Archakis & Tsakona, 2005). Comedians target members that are within their in-group and trivialize the already existing bonds among these groups, while bringing the element of humor to the surface. Therefore, it is

suggested that the target of humor is an important heuristic tool for describing its social function, revealing how it is exploited by comedians to project their shared beliefs and values, i.e., their social identity (Archakis & Tsakona, 2005), and fostering belonging and expressing power dynamics between groups and individuals (Talmy, 2010). Thus, humor can help heritage speakers explore their heritage and identity in a fun and flexible way.

Heritage Language Pedagogy

Given the two definitions of heritage language speakers, broadly and narrowly defined, in combination, these two classifications lay forth two approaches to heritage language education, one concerning language proficiency, and the other involving affective issues such as discovering identity and belonging (Carreira & Chik, 2014). This contrasts with second language learners, as they do not have the affective issues of identity and belonging and are typically enrolling in the course solely based on the needs or interest to learn the second language. One way in which this differs is that in second language classrooms, the teaching of grammar follows the traditional pedagogy, whereas in a heritage language classroom, students come into the classroom with a degree of exposure to the grammar of the heritage language, thus, formally teaching students the rules of grammar has different challenges. Given the qualitative nature of this dissertation, the focus of the student interviews will be regarding affective issues, such as identity and belonging. While students' language proficiency is included, it is merely their perceptions of their linguistic abilities and not an actual assessment.

Literature on heritage language pedagogy stresses the importance of a content-based curriculum. It also stresses project-based tasks in order to maximum success in the classroom. Post-secondary heritage language instruction stresses the importance of project-based curriculum in order to address the needs of varying proficiency levels (Kondo-Brown, 2010). In the case of

Armenian, with two distinct standards that are taught in schools and are in constant daily contact, it is important to introduce a relevant pedagogical focus; specifically referring to Culturally Relevant and Sustaining Pedagogies (e.g., content is relevant, interesting, and unbiased; supports the continued growth of individual's cultural capital, etc.) (Alim & Paris, 2007; Kumar et al., 2018; Wu, 2011) given how the potential dialectical or varietal mismatch of standards spoken between students and professors can affect student's language developmental outcomes.

However, a critical pedagogy framework applied to heritage language learning includes guiding students to understanding and awareness of the multifaceted sociocultural and political circumstances that many children of immigrants grow up in (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 1991; Leeman, 2015). The goal is to support them to overcome feelings that result from the stigmatization of the ways they speak, feelings that confront their abilities in both languages as well as their sense of self in regard to mainstream cultures in both the U.S. and their respective countries of origin, with the main focus on empowering heritage students to accept their ethnolinguistic identities as part of their lives in the U.S. and as citizens of the world.

Heritage Learners Experiences in the Classroom

Heritage language speakers seek the classroom as a place where they can learn critical skills that will help them achieve bilingualism and biculturalism, while also addressing the obstacles that come with it. Interactions with other heritage language learners appear to also be a significant tool for dealing with this process (Phinney et al., 2001; Garca-Bedolla, 2003), and the heritage language classroom provides the necessary platform for these interactions.

There are many reasons why heritage language speakers seek to enroll in a heritage language course, the main one being to learn about one's cultural and linguistic roots (Carreira & Kagan, 2011). Many research studies have used Norton's (1995, 2012) framework of investment

and imagined community to examine heritage language learners. Investment relates to how much learners believe their studied language may supply material and symbolic resources and cultural capital (i.e., power relations and status), while imagined community recognizes the influence of learners' desire to join or strengthen social groupings linked with the language, including ethnic, national, or classroom communities. This framework of investment and imagined communities identify heritage learners' desired identities, including the current sense of self that they hold.

Humor and Language Use

Humor, and laughter, have a plethora of positive effects both on an individual level, and on a collective level. For example, research shows that watching a humorous video significantly decreases stress and anxiety levels (Grases Colom et al., 2011). Furthermore, individuals who laugh more do not show as many negative effects when stressful life events increase (Kuiper & Martin, 1998). There are three main theories that explain the functions of humor: the relief theory, the incongruity theory, and the superiority theory (Wilkins & Eisenbraun, 2009). The relief theory of humor posits that since humor often calls conventional social requirements into question, it may be regarded as affording us relief from the restraint of conforming to those requirements. The incongruity theory is that we find humor when something happens that does not fit with what we expected to happen, i.e., finding the inappropriate within the appropriate, and the superiority theory, when we laugh at the pain of others. While these three theories of humor establish a premise in which to approach different types of humor, I will put an emphasis on the relief theory through the lens of ethnic humor. Ethnic humor is when "fun is made of the perceived behavior, customs, personality or any other traits of a group or its members by virtue of their specific sociocultural identity" (Apte, 1987).

When comedy and humor are used to explore positive narratives or challenges and struggles on issues related to race, culture, and identity (Casares & Gladding, 2019), it enables the person to talk about personal misfortunes or heartbreaks without placing themselves unequivocally in the position of the victim (Sandberg & Tutenges, 2019). In addition to these lasting effects of comedy, there are two immediate benefits to utilizing comedy while conducting something serious: a physiological response and a "humanizing" connection fostered between parties (Vitug & Kleiner, 2007). Aakar and Bagdonas, argue that humor is a secret weapon that can scale positive change in the world, achieve objectives, build more effective and innovative societies while also cultivating stronger bonds between individuals. In addition, humor used to maintain and enhance interpersonal relationships, as well as elevate oneself, enhances subjective well-being (F. Jiang et al., 2020). I argue that humor can be used as a powerful weapon in heritage language courses to assist with learning in the classroom, as well as social and cultural identity exploration.

Humor is a social activity with a purpose. Some of the social functions of humor include social management, decommitment, and defunctionalization (Attardo, 1994). Educators can use humor as a social management tool in order to regain control of the classroom. In this particular example, we will focus on defunctionalization, which is the spontaneous and lighthearted use of language in humor, i.e., using informal, colloquial speech. In the classroom, these social functions act as a playful and non-serious instance regarding group pertinence and classroom management. Wagner & Urios-Aparisi (2007) add to the previously mentioned social functions of humor by arguing that humor also serves as a tool for cultural transmission. The effects of these theories of humor in the classroom environment then translate to student success in various metrics, such as feelings of ease and comfort in the classroom, increased participation, focus on

topic, and increased motivation (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2007). While these studies showcase the benefits of using humor in a content specific classroom, they fail to specify how humor might interact in a heritage language classroom, where the students already enter with a cultural background and some linguistic knowledge in the field. While Wagner & Urios-Aparisi (2007) talk about the types of humorous content that can be used in the classroom, i.e., cultural information and grammatical information, they do not assess the impact that humor has on learning.

While the social functions described above can increase sentiments in the classroom among peers, research also tells us that telling a successful joke increases the joke-tellers status, however, it depends on the type of joke (Bitterly et al., 2017). The neurological shift in our brain that occurs when we hear a successful joke impacts how we behave. As a result, humor, when executed successfully and carefully, can increase motivation as it lessens the distance between people. This is because those who laugh together are perceived to be closer together (Bitterly et al., 2017). This information posits that humor has the power to bring people closer together, and in a classroom, this can be applied to lessen the distance between the educator and the students. Insights to how humor affects social development and influences interactions provide information about how humor can be utilized in a communicative context, where social interactions are constantly occurring.

Humor in Second Language Classrooms

We know that the integration of language instruction with content instruction is the hallmark of a successful classroom. Many researchers have concluded that language is best developed within a content-based curriculum, rather than as the object of classroom instruction (Christian, 1996; Potowski & Carreira, 2004; Schwartz, 2001). Including student centered and

literacy-based exercises that include many examples are key to a heritage language classroom. Since heritage language classes include individuals with a diverse background in linguistic proficiency, the most valuable strategy is those that include small-group and individualized instruction (Schwartz, 2001). Curricula that are thematically organized, content based, and designed in such a way to be adapted to different language needs, linguistic proficiency levels, and interests are positive instructional approaches that will create a safe and comfortable learning environment (Kondo-Brown, 2011; Schwartz, 2001).

It is important to distinguish the differences between a foreign language classroom and a heritage language classroom. A heritage language classroom includes students who enter the classroom with some knowledge in the target language (Fishman, 2001; Valdés, 1997). These students typically have familial ties to the language and grew up surrounded by the language, however, they have not completely acquired the language. As a result, each student in a heritage language classroom has varying proficiency in aspects of the language, e.g., linguistic, cultural, and political. The motivation to formally learn the heritage language can vary from student to student. Some may want to learn the language to communicate with grandparents, while others want to establish a closer connection to their heritage. According to Valdés (1997), the four goals of a well-structured heritage language classroom are language maintenance, acquisition of the prestige variety, expansion of bilingual range, and transfer of literacy skills. In 2008, Valdés et al. added two more goals to the original four described. These included the development of academic skills and community building and the development of self-esteem. The role of the educator for heritage language learners is a critical one, as they act as an intermediary between both languages and cultures (Neff & Rucynski, 2017). Educators are looked up to as experts in the language and culture and the students come to the class to learn their heritage language,

which is why it is important that the educator is proficient in the host country language and the heritage language. In order to gain the full potential and benefits of infusing humor in a heritage language course, there needs to be an understanding of both the target culture and the culture of the students (Neff & Recynski, 2017), which might vary given the vast differences in heritage language speaker linguistic and cultural proficiency.

Humor, in an instructional context, is defined as an act that is performed through either linguistic or nonlinguistic means by any of the participants in the classroom (i.e., the student or the teacher, Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011). The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) posits that this act towards a humorous attempt is the result of two incongruous scripts, either the producer of this humor had the intentions of creating laughter or smiles or they did not. Either way, the classroom context needs to be examined in this development, assessing how students' humor competence is related to their learning outcomes (Attardo & Raskin, 1991). While humor can be used as an implicit tool to teach grammar and other notions of the language, there needs to be explicit gains from the humor usage.

While there are different types of humorous content, there are also different ways to deliver humorous material. An overview of humor types in the classroom include humor that is either relevant or not relevant to the course content (Nussbaum et al., 1984), humor that is targeted at either the teacher, student, external source, or not targeted at all (Neuliep, 1991), and humor that is either self-directed or directed to a group of students (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011). It is important to note that while humor is used by teachers to ease students, attract their attention, showcase that the teacher is human like them, and to make the class fun by giving it a less formal tone (Neuliep, 1991), it is just as important to identify the different targets in the classroom and be intentional about the different types of humor that can be used. It is possible

that one method of humorous delivery elicits many laughs, however, it may not be useful for increasing language proficiency, which is why it is imperative that educators who utilize humor also utilize frequent assessment to ensure that learning is occurring.

Krashen (1981) confirmed a variety of affective variables that impact second language acquisition, which includes: motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety. If motivation is low, self-confidence is low, and anxiety is high, this will hinder the ability for a second language learner to acquire the language. Including humor in second language (L2) classroom pedagogy has shown to lower the affective filter, thus assisting L2 learners in their language acquisition (Askildson, 2005; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2010). This can be used in heritage language classrooms as a way to enhance students' language skills, while simultaneously connecting to the cultural references made in the humor set. The employment of humor within the context of second language pedagogy offers significant advantages to both the language teacher and learner. Humor serves as an effective means of reducing affective filters (Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2010), which as a result, can help promote language acquisition for L2 learners in a way that is approachable and significant. This effectiveness is particularly relevant to the communicative classroom, as humor has been shown to lower the affective filter which stimulates the prosocial behaviors that are necessary for success within a communicative context (Askildson, 2005). Furthermore, humorous interactions in the classroom provide students with opportunities to negotiate their social, cultural, and linguistic components as well as foster group cohesion (Dávila, 2019). This is important as social interactions shape cultural perceptions, which in turn influence group participation. Those that are not involved in strongly cohesive groups will not be as inclined to participate in cultural activities or stay involved with the group.

However, it is important to note that being funny is not sufficient to enhance student learning. Instructional Humor Processing Theory (IHPT) argues that a teacher must go beyond solely using students' laughter and smiles as feedback on effectiveness of their humor (Wanzer et al., 2010). Receiving smiles is not enough to aid in language maintenance, there must be some measure to ensure students are retaining the linguistic, cultural, or social aspect of the humor. Beyond this, it is important that the humor is relevant and related to the topic at hand, otherwise, it may leave the students confused, and thus defeat the purpose of the humor. Schmitz (2002) argues that there are three categories of humor in general and each category is most effective for each respective class of proficiency. He argues that universal humor (i.e., reality-based) is fit for elementary-level students, culture based (i.e., culture-based) humor for intermediate-level students, and advanced students will benefit from linguistic humor (i.e., word-based) with a combination of the aforementioned two types as well (Schmitz, 2002). While Schmitz argues for the use of humor in foreign language and translation classes, he fails to consider where a heritage language speaker will fall on the line of categories. Heritage language speakers come from varied and complex proficiency backgrounds, therefore, this one-model-fits-all will hardly apply to heritage language speakers. Researcher argues against Schmitz's method by showing that there is more required than just placing individuals into categories as each person's linguistic abilities needs to be examined more closely (Bell, 2009; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011).

Very few studies have examined humor's role in increasing student learning results with a pre and post-test design (Syafiq, 2012; Wahyuni & Naim, 2019; Ziv, 1988), and when they do, they examine learning English as a second or foreign language. For example, Syafiq & Saleh (2012) investigated the effectiveness of humorous material to improve students' speaking skills in an English as a foreign language course. They implemented a quasi-experimental study where

they provided humorous teaching material to the experimental group but not the control group. They found that humorous material had significant effects on students' speaking skills (Syafiq, 2012). Wahyuni & Naim (2019) similarly conduct a quasi-experimental study where they examine the effects of a humorous treatment in a control and experimental classroom. They find that there is a difference in students' ability and achievement after implementing the humorous treatment. Ziv (1988) also conducted two separate experimental studies, one in a statistics course and the other in a psychology course. In both studies, the group that was receiving relevant humorous material in the course had higher scores on the final exam (Ziv, 1988). When teachers infuse humor that is related to the course content, students, in turn, may have an easier time remembering information better. This use of humor is positively associated with affective learning and course and learning indicators (Wanzer et al., 2010). In recent years, metacognitive thinking skills have been studied in L2 classrooms. Kaufman and Beghetto (2009) proposed that creativity can be discussed as Big-C and little-c. While Big-C represents eminent creativity, little-c is typically the more nuanced one that is important in language learning. The little-c encompasses creativity of non-language experts and captures the original ways in which students can utilize their non-dominant language. Given the information and the tools that prior research has shown us about creativity in L2 and foreign language learning, we can utilize these skills in heritage language classrooms in order to assist with language maintenance.

While the literature on heritage language learners' cognitive development when using humor is limited, with this information, educators can utilize humor in the classroom to 1) unite the diverse backgrounds of heritage language speakers in the classroom through humor, and 2) increase information recall by presenting the classroom information in a humorous way (Coronel et al., 2021; Wanzer et al., 2010). While humor has been shown to improve learning outcomes

(Syafiq, 2012; Wahyuni & Naim, 2019; Ziv, 1988), it has yet to be studied in a heritage language course. Beyond educational outcomes, research that looks at the use of humor in L2 education indicates that using verbal humor in L2 classrooms offers opportunities to facilitate access to L2 linguistic and cultural knowledge resources that are embedded in humorous exchanges (Ziyaeemher & Kumar, 2013). Not only is humor helpful for increasing linguistic proficiency, but it also disseminates cultural knowledge. Humor brings in the fun aspect of learning a language, and this is what heritage learners need to better learn, advocate, and spread literacy and everyday use in their heritage language. It is equally important to know the different types of instructional theories that argue against a 'quick laugh' (Wanzer et al., 2010) and instead argue that humor, although thought of to be silly, needs to be taken seriously.

Importantly, when considering humor and identity in the classroom, the educator's role should not be overlooked. Humor can be used to impact students' perceptions of an educator, as well as an educator's perceptions and expectations of students. Norrick and Klein (2008) argue that various types of humor offer a valuable tool in identity construction, both for the students and the educator. Educators construct the classroom environment they prefer; this can include a space that is conducive to humor as well as individual identities. This can impact how students interact in the classroom, determining how their personalities and identities are going to be presented. As the educator constructs their "teacher personality" and sets up classroom expectations, the students also construct their own individual identities in the classroom setting, determining how they are going to present and express themselves. Goffman (1959) defines this performance as an activity that serves to influence participants. This model of human interaction leads humor to serve as a guide to identity construction in the classroom.

Humor in Cross-Cultural Situations

Humor is unquestionably steeped in and shaped by culture. The most successful comedians are the ones that can capitalize on cultural references by exaggerating and adding in elements of irony and sarcasm. Specific cultural references also build a sense of trust between the comedian and the audience. The experiences that we share as members of a culture are the basis for jokes, humorous observations, puns, ironies, satires, and punchlines that strike us as comical and entertaining. In researching humor across widely differing cultures and language families, we can better understand the linguistic, cognitive, and cultural influences on humor in that culture (Cisneros et al., 2006). This relevance signals humor's significance for heritage learners, as they need to understand both the language (i.e., at least receptive language abilities) and the cultural aspect of humor, thus proving to have more command on their heritage language compared to typical second language learners who grew up without the cultural connection to the language they are studying in school. By the same token, as communication in a second language requires understanding of both literal and non-literal meanings and interpretations of utterances, humor functions as a mechanism that makes the input easily digestible, making the language accessible to heritage learners and speakers (Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014). Therefore, infusing humor into the heritage language classroom would be beneficial for heritage language learners, providing them with cultural references they understand in the colloquial form of the language. Various studies have been done on the cultural differences in humor perception, usage, and implications. Research finds that Eastern and Western cultures differ in humor perception. Westerners associate humor with more positivity than Easterners (T. Jiang et al., 2019). Easterners tend to use more adaptive humor, while Westerners tend to use more maladaptive humor. To add to that, Americans used significantly more self-defeating and self-enhancing humor. One example of how these differing perceptions of humor matter is in advertising. Wang

et al. (2019) discusses the influence of culture on attitudes towards humorous advertising. A preference for self-enhancing humor tactics is more prevalent in the North American individualistic culture. United States audiences preferred ads using self-enhancing tactics to those using affiliative tactics, Chinese audiences did not differentiate (Wang et al., 2019).

Humor means understanding not only the language and words but their use, meaning, subtle nuances, the underlying culture, implications, and unwritten messages. Humor does not often transfer well from one culture to another, as each society has a somewhat different concept of what is funny (Dobson, 1987). This difference in cross cultural perceptions of humor might transfer to the two varieties of Armenian spoken in communities in the U.S.: Eastern and Western. Beyond these two groups, and the comedians that conduct comedy in their respective space, there are further nuances among Armenian groups in the United States. Similarly, when a group does specific skits on American and Armenian culture combined, an interesting intersection of immigrations generation and cultural adaptation occurs. For example, casual and different representations of the heritage language change perceptions of the language and encourage heritage language speakers to use the heritage language more frequently (Pogossian, 2019). This can impact language learning as one needs the linguistic skills, as well as the cultural knowledge, to fully comprehend the complexities of these bicultural and bilingual skits. As such, if conducted properly, these skits can last in the memories of heritage speakers and learners for a long while to come.

While jokes frequently make fun of a group of people who deal with sensitive themes, like politics or ethnic identity, Norrick (1993) claims that the major goal of jokes is to provide listeners an opportunity to validate shared knowledge and views, adding that jokes help us to get to know one another. A study by Machlev & Karlin (2017) found that both relevant and non-

relevant humor predict student interest in the course. The more relevant and appropriate the humor is, the more students are engaged, whereas the opposite happens for non-relevant humor. I argue that the feeling of relief that comes from the removal of the restraint through relevant ethnic humor creates an environment where heritage language learners feel safe and welcomed to explore their linguistic abilities as well as identities in the heritage language classroom. The more relevant the humor is, addressing the heritage culture and language, the more students will be engaged, and active students will be in the course.

The research on humor often tries to answer whether certain concepts and skills in humor comprehension and production are universal or culture specific. A heritage language classroom would be an ideal testing ground as it includes individuals with varying levels of cultural and linguistic knowledge of the target language. An interesting case with Armenians is that there are two varieties of the language, Eastern and Western. The Eastern standard is spoken in the Republic of Armenia, while the Western standard is spoken in diasporic populations in Beirut, Syria, Lebanon and some parts of Turkey. What makes something humorous might be culturally specific, however, humor is generally understood as a phenomenon that invokes amusement on part of the interlocutors (Bell, 2011). For example, the group that performs skits on American and Armenian culture is well perceived by Eastern Armenian speakers, however, that is not the case for Western Armenian speakers. Western Armenian speakers have their own style of comedy that incorporates Arabic and Turkish languages, while Eastern Armenian comedy includes Russian and English code-switching.

Armenian comedians have been able to capitalize on and employ to their advantage humor to evoke laughter in hopes to maintain the Armenian language in the community (Pogossian, 2018). The skits and sets those comedians create show how people of Armenian

heritage have undergone shifts in their cultural background, reflecting upon their heritage in a playful, and meaningful way while constructing a positive, symbolic representation of what it means to be an Armenian-American individual living in the United States. Humor can be utilized as a mechanism of heritage language maintenance in the diaspora.

The Armenian Language

The development of the two standards of Armenian, Eastern and Western, unfolded in an interesting way. Dating back to the 5th century, Mesrop Mashtots established Grabar, the first written Armenian alphabet in 405 AD. This was considered Classical Armenian, and it was developed for the aristocrats and churchmen. Throughout the years, the Armenian language went through many different impactful difference periods. From Grabar to middle Armenian to Ashkharabar (civil language) to Modern Armenian, which is the vernacular now (Dum-Tragt, 2009). Armenian is part of the Indo-European language family, but it wasn't always.

The development of the print capital in the 16th century started a huge direction toward the reformation of the Armenian language. The first published work on Modern Armenian political philosophy, called *Nor Tetrak,* New Book, was published in 1772 by Shahamir Shahmirian. The role of print capital became very significant in this period because it signified modernism, and as a result of printing, allowed worldwide dissemination. Mkhitar Sebastac'i also had a great impact on the role language played in the formation of the Armenian nation because he believed that schools should provide a higher level, or a more Westernized form, of education to regularize the Armenian language. He produced vernacular grammar into models. The first model explains the vernacular spoken language of Armenian. The second model, which was never published, was more about syntax. Sebastats'i tried to cleanse all Latin influences, and all sorts of external and alien influences on translations.

Whereas the formation of Western Armenian was codified in the first half of the 18th century by Mkhitar Sebastsi's work "Grammar of Modern Armenia" (Dum Tragt, 2009), he struggled over whether classical or vernacular should provide the basis for the new literary language (Cowe, 1992). The formation of Modern Eastern Armenian (MEA) took place in the mid-19th century. Xacatur Abovean played a key role in the formation of MEA. He was a teacher of classical and foreign languages that believed we need to employ vernaculars as a literary medium, and here he writes and publishes the first book written in the vernacular language, "The Wounds of Armenia" (Cowe, 1992). Although it is in the Kanaker dialect, it had a huge impact on the direction the vernacular language took. "Establishing MEA was the main aim of the Armenian nationalists at the eve of the Armenian massacres in the Ottoman Empire. Armenians were not only fighting for their political independence, but for their survival and for the maintenance of their main ethnic frame; their homeland, their people, and their language" (Dum-Tragt, 2009).

In the 1800-1850's the appearance of new literary languages emerged. Two forms of modern Armenian emerged, Eastern and Western, dividing the language into two standards. Modern Armenian is a pluricentric language, meaning both literary standards are used by one people, yet neither is the norm of a sovereign country (Cowe, 1992). The language laws, which were created in 1993 state that Armenian is the language of the state, but the laws do not specify which standard, however we know that Eastern Armenian is the one widely spoken and commonly accepted in The Republic of Armenia today. The purification of Western Armenian, which still uses classical orthography, took place in the Ottoman Empire.

In the 1920's and 1930's Eastern Armenian orthography began to undergo changes as it was reformed under Soviet rule. Prior to Soviet rule, both standards used the same orthography.

Currently, Eastern Armenian uses a reformed orthography, which happened while under Soviet rule. Since Western Armenian is a language without a state, it has had a lot of influences from other dominant languages. The linguistic and cultural distance and capacity to differentiate themselves is a positive advantage for entire collectives of these victims of the newly emergent world. Since language is such an important part of ethnicity, the struggle over language is the struggle over ethnic dominance (Kagan, 1991).

Armenians in the United States

While the population of the Republic of Armenia is approximately three million, the population of the Armenian diaspora is about seven million people, with an estimated one and a half-two million residing in the United States (Kiprop, 2019). The states with the largest Armenian populations are California, Massachusetts, and New York, however, there are also significant Armenian populations in New Jersey, Michigan, Florida, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Rhode Island and Texas (Kiprop, 2019). The first Armenians in the United States can be traced back to the late 1600's, however, the first wave of immigration did not begin until the late 19th early 20th century. During this time, Armenians started to arrive to the U.S. in higher numbers, seeking asylum from the Hamidian Massacres in the Ottoman Empire (1894-1896) and the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923) (Mirak, 2004). During this time, Armenians settled mainly on the East Coast, with some finding solace in Frenso, California. The second wave of immigration occurred after World War II under the Displaced Persons Act, beginning in 1948 up until the 1960s. During this time, Armenians continued to immigrate and find solace on the East Coast. However, it wasn't until the 1980s that Armenians began to find refuge on the West Coast, more specifically, Southern California and especially in the greater Los Angeles area. From the 1980s to the 2000s, the immigrant population from Armenia, Iran, and Lebanon more than doubled in

California, continuing to increase in Los Angeles, even today. Factors that influenced the influx of immigration during this time was the 6.8 magnitude earthquake that affected the northern region of the former Soviet Union in December of 1988, called the Spitak earthquake, killing 60,000 people and destroying half a million buildings. A few years later in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, influencing many Armenians to leave and find refuge in Southern California.

Armenians in Los Angeles

Flash forward to the 21st century, we see that in Los Angeles, Armenian humor raises a particular familial relevance within Armenian heritage speakers, as it appeals to many of the social, cultural, and emotional aspects of living in the diaspora. The United States holds the third largest population of the Armenian diaspora, ranging somewhere between 475,000- 1.3 million people (Kossakian, 2013). According to the most recent US Census data, there are 171, 144 speakers of Armenian in Los Angeles County. Los Angeles, is very unique for the Armenian language since there is daily language contact and interaction with both standards of Armenian, as well as many different dialects. The immigration to Los Angeles has been the third and more recent wave, and has spanned over a few decades, during which hard living conditions in Armenia and diasporic hostland countries have continued to attract newcomers to the United States. The 1989 earthquake in Spitak, followed by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which turned into a war between Karabakh (recently also known as Artsakh), and Azerbaijan, and the fall of the Soviet Union sharply accelerated Armenian emigration (Yeghiazaryan et al., 2003). California served as the destination for all Armenians, coming from Armenia and various other hostlands. This includes Iranian Armenians, native-born Armenians, Russian Armenians, and Lebanese Armenians. Many Armenians consider Los Angeles to be an extension of the Republic

of Armenia, as it is home to the third largest Armenian population. The first being the Republic of Armenia and the second Moscow, Russia.

The growing population of Armenians in Los Angeles naturally lends itself to many cultural and social events, as well as the increase in Armenian language education options available for primary schooling. The first private Armenian school to open and serve the Armenians of Los Angeles was Ferrahian Armenian School, which was established in 1964 and had a total of 615 students enrolled. Today, there are 24 Armenian schools in the United States, with 15 in Southern California, two in the Northern California Bay Area, and five on the East Coast (Chahinian & Bakalian, 2015). Armenian private schools teach all subjects in English, with the exception of Armenian language, Armenian history, and religion.

Public schools soon began to incorporate elements of Armenian language and culture in after school programs, the first to enroll students was in 1987, called The Davidian and Mariamian Educational Foundation. In 2007, the Glendale Unified School District (GUSD) added its first Spanish dual language program across multiple elementary schools in Glendale. Since then, GUSD has also added programs to include Italian, French, German, Armenian, Japanese, and Korean. This program, called the Foreign Language Academics of Glendale, is a dual immersion program. In particular, the Armenian program fosters a 50/50 bilingual immersion model where students receive content instruction in Armenian and in English. Half of the day will be content taught in Armenian, and the other half, in English. They switch which subject gets instruction in each of the two languages every month.

The increasing number of Armenians and available Armenian-language education in Los Angeles highlights a very large community, making up a large portion of the immigrant community in LA, that often goes understudied. The need for research on Armenian heritage

language speakers in Southern California and in Los Angeles is necessary because of the number of individuals who are children of immigrants and attend Armenian schools. The Armenian immigrant population has built out a social, cultural, and educational infrastructure to support the maintenance of Armenian culture, heritage, and language.

Theoretical Framework

Ethnic Identity

Language is one of the most important factors in the maintenance of a strong ethnic identity, especially for minorities (Edwards, 1997; Joseph, 2004). Ethnic identity is fluid and socially formed, reflecting a sense of belonging to a group of people who share a common heritage, such as language, traditions, religion, beliefs, and ancestry (Hecht et al., 1993). Building on the social psychology model of social identity (Tajfel, 1981), Phinney (1989) defines ethnic identity in three stages: (1) commitment and attachment, (2) exploration, and (3) achieved ethnic identity. Commitment and attachment refer to the extent of an individual's sense of belonging to their group, exploration refers to the engagement in activities that increase knowledge and experiences of one's ethnicity, and achieved ethnic identity refers to having a clear sense of group membership and what one's ethnicity means to the individual (Phinney, 1989). For minorities, social identity impacts individual identity based on perceptions, held by themselves and how they are perceived by others.

Research on African American racial identity has focused on properties associated with detailing the meaning of being African American and the properties associated with racial and ethnic identity. The Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) proposes four dimensions of African American racial identity: salience, centrality, regard, and ideology (Sellers et al., 1998). Salience describes how much a person's race matter to their self-concept in a

particular moment or situation. Centrality refers to the degree which a person normally defines their identity through their perceptions of self and race, relatively constant and stable across situations and contexts. Regard highlights feelings of positivity or negativity towards identity, and ideology is the persons beliefs, opinions, and attitudes about the way they feel members of their race should act. Individuals' views on the relevance and meaning of race might affect how they perceive and act in particular situations (Sellers et al., 1998). These four dimensions that create racial identity influence behavior at the event level, meaning that identity is influenced based on situations and circumstances. While previous studies have looked at African American populations, this study can extend the framework to the Armenian culture and language, further informing the literature and our understanding on how other ethnic communities and populations interact with the MMRI framework. Extending our understanding of the Armenian population in Los Angeles can also shed light on other immigrant populations in the surrounding areas.

Language Socialization

Language socialization examines how novices are socialized to use language as well as how language is used to socialize novices to become component members of their community (Ochs, 1990). This framework also focuses on the connections between language use and larger cultural contexts of communication (He, 2012). In a diglossic context, the transmission of the heritage language takes place in formal settings (e.g., the classroom) and arguably more importantly, informally (e.g., in the home, across generations, in the community). Here, language socialization and acquisition are seen as an intertwined process. Through language socialization, heritage language speakers learn early on which registers are used when and in what context. This theory also views identity as a result of socialization, as something that is created, rather than simply reflected, through language.

Therefore, this dissertation aims to uncover students' relationship with their heritage through the lens of ethnic identity, as language and identity are intermingled. It attempts to answer the questions of how students of Armenian heritage interact with their linguistic backgrounds, how they experience Armenian humor in the classroom and in the community, and what tools professors use in their college classroom to facilitate heritage language maintenance. Ethnic humor acts as a tool for identity negotiation, a safe place to practice language use, and as resources for the heritage language speaker, while also helping to reduce and lessen tensions, increase positive classroom climate, and provide a safe space to build community and camaraderie in heritage language classrooms. Professors also play an important part in Armenian language and identity development and humor is critical in aiding identity formation. This dissertation fills the gaps in the highly understudied field of Armenian language and studies in the diaspora. It also adds to the literature on the use of humor in heritage language classrooms, as humor has previously only been studied in foreign or second language classrooms. In this dissertation, I argue that ethnic humor acts as a tool for identity display and safe language practice, while also helping to reduce tensions, increase positive classroom climate and provide a safe space to build community and camaraderie in heritage language classrooms.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This study explored Armenian college-aged heritage language speakers and their engagement and interactions with their heritage language, with an emphasis on humor and classroom experiences. It includes attitudes about learning Armenian, incorporating participants' feelings about their identity, experiences in Armenian language college classrooms, and the sentiments they hold of their heritage.

Research question one and two focus on Armenian heritage language speakers' experiences in an Armenian language course as well as their perceptions of Armenian humor used in educational contexts for language-learning purposes. It included attitudes about learning Armenian, incorporating students' attributes to identity and their relationship with the Armenian language, experiences in Armenian heritage language classrooms, including what they enjoy about the course, what they would change, and how humor was used in the classroom. This study also explored the pedagogies of Armenian language professors, incorporating aspects of their teaching philosophy, including investigating humor as a pedagogical tool. It was guided by the following research questions:

1. How are bilingual students of Armenian heritage engaging with their linguistic heritage in the community and in the classroom?
2. How are students experiencing Armenian humor, both as a community member and as a heritage language student?
3. What pedagogical tools are professors using in their classrooms to facilitate heritage language learning and maintenance in university-level heritage language courses, including the use of humor?

Study Design

The current research was conducted using a qualitative phenomenological approach. I interviewed students and professors about their focused life history, details of their schooling experience, and their reflection on the meaning of learning and "being" Armenian (Seidman, 2013). A phenomenological study is conducted to understand a participants' experiences and interpretations of a given phenomenon. It encompasses the whole participant such that it focuses on the participant's past, present and future. Qualitative methods were chosen for several reasons. Firstly, no literature examines the complexity of pedagogical tools used in Armenian heritage language college classrooms in Los Angeles. Previous research in the Armenian community has examined Armenian heritage language speakers and experiences with the language (Imbens-Bailey, 1996; 2000; Karapetian, 2014), and humor has been examined only in second or foreign language classrooms (Schmitz, 2002; Syafiq, 2012; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2010). Taking the previous studies one step further, the aims of this study were to provide an in depth, descriptive picture of how heritage speakers are interacting with their heritage language and how they are experiencing their heritage language in the college classroom, with a critical lens on interactions with humor inside the classroom and outside the classroom. In order to capture the thoughts of this community, I decided that phenomenological interviews were the best method to capture the essence of my inquiry.

Recruitment Procedure

IRB approval was received in February 2022. Participants for the study were recruited through social media groups and through snowball sampling. Flyers were distributed on appropriate Armenian student focused social media pages (e.g., All-Armenian Students Association on Instagram and Facebook). Emails were also sent to student groups (e.g.,

Armenian Students' Associations, Armenian student groups). Students who participated in the study were also asked to forward the study flyer to any friends or classmates that fit the criteria and who might be interested in participating. The recruitment flyer and information sheet can be found in Appendices A and B. Those who were interested in participating emailed me expressing their interest. After going back and forth through email to confirm if they were eligible (e.g., they had previously taken an Armenian language course and they have basic conversational skills), we scheduled a Zoom interview to take place. All participants who reached out to me were eligible to participate.

Initially, the professors who were identified or mentioned during the student interviews were emailed and asked to participate in the study. However, this yielded only four professors to contact. As a result, I created a list of potential professors to contact in Los Angeles. I first began by finding which schools have Armenian Students' Associations (ASAs), as those schools have a sizable number of Armenian-heritage students and would be more likely to offer an Armenian-language course. I found a comprehensive list of all schools in the country that have ASAs through an organization called All-ASA, which is the all-encompassing Armenian Students' Association organization that works to unify the various Armenian college/university associations. From there, I narrowed down the schools in Los Angeles since that was the focus of this study. Once the schools that have ASAs in Los Angeles were identified, I began to look online at the course schedule to assess if these schools offer Armenian-language courses. If the school offered an Armenian language course, I went to the faculty page to find any form of contact information to reach out to them. None of the faculty pages included phone numbers (likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and their courses being online during the time of data collection), therefore I used the email address listed. I emailed 10 professors, giving them some

background information on my study and asking them if they would be willing to participate in an interview lasting approximately an hour asking them about their teaching history, teaching philosophy and about their curriculum development process. From these 10 professors that were contacted, four were willing to participate.

Participants

Students. Participants (*N=17*) were young adults recruited from four universities in Los Angeles that offered Armenian language courses. Men and women who had previously taken an Armenian language course in the last 5-10 years were recruited to participate. Individuals were able to participate if they were an Armenian heritage language speaker, i.e., they needed to be ethnically Armenian and grew up with some ties to Armenian heritage and language either broadly or narrowly defined, if they have basic conversational and receptive skills in Armenian, and if they had previously taken an Armenian language course. The level of the language course (beginner, intermediate, or advanced) was not a consideration as a selection criterion because the pedagogical approaches were the focus rather than the language level being taught. Participants came from varied linguistic and academic backgrounds. The response rate for student participation in interviews was 85%. An overview of the participants in terms of their gender, major, variety of Armenian spoken in the home and the modality in which they took the Armenian course is shown in Table 1. The final sample for the student participants encompassed a variety of backgrounds in terms of gender, school majors, and spoken standards of Armenian in the community that is most likely not dissimilar to the variety of backgrounds for many young college-going Armenians in the Los Angeles area.

Table 1

Participant Overview

Name*	Gender	Major	Variety of Armenian spoken at home (Eastern or Western Standard)	Course Modality (in person or online)
Sophia	F	Psychology	Eastern (Iranian)	In Person
Amelia	F	Psychology	Eastern	In Person
Ariana	F	Political Science & Middle East Studies	Western	In Person
Harry	M	Computer Science	Eastern	In Person
Arthur	M	Middle East Studies	Western	In Person
Nicole	F	History	Eastern (Iranian)	Online
Talin	F	Political Science	Western	In Person
George	M	History	Western	Both
Paulina	F	Physiological Sciences	Western	Online
Alice	F	Philosophy	Eastern	In Person
Victoria	F	Mechanical Engineering	Western	Online
Nayiri	F	Chemical Engineering	Eastern	In Person
Vahe	M	Environmental Science	Western	In Person
Evelyn	F	Slavic Languages	Eastern	Both
Mary	F	Health Promotion & Disease Prevention	Eastern	In Person
Edward	M	Philosophy	Eastern	In Person
Hailey	F	Linguistics & French	Eastern (Iranian)	In Person

* All names are pseudonyms.

Student Participant Demographics

The final student participant sample included 12 women (71%), and 5 men (29%). Ten participants spoke the Eastern standard at home (three out of the ten speaking the Iranian dialect of the Eastern standard) while seven spoke the Western standard at home. Twelve participants took an Eastern language course, four took Western, while one participant took both Eastern and Western standards. Fourteen participants were born in the U.S., two were born in Syria and one participant was born in Iran. Of the three participants born outside of the U.S., two emigrated to the U.S. when they were young and one emigrated at an older age. Further demographics can be seen in Table 2 below. Of the 17 participants, two came from a family where their parents spoke different standards. In this case, when asked what standard they speak at home, those participants identified with their mother's spoken standard. Two participants were only maternally Armenian and fall into the broadly defined heritage language speaker's definition. These participants did not grow up speaking Armenian, however, they learned it either through a Birthright program to Armenia or in college. From these two participants, one spoke a standard that was different from her mother's, due to learning Eastern Armenian through Birthright, while her mother identified as a Western speaking Armenian. Five participants also attended Armenian private school for their K-12 education, two participants attended Armenian Cultural School on the weekends (i.e., Saturday school), three participants had strong familial ties to Armenia and spent many summers immersed in the language, and seven participants took Armenian formally for the first time in college. This is likely typical of the distribution of Armenian-language primary schooling in the community, as there is a good mix of Armenian private schools and Armenian weekend schools, with some participants not active in either of those programs.

Table 2

Student Participant Demographics (N=17)

	n	%
Gender		
Female	11	65
Male	6	35
Country of Birth		
United States	14	82
Iran	1	6
Syria	2	12
Parent's Origin		
United States	4	23
Armenia	7	41
Iran	3	18
Lebanon	1	6
Syria	2	12

Student participants were also asked to rate their proficiency levels for speaking, reading and writing in Armenian. These ratings were completed on a 3-point scale: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. We see that most participants (64%) consider themselves advanced in terms of speaking, however this percentage decreases to 47% for advanced in reading and 41% when rating themselves as advanced in writing. Four participants consider themselves intermediate in speaking (24%), five participants consider themselves intermediate in terms of reading (29%), and six participants consider themselves intermediate in writing (35%). Less participants consider themselves beginner, however, we still see two participants rate themselves as beginner in speaking (12%), and four participants rate themselves as beginner in reading and writing. These ratings can also be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Student Participant Self-Ratings of Armenian Language Proficiency

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
	n (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
Armenian			
Speaking	2 (12)	4 (24)	11 (64)
Reading	4 (24)	5 (29)	8 (47)
Writing	4 (24)	6 (35)	7 (41)

Participants were also asked how many Armenian language courses they took. Four participants took 1 Armenian language course in college, five participants took 2 language courses, five participants took 3 language courses, and three participants took 4 or more Armenian language classes. You can see this breakdown in Table 4 below. Eight participants took a course that was different from the standard that they spoke at home. Two participants took a course different then their standard because they were curious to learn a standard different than their own, six participants took a course other than their standard because that was all the school offered. Some schools offer both Eastern and Western standards, while other schools only offer one. This could be due to school funding and budgeting allocated for language, especially minority languages, or lack of qualified professors in each respective standard. Ten participants had also studied the language either in private school, Saturday school, private tutoring, or had exposure to the language due to traveling to Armenia frequently. Table 4 below also shows the breakdown of course modality. It is likely that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted some participants' recent experiences as the classrooms shifted to remote instruction. Three participants took a language course online, two participants took a course both in person and online, while 12 students took a course in person.

Table 4

Course Modality Information

	n

# of Courses Taken	
1	4
2	5
3	5
4	3
Level of Course	
Beginner	7
Intermediate	8
Advanced	8
Course Modality*	
In Person	14
Online	5

*Two students took courses both in person and online.

In the table above, we also see some students took a combination of beginner, intermediate and advanced courses, which is why the numbers in this section add up to more than seventeen. For example, the beginner and intermediate courses are year-long courses. So, if a participant took Armenian courses for the entire year, they would have taken 2 beginner courses (or 3 if their school was on a quarter system). Similarly, if a participant took a beginner course and then jumped to an intermediate course, that was also captured here. As we see in the table above, 13 participants took more than one Armenian language course. It is also the case that two students started taking courses before the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to remote instruction, and continued during the pandemic, which is why the total for this number also exceeds seventeen.

Professor Participant Demographics

Professors were recruited from three schools in Los Angeles. The response rate for professor participations in interviews was 40%. Because the number of 2-year to 4-year institutions in Los Angeles that offer Armenian language courses is scarce, I will refrain from sharing individual detailed demographic data since professor identity is highly personally identifiable information. Professors had been teaching for a range of 7-18 years. The inclusion criteria for professors required that they currently teach language courses or taught a language course in the last year. Some professors strictly taught language courses, while others taught a combination of language and culture courses. Three professors taught beginner and intermediate courses, while one professor taught beginner, intermediate, and advanced courses. One professor was female while the other three were male. There was a mix of professors who taught at a community college or at a 4-year university.

Instruments

Semi-Structured Student Interviews

Interview Procedure. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews took place on Zoom to maximize the safety of everyone involved. The interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes to 1and a half hour. At the start of the interview participants were briefed with the study's information sheet, purpose of the study. I also answered any questions that they may have had upfront. I then asked for verbal consent and assured that confidentiality would be maintained. I also disclosed that they are free to discontinue participation at any point. Participants were also asked if they would be comfortable if I recorded the interviews and reassured that only I would listen to the recording, and it would be for transcribing and coding purposes. As mentioned, during the initial interviews, students were asked to nominate a professor that they thought employed unique pedagogical tools in the classroom.

Interview Protocol. Interviews served as a main source of data. The semi-structured student interviews followed a phenomenological approach in order to understand participants' understanding of their experiences. Interviews were conducted over Zoom in a single 33–96-minute session, with an average of 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded on the Zoom cloud, which automatically provided a transcript, which was then verified by going through and listening to the transcript again while making the necessary edits in case the transcription service mis-caught something. Notes were taken throughout the interview to emphasize important points or areas to further probe. The interviews involved three main sections: questions pertaining to Armenian identity, questions about their attitudes about the language, and questions pertaining to their attitudes about the Armenian language course that they took along with their overall classroom experience. Background information and necessary demographic information was collected at the beginning of the interview.

Following the background and demographic information sections, I transitioned into asking students what "Armenian identity" means to them. I initially asked these questions broadly and then probed for further detail as they responded. This portion of the interview included asking questions about what makes them Armenian, and what being Armenian means to them. Towards the end of the interview, I asked students whether the language course helped strengthen or negotiate their identity, tying in their answer with their previously explained identity. The purpose of this question was to invite any additional comments and connections between language and identity that had not previously been mentioned throughout the interview.

Following the identity section, I began to ask questions about their language attitudes towards Armenian. Then I asked questions pertaining to language interactions, i.e., who they usually speak Armenian with, what the topics of conversations typically are, and how they feel

when they speak in Armenian. These questions were asked in order to elicit information about their relationship with the language through who they speak with and how speaking Armenian makes them feel. The interactions with the language also provide information about the relationship that they have with their heritage language. Following this section, I then asked participants about their experiences in the language classroom. I began by asking what motivated them to enroll in an Armenian language class, then continuing to ask about activities that they enjoyed from the course, what lessons they thought were unique, leading up to asking if the course helped negotiate or strengthen their previously mentioned Armenian identity. I also asked participants if they noticed their professor employing any unique methods in the classroom, allowing them to list everything they thought was unique about their course. If humor was not mentioned, I would then probe them about their thoughts on using humor in the classroom and if their professor employed humor in their course.

At the end of the classroom experiences portion of the interview, I asked participants two detailed questions in order to elicit their emotions about the courses they had taken in hindsight: *If you were to take a language course today, what would you need from the professor?*, followed by, *if someone was to come to the class with a lot of anxiety, how would the professor make this student feel comfortable?* Although a variation of these questions was asked throughout the interview, these questions specifically were asked at the end of the interview to serve as a reflection piece and served as an opportunity for students to add any details they may have missed or reflect on their experience from another lens. Following each interview, I immediately took notes, highlighted instances that stood out to me, and jotted down memos that suggested connections that participants were making between humor and language learning that were echoed in previous interviews.

Semi-Structured Professor Interviews

Interview Procedure. Interviews were conducted both online and in person. Two interviews were conducted online due to time constraints and geographical limitations, while the other two interviews were conducted in person. Interviews with professors lasted approximately one hour. Two of the interviews were not recorded while the other two lasted 62 minutes and 58 minutes. At the start of the interview, I provided a brief background on my study and asked for verbal consent. One professor was not comfortable being recorded, while the other non-recorded interview took place before and after classroom observations, where I was able to ask the necessary and relevant questions from my protocol.

Interview Protocol. The semi-structured interviews followed a phenomenological approach in order to understand the professor's focused teaching history, details of their teaching pedagogy, and their reflection on the meaning of teaching and learning Armenian. The professor interviews took place either as a phone call, Zoom call, or in person. Notes were taken throughout the interview to emphasize important points or areas to further probe. Background information and necessary demographic information was collected at the beginning of the interview.

Following the background and focused teaching history information sections, I transitioned into asking professors what their teaching philosophy entails. I initially asked these questions broadly and then probed for further detail, for example, what does their curriculum development process entail. This portion of the interview included asking questions about how they gauge different proficiency levels, what role humor plays (if any) in their curriculum, and how they encourage students to continue to learn after they leave the course.

At the end of the teaching philosophy portion of the interview, I asked professors two detailed questions in order to elicit their emotions about the course in hindsight: *how do you think about using modern literature or media in facilitating language learning,* followed by, *how do you view Armenian language maintenance in the diaspora?* Although a variation of these questions was asked throughout the interview, these questions specifically were asked at the end of the interview as a way to conclude the interview and understand the professor's personal stance on the matter, beyond their teaching philosophy. During the interviews that were not recorded, I did my best to take detailed notes throughout the interview and then did voice memoirs right after the interview to ensure as much accuracy as possible. For the two recorded interviews, I made sure to jot down any notes of instances that stood out to me.

Classroom Observations. Classroom observations were used to triangulate what the students said in their interviews and to add context to the interviews conducted with the professors. I employed a macro to micro lens to observe professor and student communicative interactions and professors' pedagogy style. See Appendix E for observation protocol. Moreover, the purpose of the observations was to document the level of engagement students showed in the course, how the professors employed and attracted engagement in the course, how the professors handled different proficiency levels, and how the professors used humor in the classroom.

Recruitment for classroom observations began when I emailed the identified professors in student interviews as using engaging pedagogical tools and asked them if I would be able to observe their classroom. I emailed the four initially identified professors asking them if I can observe their classroom, followed by an interview. I only heard back from two of these professors. I coordinated with the two professors who did respond to confirm that days that I was planning on observing would disrupt the class the least. I was able to conduct classroom

observations for two professors, totaling to six classroom observations and approximately 13 hours. I observed one professor two times across two different courses, one a beginner course and one an intermediate level course. These were on Zoom because this professor was teaching online during the quarter the data was collected. Each course was 1 hour and 50 minutes long and covered homework review, grammar, reading, and speaking exercises. The second professor was observed 4 times (all in person since this professor was teaching in a hybrid model), across 3 different courses, beginner, intermediate, and advanced (the advanced course was observed twice). The beginner and intermediate courses were 2 hours and 20 minutes, while the advanced course was 1 hour and 50 minutes long. During this time, I jotted down any important information pertaining to the course content, techniques used by the professor, humorous things said, and student levels of engagement. The classroom observations were used as a tool to elicit deeper questions during my interviews with professors. It is important to note that while I was paying attention to the course content, my main focus of the classroom observations was the professors and their style of teaching, including any interesting, unique, and humorous moments that occurred. I then used the information from my observations to ask these professors about specific instances in the course while asking them to elaborate on their methods of teaching. These observations also provided a lot of context to their self-reported accounts of their teaching history, classroom climate, and overall experiences with their students across the different courses.

Course Information. In order to triangulate the data between the professor interviews and classroom observations, I also gathered information about the courses. This was done through asking the professors for their course syllabi. After emailing the professors, I was only able to obtain one syllabus. I therefore sought more information on the courses by reviewing the course

descriptions on the college or university website. In doing so, I realized this might be a more relevant portrayal of the course because this is the initial information that students see before deciding to enroll in the course. I found the course descriptions of the classes that the four interviewed professors teach. During this time, I was looking for any information that would help understand the intentions of the professor, how course concepts are communicated and if there are any differences in those concepts, and overall, how the structure of the course is presented to students. This included examining similarities and differences in the course descriptions. During this process I noticed that some descriptions provided more details than others.

Data Storage and Organization

In order to ensure efficient, organized and methodological data collection, a data organization plan was created before data collection began. An excel sheet with multiple tabs was created in order to organize student data, professor data, classroom data, timelines, and keep track of outreach and communication. This Excel sheet also included researcher memos to help organize my thinking process, keep track of the decisions I made, and document any questions or queries that arise throughout the process. I also maintained a separate database to ensure all collected participant data had been properly deidentified. All Zoom interviews were saved, and the auto-transcription was reviewed and cleaned. While the transcripts were being verified and cleaned, I utilized the comment function to highlight what stood out to me, what I wanted to further investigate, and what emerging themes I was noticing. I also began to color code sections as I noticed themes emerge, helping organize the data for further analysis. Then I uploaded the documents into MAXQDA. All subsequent coding on the edited transcripts were then coded in MAXQDA.

Coding and Analysis

Coding

The data analysis occurred in multiple stages. First, I began to review the data by listening to the recordings, verifying and re-reading the transcripts. This process began while data collection was still taking place. The process of qualitative research is iterative and generative, therefore, I used analytic memos to track emerging themes, concepts, and patterns as I explored the first transcripts obtained (Saldaña, 2013). Then, I began to analyze my data through a process of coding conducted on qualitative data analysis software, MAXQDA, as well as in Microsoft Word and Excel. I read and reread my data while looking for emerging themes in the interviews and patterned meanings. I went through the transcripts and commented on quotes that stood out to me, things that were repeated across most interviews, and new insights that were emerging from the protocol questions that were not previously considered. Using my research questions and my conceptual framework as a guide, data analysis occurred in multiple steps, with a rough, first encounter read through with descriptive coding to explain what was evident at first glance (Saldaña, 2013), continuing to parse commonalities and differences between my participants, to put together their demographic information, and to guide the following levels of coding. For research question one, I employed constant comparison analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) where I looked for categories, patterns, and themes in the transcript. I then continued with open coding, breaking down the data into small units. From there, I conducted axial coding, where I sorted these small units into categories. I then conducted selective coding, where I determined themes from the student interview data. While constant revision was occurring, I was able to allow themes to empirically emerge from my interview transcripts through multiple close readings.

To begin the coding process, I pulled focal questions from the interviews that provided data on the students' engagement with the language as well as their experiences with humor.

These questions were *(1) what does being Armenian mean to you?, (2) what motivated you to enroll in the Armenian language course?, (3) what media do you access in Armenian? and (4) what are your perceptions of including elements of Armenian humor in the classroom?* I reviewed each participant's response to this question, as well as any questions that I used to probe further. Through an open coding process, I applied descriptive codes (Saldaña, 2013), and compiled these codes onto a preliminary codebook. Using these preliminary codes, I began the initial round of coding, revising, and adjusting the codebook when necessary. After a couple weeks of coding, editing, and modifying, I was able to create the master codebook, which can be found in Appendix F.

For research question three, I followed a similar pattern to the student interview coding. I began with a rough, first read through of the four professor interview transcripts. For the subsequent levels of coding, I continued with In Vivo coding, reading through each interview about three times, marking salient quotes and phrases used by professors to inform my research question. The phrases that I identified across my participants gave me the means to continue with another round of values coding (Bazeley, 2013; Saldaña, 2013). I then utilized values coding to elicit what professors valued and prioritized when they teach Armenian. An example of what they prioritize would be writing skills or speaking skills. With values coding, I was also able to discern more common patterns, as well as the many differences, among my participants by reflecting their values, attitudes and beliefs and also describe the differences between teaching methods. I tried to highlight the similarities and differences that professors held in their teaching philosophy, as well as how they conceptualize these views into actionable lesson plans, i.e., their methods.

During classroom observations, I was looking for instances or references to humor use (particularly in familial or cultural context), ability to connect with the students during classroom or group discussions, as well as curriculum and lessons relating to culturally sustaining pedagogy. These observations were coded to the extent in which they provided further context and elicited more questions to ask the professors during our interview. Classroom observations also allowed me to triangulate the data in my study between my student and professor interviews. This process of thematic and descriptive coding helped establish properties encompassing multiple datasets, and ultimately, the process of axial coding refined the properties and related them to one other (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After adjusting and reiterating the codebook, I then used the final version of the codebook to calculate interrater reliability for the student interviews. In order to determine inter-rater reliability, approximately 20% of the student interviews, roughly 3 interview transcripts, were randomly selected and coded by a graduate student. The equation used for calculating interrater reliability was Miles and Huberman (1994) in which they state reliability=number of agreements/number of agreements + disagreements. There was 82% of interrater reliability for the student interview data. In order to determine inter-rater reliability for the professor interviews, all four transcripts were coded by the same graduate researcher. The same equation was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which led us to a reliability of 88% for the professor transcripts.

Analysis

Analysis Informing RQ1 and RQ2

In order to answer Research Question 1, *How are bilingual students of Armenian heritage using humor to engage with and comment about their linguistic heritage?* and Research Question two, *how are students experiencing Armenian humor, both as a community member and as a*

heritage language student? I conducted a constant comparison analysis, examining the commonalities and differences in my interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To examine commonality, I employed Excel in order to create a chart with the overview of observed themes. Any differences observed between participants were attempted to be explained. Research Question 2 focuses solely on the classroom experiences of the participants and is organized by participants' experiences in the course, experiences with humor outside of the course, and finally, experiences with humor in the course. Experiences with humor outside of the course highlights what comedians or humorous content they consume in the Armenian language, whereas the humor in their course describes humor that their professor employs. Research question two was also conducted with constant comparison analysis.

Analysis Informing RQ3

In order to answer Research Question 3, *What pedagogical tools are professors using in their classrooms to facilitate heritage language learning and maintenance in university-level heritage language courses, including the use of humor?* I analyzed four professor interview transcripts, which also included questions that were elicited from the classroom observations. Constant comparison analysis was also used to analyze research question three because its procedure to combine codes and theory development allows for the data to compliment theory. After an initial read through, I realized the professor interviews varied immensely. As a result, I created an Excel sheet where I listed each question that pertains to their teaching pedagogy and use of humor. I then filled in the Excel sheet with each professor's response. This allowed me to see the responses across one row. I noticed that there were minimal commonalities between each professor's teaching philosophy, therefore, I decided to break down the findings for this research question into categories, e.g., methods, humor, and goals, and answer the research question by

doing a case study on each professor. For example, all professors talked about the importance of using humor in the classroom, however, they all conceptualized it in different ways. This holds true for their pedagogical methods as well as goals for their students.

Trustworthiness

In order to address validity and reliability in my study, I adapted a framework that encompasses four criteria in qualitative data: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to establish credibility, I employed data triangulation by pulling data from multiple sources which included, student interviews, professor interviews, classroom observations, and course descriptions. I also used member checks to provide additional clarity on participant's responses when necessary, providing them with the opportunity to have autonomy over their data by establishing a role in the data analysis process. Member checks were conducted with five participants, where I emailed them asking for more context about a portion of the interview. This led to a brief phone call conversation with three of them. This helped clarify any missing information from the interviews and ensure I had understood what participants were meaning to convey. Finally, I noted discrepancies that I found in the data that I had not previously considered. These discrepant cases can be found in the findings and discussion sections and can be used to offer a different perspective on heritage languages in future studies. After conducting 14 interviews, I started to notice the same information was being repeated, thus indicating that I have reached saturation and felt comfortable with amount of data collected. The remaining three interviews were still conducted as they were already scheduled, however, participant recruitment was paused after interviewing 17 participants.

In order to establish transferability, I conducted analyses and findings closely to existing theory. In addition, I provide participant quotes in the findings section to highlight and illustrate the findings as richly as possible, in hopes to allow readers to see the relevance of these findings beyond the context of the current study as well as the applicable to other heritage languages (Creswell, 2014). For dependability, I reviewed interview transcripts for accuracy after receiving the transcription via online software (Zoom, which uses Ottar.ai). In addition, I documented my decision-making process by using coding memos, analysis memos, and journaling. I also triangulated multiple data sources to ensure my analysis is dependable and valid. In particular, for research question three, I triangulated between classroom observations, professor interviews, and available course syllabi and descriptions. By comparing and contrasting these three sources of data, I was able to provide a holistic overview of Armenian language pedagogy and how it is executed in Los Angeles. In addition to these components, to reach confirmability of the data, I participated in dialogic engagement with a fellow graduate student to ensure interpretations were understood and accepted by individuals by someone other than myself as researcher (Creswell, 2014).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The following chapter is organized by research question. Informed by thematic analysis, research question one investigates heritage language speakers' views of their heritage language, humor, and language-learning experiences. The first research question elicits information about how heritage language speakers are engaging with their heritage language (this includes engagement with their identity, media in the Armenian language, and the community). Research question two is related to the experiences that heritage language speakers have in Armenian language courses at the college level. Research question three investigates the pedagogical approaches Armenian professors use in their courses, including elements of humor. The fieldnotes from the classroom observations and the course information drawn from course catalogs are interwoven throughout the findings on professors to further contextualize the instructional settings.

Engagement with the Heritage Language

To identify how participants are engaging with aspects of their heritage language, I conducted a thematic analysis using an iterative coding process, modifying codes as I collected more data. Based on the participants' responses to the open-ended, semi-structured interview questions, I was able to organize my codes into broad themes. This process was iterative and reflexive, which led me to identify subcodes as belonging to three descriptive themes: participants' engagement with their identity, participants' engagement with Armenian media, and participants' engagement with community members. The findings for research question one is presented by theme below. See figure 1 below for an overview of the three main themes and subcodes for research question one.

Figure 1
Research Question One Themes and Subcodes

Theme	Engagement with Heritage Language
Engagement with Identity	Language as a top factor
	Ties between language and culture
	Language not a precursor to identity
	Minimal engagement with the language
	Friendships in Armenian
	Feelings when speaking Armenian
	Guilt
	Complex identities
Engagement with Media	Current affairs and news consumption in Armenian
	Literacy
	Voluntary participation in identity
Engagement with Community	Seeking belongingness
	Community responsibility

Engagement with Identity

Students discussed many factors pertaining to identity development which included identity markers such as: history, blood, genetics, culture, food, traditions, values, religion, and language. Two participants had an inclination during the interview to identify genetics as a large factor in identity development, while three participants thought culture and religion play the biggest role in being Armenian. However, 13 participants identified language as the main factor in determining identity. While some participants were confident in their identification of the factors that make them Armenian, others felt they were not "Armenian enough" as they were listing identity markers. Nevertheless, most participants were quick to decide language as the

main and most influential factor that makes them Armenian. The sections below will include findings on the role language plays in Armenian identity.

Language as a top factor

In the quest to define identity, language was declared as one of the top factors listed in my interviews. The first few questions in the interview protocol gauged a student's personal definition of 'Armenian identity' by asking them the following questions: *(1) what makes you Armenian? and (2) what does 'being' Armenian mean to you?* These questions were asked to gauge their Armenian identity, to elicit feelings of belongingness, and to understand if they currently take any actions to strengthen their identity.

Throughout all interviews, language was recurring as the top factor in identity determination. Arthur, for example, explains that while his definition of Armenian identity has changed over time, he would rank language as the main criteria today.

> "I'd probably say language, more than anything. Because you know, like I don't want to go into genetics and blood…I don't really eat Armenian food every day either… so I think it's mostly language" (Arthur).

He goes on to talk about how his experiences growing up have also influenced and shaped him, and as he recalls his experiences, he remembers language was always at the forefront. Another participant, Talin, ranks speaking Armenian as the number one thing that makes her Armenian. She talks about how she and her family must fight every day to maintain their Armenian-ness. When I asked her to elaborate on what this fight entails, she brought up an example of her experience as a child getting constantly scolded by her grandparents to speak Armenian. She and her cousins would respond to her grandparents in English and would get reprimanded to respond in Armenian if they are being spoken to in Armenian. She compares this memory to her experiences speaking Armenian today, and how frustrated she becomes when she

is trying to remember a certain word and how it has become a conscious effort to try to speak Armenian currently. George talks about a similar situation where his parents were strict with him and his sister when they were younger, telling them to speak Armenian in the house so "our language becomes stronger and so we're good at speaking Armenian". George goes on to recount his experiences growing up attending an Armenian private school, stating that although he now classifies language of utmost importance, he remembers speaking English most of the time while in school.

George's experiences contrast with Paulina's experience as a heritage language speaker who grew up in a country where the host language was different from Armenian. Paulina was born in Syria and immigrated to the United States as a teenager. Her command of Armenian is strong, as she considers herself advanced in all competencies. Paulina also attended Armenian primary school in Syria, however, she recounts that she would never speak to another Armenian in Arabic. While the language of instruction in Paulina's case was Arabic, and the students only received one hour of Armenian instruction a day, functioning as a second language class, she says she would never imagine speaking to her Armenian teacher or Armenian friends in Arabic. George's schooling experience echoed a similar pattern, where subject areas are taught in English, the language of the host country, and Armenian was only taught as a language course, however his social experiences in school were vastly different. George mentions he would mostly speak English to his friends and teachers, even if they were Armenian. The reason Paulina maintains Armenian language discourse with her friends and teachers while George does not may be because the diaspora in the Middle East have been resisting assimilation for centuries longer than the diaspora in Los Angeles. Despite these vastly differing experiences, George and Paulina both listed the Armenian language of paramount importance.

Ties Between Language and Culture

The link between culture and language was highly evident for three participants, as they cannot separate the two. Below, I highlight instances where participants talk about how language can strengthen cultural ties. For example, Nayiri talks about the connection between language and culture. She talks about how she classifies being Armenian into two things: the genetic aspect and the cultural aspect. When probed on the cultural aspect, Nayiri talks about how part of being Armenian is being able to speak and write the language. She talks about how she finds herself trying to speak more Armenian at home with her parents and grandparents, even if they speak English. When she was further probed on why she talked about language being the prominent thing when talking about being Armenian, she states:

> "I feel like I've seen families where they stress using the language and they still speak Armenian… that also comes with keeping Armenian traditions, or I've noticed in households where the kids are born, they don't speak any Armenian at all, then I feel like there's less like tradition there. So, I feel like the two are not always, but I feel like a lot of the times go hand in hand. Or if you speak Armenian, you're more likely to carry on the culture and the tradition, although that's not necessarily true but I think the two maybe go hand in hand" (Nayiri).

Harry also talks about the connections between culture and language, highlighting the importance of understanding the language in order to understand the culture. Harry argues that part of being able to identify as an Armenian means knowing how to use the language.

> "I think in order to fully embrace the culture and identity of being Armenian you need to be able to communicate in Armenian in order to fully understand the meanings [of the sayings]. There's a lot of sayings, there's a lot of expressions, even words that just don't translate well" (Harry).

Hailey talks about her Armenian identity by describing the memories and the relationships she has had with family members. Hailey is half-Armenian, from her mom's side, and talks about the strongest link to her Armenian cultural identity was her grandmother.

> "The strongest link that I have to like an Armenian cultural identity was with my grandmother, and she sort of helped to raise my sister and I, and she introduced us to the language at like a very young age, though I didn't really learn to speak it significantly until undergrad, and so I think for me it's about the language" (Hailey).

Hailey goes on to also talk about culture, food, religion, and community also being strong factors in her Armenian identity. She talks about the strong sense of community Armenians have and how that probably contributes to how family oriented and how compassionate Armenians are about things. However, she also mentions that while language was one of the first things she mentioned about being Armenian, she also states that knowledge of the language should not be a hindrance to anyone that wants to identify as Armenian.

> "I don't think you have to speak Armenian perfectly in order to be like a valid Armenian. In fact, I think it's amazing how many different dialects and linguistic diversity we have within the scope of the Armenian language" (Hailey).

Here, Hailey is highlighting the Iranian dialect of the Eastern standard, which is what her mother speaks, as well as the Western standard. She talks about how living in California is unique because you get exposure to the different dialects and standards. She goes on to spontaneously introduce and talk about the humorous aspect of the comingling of the different standards and dialects. She talks about how the miscommunications between Eastern and Western Armenian are fun, as long as people are open minded to it, and how that makes for a funny or great experience.

Language is not a Necessary Precursor to Identity

While the connections between language and culture were highly evident, three participants also talked about how not knowing how to speak Armenian does not make you any less Armenian. While a couple participants have faced neglect and have been outcast from joining Armenian school organizations because they are not "Armenian enough", e.g., they don't have an Armenian last name, they are half-Armenian, they don't speak Armenian, or they don't

look Armenian, they go on to talk about how this needs to change. Vahe gave his opinions on what makes an Armenian. For him, personally, the biggest thing is that his family is from there. However, he doesn't think having lineage from Armenia should be a deciding factor in group membership or identity formation.

> "I don't think it's a requirement for someone to be 50% or 80% or 90% or 100% Armenian blood, to be Armenian it could be 25% or 50% and I don't think it's like a requirement for someone to speak the language or have mastery over language, of course, it helps and I think language is one of for sure, one of the easiest most solid ways of connecting with being Armenian, but I don't think it's only requirement. I think, as long as there's something that you can identify with, whether it's culture or history or if you really identify with Armenia as a place, whatever it is, I think that's valid too, one should be considered, you know, being Armenian" (Vahe).

While thirteen participants classified language as the topmost factor in identity development, there were also instances where participants refuted the notion of Armenian identity being composed of things that you can check off on a list, highlighting the complexity and nuances that are included in identity formation. More findings on identity can be found dispersed throughout the following sections.

Minimal engagement with language

While most participants were adamant about language being a main factor in determining their Armenian identity, eleven of the thirteen participants who rated language as a main factor did not regularly engage with the Armenian language, contradicting their previously stated stance on the matter. As the interview progressed, I asked participants various questions about their engagement with their heritage language. Some of these questions included, but were not limited to: *(1) who do you usually speak Armenian with? And (2) how do you feel when you speak Armenian with them?* These questions were asked in order to stimulate information about

their relationship with the Armenian language and what types of interactions they have in Armenian.

While 13 participants rated language as the top factor that makes them Armenian, when probed on "who they usually speak Armenian with" the responses were mainly their parents and their grandparents, followed by a "but not regularly" clause. Arthur and Vahe talk about how their parents' dominant language is English, leaving the only people they speak solely in Armenian to their grandparents. Arthur states how he used to talk more Armenian, but over the years there are "fewer and fewer people who I speak exclusively Armenian with."

There is a trend that heritage language speakers are not speaking Armenian with their own generation or with newer generations. Edward talks about how he feels like he will lose the language if he does not speak it with his future children. He goes on to talk about how easy it is to forget the grammar rules, forget how to read and write or even speak Armenian. He reflects on who he typically speaks Armenian with, and beyond his immediate family members, he talks to one friend who recently moved to the United States strictly in Armenian, but not with his long-time friends that he grew up with. He goes on to reflect on his relationship with his sister and states:

> "My sister and I obviously grew up together and we have the same upbringing, but I realize, we never speak to each other in Armenian. Like it's just not a thing, we just don't speak Armenian as much. It's like, you know, we will say a couple things or make a joke here and there, but not a lot" (Edward).

Edward's case, which he describes above, is common in Armenian households and occurs often. Nayiri says she speaks Armenian with her aunts and uncles and typically older generations. She clarifies that even though she speaks Armenian with her aunts and uncles, she does not speak Armenian with her cousins. This finding also holds true in Ariana's case, where she responds that she only speaks Armenian with older generations. When probed on why she

only speaks Armenian with older generations, she responds because there is a sense of respect speaking to older people in Armenian.

> "With older people [I speak] always in Armenian…I think with older people, I almost feel an obligation to do that because, like they're older and I want them to feel comfortable" (Ariana).

> "I will speak Armenian with my father-in-law as well because, for some reason, it feels more respectful to speak Armenian with him than English. Even though he's fully proficient [in English]" (Alice).

Both Ariana and Alice highlight that they speak Armenian with older generations as a sign of respect. This implies that they choose to speak Armenian not because they want to, but instead because they perceive their interlocutor will want them to speak Armenian. This indicates that speaking Armenian with older generations is not a choice that my participants make, but a choice that is made for them.

Friendships in Armenian

In contrast, 11 participants mentioned that they try to speak Armenian with their friends, however, their efforts make things complicated. For example, Nayiri says that it is difficult to speak with her friends in Armenian because not everyone is comfortable talking in Armenian in their everyday life. She goes on to explain how sometimes it is hard to understand the word borrowings of each respective standard (e.g., Eastern Standard has a lot of Russian borrowing, Western has a lot of Arabic). Nayiri goes on to mention how difficult it is to switch languages with someone once you have already established a relationship with them, e.g., Nayiri has already established her friendships in English and switching to Armenian would be difficult.

Nicole echoes this statement as well, stating that due to her friends speaking different standards and dialects than her, they choose to speak in English with one another. She states, "We all get along in English, let's just stick to English " highlighting the misrepresentation and

misunderstandings that occur in her interactions with her friends. In this quote, she is also alluding to the common power dynamics between the standards of Armenian. The struggle of each respective standard is widely known in the Armenian community. While mutually intelligible, each standard has differences in pronunciation, as well as word borrowings from geographically close languages that the interlocutor might not understand (Russian for Eastern Armenian, Arabic for Western Armenian).

Even though participants mentioned that they do not use Armenian regularly, eight participants mentioned that they use Armenian with their friends as a secret language. For example, when they are in public, they will revert to using Armenian so the people around them will not understand what they are saying.

> "I guess in situations where it would be rude to speak in English and it's like I have the fallback of speaking in Armenian and you know, trying to figure out a 'plan of attack'. This is informal but like if we're planning something about a guy in the periphery, like 'say this', but it's all in Armenian" (Talin).

Here, we see the use of Armenian when participants are out in public and want to talk about things so that those surrounding them will not understand. This topic of a 'secret language' came up in all interviews. Many participants stated that they also have a lot of pride when they speak Armenian. Talin further states that if someone hears her speaking Armenian in public and shows signs of not liking it, she will go on to speak even louder. Contrasting to Nayiri and Nicole's experience, Talin talks about how comfortable she is speaking with her friends in Armenian because she does not have to sound polished and can say what is on her mind and express herself in any way and she will be understood. It is important to note that Talin attended Armenian private school and can speak both Eastern and Western standards.

Feelings when Speaking Armenian

From the participants that identified they speak Armenian with their parents and grandparents, they all responded to feeling positive, at ease, and comfortable when they speak Armenian with their family. This could be because speaking Armenian with family members with whom they regularly converse with at home makes them feel safe. When asked in what topics they speak Armenian, all but two participants responded with common, mundane topics such as the weather, daily errands, and food. Participants expressed disdain over the fact that their lack of vocabulary and command of Armenian does not allow them to discuss technical, work-related, or abstract topics.

These realizations of not having full command of Armenian across all aspects of their lives raised instances where a couple participants expressed that they do not feel Armenian enough. When probed on what would make them feel Armenian enough, they answered that they did not know, but went on to talk about their experiences with the language, stating that they feel like they do not immerse themselves in their Armenian roots as much as they could, for example, in politics, history, or cooking enough Armenian food.

Guilt

Five participants expressed these feelings of guilt, taking ownership for how they feel solely based on their personal choices and that the weight of maintaining their culture is a personal decision and sits on their shoulders. These participants described this as a shortcoming that they face.

Nicole highlights how she feels a combination of guilt, shame, and embarrassment when she skips over reading a caption in Armenian on social media. Alice feels guilty for not "doing enough" Armenian things. This not only includes using the language, but also knowing enough history, or cooking Armenian food for dinner.

> "I feel guilty for not knowing as much as I should, for not cooking enough Armenian food. It's weird because I love Armenian food, but we have so much of it at family events that when I'm having dinner, I'm not thinking of making a big batch of tabbouleh or dolma. So that's why I don't feel Armenian enough and it always comes down to me in my head, a personal responsibility and stance. I'm not blaming anybody for these feelings or shortcomings" (Alice).

In these instances, we see Nicole and Alice feeling guilty for not being able to maintain their Armenian heritage as well as they would like it. George feels guilty that we are safe and comfortable here in America while those in Armenia are struggling, especially after the Artsakh 2020 war. He adds that he feels a sense of responsibility to go and defend his homeland. He expressed remorse that he is here in America safely getting a higher education while the kids in Armenia and Artsakh are not presented with the same opportunities.

Complex Identities

This next section highlights the complexities in identity that bilingual and bicultural individuals face in their daily lives. During the interview, I asked participants: *how do you identify?* This was asked to elicit responses around how they introduce themselves to various people. All participants identified as either Armenian, Armenian-American, or some combination of Armenian that includes where their parents are from (such as Armenia, Iran, or Syria). Most participants also stated that "it depends on who is asking them the question", for example, if they are meeting an Armenian, they will typically provide a more detailed example of where their family is from (i.e., *Parskahye,* Armenians from Iran). If they are meeting a non-Armenian, they will typically just introduce themselves as Armenian. Ten participants mentioned that they would say Armenian-American, highlighting that a significant aspect of their identity comes from being born and raised in the United States, however no participant identified as simply American. This section will also highlight the nuances in identity formation. Building off

the previous sections, this section highlights the complexities of responses that some participants provided.

Previous research highlights the complexities in identity development with regard to heritage language (Cabrera, 2013; Rumbart, 2005). Some factors that affect identity achievement include heritage language proficiency, historical contexts, language ideologies, and institutional policies (Leeman, 2015; Phinney et al., 2001). For Nicole, community associations and memories had the biggest impact on her identity formation. For example, it is not the food that makes her Armenian, but instead the memory of her coming home and smelling that her mom had made a traditional Iranian dish (Ghormeh sabzi, an Iranian herb stew, made with parsley, beans, and beef that many Iranian Armenians also eat).

> "There's such a disconnect between all these things that we think we are, that we think we have to be, and nobody knows the true answer of what is it that we're striving for? Because there's no concrete thing that we can attach ourselves to. Nobody really knows what they're like working towards. Yeah like French people know that they're French because they have this and that, and this is French so if you're a French person living in Haiti, or in America or whatever you know what's going to make you French you know what's going to make you German what's going to make you British you don't know what's going to make you Armenian because, I don't know, it's so fragmented and disputed" (Nicole).

Nicole feels as though there are so many disputed, opposing concepts that one defines as making them Armenian, and that these can change based on your background or, as she says, "what type of Armenian" you are. Nicole stated that she does not feel Armenian enough, however, when asked what it would take to achieve feeling enough, she stated "I don't think I could ever achieve that, I think that it's something I created for myself". Hence, Nicole feels as if she cannot determine what makes an Armenian and alludes to French people as having a more concrete, less fragmented definition of their identity. I probed her on her perceptions of French culture and asked if someone was on the outside looking into Armenian culture, would they also

think that we as Armenians have a standard, consistent answer to what makes us Armenian? After which she agreed and acknowledged that cultural identity may be more complicated than it seems to be at first glance and that Armenians are not likely the only community that struggles with identity. In another example, Talin attempted to describe how she feels about being Armenian.

> "There's just something there's one quality that you just can't explain, and I don't know, I can't really put it into words it's just like…like going and talking to a person or feeling that comfort, that's what makes me feel the most Armenian, more than anything. And the further and further I strayed away from being around Armenians, the more and more I started appreciating it and the more and more I started being more proud of it" (Talin).

Talin talks about how she was constantly surrounded by Armenians in her Armenian private primary school and in her hometown. Once she left her hometown for college and left her Armenian community, she realized how proud she was to be Armenian. Ariana also said that she has complicated feelings about her identity, while Harry said that identity is arbitrary. Vahe talks about how it is not something we can just check off in a list. Victoria provided another key perspective to the question of identity.

> "I think there is a very, I want to say, like specific characteristics that most Armenians have, and it feels like it's a variant of survival. And it does come back to your language in a way because we are fighting to keep that alive. We fight for our borders, you know, to not be completely wiped off the map, so it feels like taking part of that struggle in any form, and just simply being impacted by it in a way that most Americans don't understand that I think is integral to being Armenian. Like you're not indifferent to the state of that country. You're not disassociated from whether or not Armenia gets wiped off the map, you know, for you that's a part of you, and you can feel it and I think that's what I think that's what makes an Armenian" (Victoria).

While feelings and sentiments about the Armenian Genocide were mentioned in every interview, Victoria here is referring to a more recent event that took place in 2020. In September of 2020, Azerbaijan opened fire on a small ethnically Armenian region, Artsakh, leading to war

and the death of thousands of Armenian men. Bringing up the past showcases how these participants' identities have been influenced and are continuing to be influenced to this day. As Victoria highlights, living in America is not emotionally easy on Armenians.

Often, when participants were asked, "how do you identify?", they did not have a response. After a long pause, they either said "I don't know", "I just am" or asked to skip the question. While participants were quick to list the many factors that make them Armenian (see section on language as a top factor), they did not have much to provide when probed on what that means to them. Evelyn talks about how culture and identity is made up by external influences and how she considers the historical past of Armenians as a strong identity marker.

> "I have the point of view, also, that I can see how everything that we call culture is like you know something that people just made up, you know it's not like inherent to the person I mean, maybe, like all the like mental illness and like genocide trauma is something that is" (Evelyn).

Evelyn talks about culture being a shared experience through the lens of the Armenian Genocide. Evelyn, who is Armenian from her mom's side, states that she cannot just say she is Armenian, because she does not have an Armenian last name. Similar to Victoria's analysis of identity, here we see the importance of history playing a significant role in identity development today. While most participants mentioned actionable things that make them Armenian, like speaking the language, eating the food, and taking Armenian classes, being a part of the community, many participants talked about being Armenian as a feeling, one that they cannot describe.

Engagement with Media

When assessing engagement with the Armenian language, I asked participants, *what media do you tend to listen to, watch, read or browse in the Armenian language?* The purpose of

this question was to understand, if language was stated as the most important factor in these students' identity markers, and what types of content are they consuming in the Armenian language. This could include books, news, TV shows, comedy, music, anything that they watch, listen, or read in the Armenian language. This question also gauged participants' Armenian humor consumption, which will be answered later in the discussion when answering research question two. Most participants expressed that they consume content from a combination of Armenian media outlets. This included music, TV shows, and comedy. Only two participants regularly read material in Armenian, and that is because their current jobs require it. Thirteen participants stated that they watch humorous content in Armenian.

Current Affairs and News Consumption in Armenian

All participants stated that they currently keep up with news about Armenia on a regular basis. While this dissertation does not dive into the political, historical, or geographical background of the Nagorno-Karabakh/Artsakh region, it is important to highlight some information as it pertains to the findings in this study. The 2020 Artsakh war came from a conflict over 30 years old. In an attempt to appease Turkey while redrawing the regional border, the Soviet Union decided to internationally recognize Nagorno-Karabakh (the Azeri term for the region) as part of Azerbaijan, even though the region was heavily populated by Armenians, and has been de facto in Armenian control since the early 1900s. After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, a war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh resulting in the death of 30,000 individuals and breaking a ceasefire declared in 1994. While there has always been tension between the two countries between this land, the tensions greatly escalated in July 2020, leading to a full-blown war later in the year in September lasting approximately 45 days

and ending when Armenia forfeited a large portion of the land, resulting in many Armenians left homeless and forced out of their regional homeland.

Participants talked about how before the 2020 Artsakh war, their media consumption, particularly news, was not high. After the war between Artsakh and Azerbaijan broke out in September 2020, a sense of urgency was created to be involved and informed of any war updates, political decisions made, and government commentary on the crisis. In all participants, this included a sense of urgency to read news sources and other content in Armenian. Nayiri, for example, tried to keep up with the news in Armenian, specifically mentioning that she will try to read it in Armenian. Talin shares a similar experience.

> "There was this influx of information coming at me, and it became overwhelming. There was so much information out there [...] within our own little bubble, there was a lot of information coming in, as opposed to a little bit like a few months earlier so I made sure like if I saw a big body of Armenian writing I wouldn't shy away from it, I kind of forced myself to sit down and actually read it, so I think sometimes a lot of things can be lost in translation, unfortunately, and I wanted to kind of have the full story" (Talin).

There was a great sense of urgency to keep up with news in Armenia conveyed in my interviews. While some participants talk about reading in Armenian primarily due to the desire of remaining informed about the Artsakh 2020 war, Victoria talks about it in a broader perspective, highlighting that she tried to read any Armenian material that she comes across.

> "You force yourself to keep up with this stuff because you might as well be witnessing the death of your own country in slow motion, but you do it because you have to know. Keeping up with that, as part of being Armenian you know we're not there, though, because we're not the ones who are struggling. All we do is just struggle emotionally, and then we just live our American life" (Victoria).

Here, you can sense a tinge of helplessness in Victoria's stance. She goes on to talk about how we cannot do much from so far away, adding that most of our efforts went to putting together fundraisers and sending money to those families who are losing their homes and their

loved ones. George also talks about trying to combat this state of helplessness by stating that he was ready to get up and go fight alongside the soldiers. For one participant, the amount of news he consumed increased during the war and remained elevated even after the war ended, mentioning how he thinks it is an unhealthy amount. We see instances of this affect participants' mental health.

Literacy

All participants spoke about how they force themselves to read the news that is published in Armenian, even if that means struggling and taking a lot more time to do it. Those who had previously not attempted to read any media in Armenian would now try to make sense of the influx of news coming in. Particularly during the period of the war when there was unsubstantiated news and misinformation spreading rampantly, the ability to verify the news in Armenian made a huge difference to the overall mental health of the participants. Knowing the truth about what was happening during the war was more important than living in ignorance, even if that meant accepting bad news. During a large part of the war, the Armenian government issued reassuring statements to the public in an attempt to boost morale. Believing the Artsakh forces were winning, many Armenians were surprised when Armenia ceded a large portion of the territory to the opposing forces in order to end the war. This resulted in civil unrest, as Armenian citizens protested the ostensible surrendering of Armenian territory. For my participants, it was this chain of events which underscored the importance of understanding the news in its original language from primary sources and on-the-ground reporting. The ability to read these sources in Armenian helped them to make sense of a chaotic and unstable situation. While false information can still be spread in Armenian, participants felt that reading the news in Armenian give them information from the primary source, while information can get lost or

misinterpreted when translated to English. Trying to read in Armenian, despite the challenges and difficulties, contributed to the closeness that participants felt to Armenia during devastating times. While all participants spoke about keeping up with politics, none of them mentioned their Armenian or American political affiliation.

Despite the difficulties Talin has reading Armenian, she forces herself to read the news in Armenian instead of a translated version, regardless of how long it may take her to read an article. Talin also talked about verifying the news across multiple news sources and the importance of reading the news in Armenian since “a lot gets lost in translation”. Similarly, Harry talked about how he tries reading more news in Armenian now, especially after the war. He also emphasized the importance of confirming the sources of news and not relying on only one news outlet to be his sole source of information. One participant, Paulina, mentioned how the war influenced her to join groups of Armenians who are trying to study and practice the language more. Specifically, the war prompted her to join various Facebook groups, and one of those groups happened to be a group of individuals who had a reawakening to learn the language after news of the war broke out.

Victoria provides further explanation on the sense of urgency to keep up with the news. This notion of keeping up with attempting to read in Armenian as it appears to participants is also echoed in Victoria’s interview. When Victoria was asked “what does ‘being’ Armenian mean to you”, she mentions that she spent a lot of her young adult life trying to run away from her Armenian identity. She mentions that she has a lot of ideas of what it could be, but for her personally right now, “being Armenian just means that if I come across some Armenian text, instead of trying to run away from it and not read it, because it’s hard, I make myself read it"

hinging her response of being Armenian on reading Armenian text, instead of skimming or skipping over it like she may have previously done.

Voluntary participation in identity

While transnationalism is not a focus of this dissertation, it is important to highlight as it pertains to one of the findings. There are many reasons why those residing in a diaspora will maintain ties with their home country. Those reasons may include socializing, feeling seen/heard, identity formation, and keeping up with the news. An interesting finding in this study is that participants were able to control how much of their 'Armenian identity' they wanted to participate in at any given time. For example, while the 2020 Artsakh war prompted my participants to "wake up" and take more interest in the news, particularly in reading the news in Armenian, they all stated how it quickly became overwhelming, which caused them to stop following certain news outlets as a result. This push and pull quickly becomes overwhelming for participants as they try to navigate their lives in America, with full-time school and work schedules. One participant, Nicole, talks about how the war impacted her Armenian-ness before and after the war.

> "During the war everyone was fervently Armenian. And then after things like settling down, then it was like time to think about what it really is for me. So that's where the identity crisis began and continued" (Nicole).

Here, we see the war not only created a sense of urgency, once the war was over, it left these bicultural and bilingual individuals with the lingering sense of lost identity. We see this feeling of being overwhelmed causing the participants to shy away from the media and disregard anything that might evoke their sense of Armenian identity. This give and take relationship seems to suggest that individuals in the diaspora can control and often regulate how attuned they

are with their identity at different points in their lives. When they need to "up the ante" and become more involved, they do, and when they want to slow it down, they can.

> "It was to the point where, like I was thinking about unfollowing it, because it was just so depressing one after another, like, hearing like Armenian soldiers dying and all that stuff" (George).

During the war of 2020, the weight of the conflict was severe enough that participants expressed that they felt as if they had to reject pieces of their identity in order to be able to perform daily functions in the United States. The lack of support and recognition from mainstream, English-language news outlets also negatively influenced their well-being. For example, information about the war was only being published in news outlets that had an Armenian reader population. Larger news conglomerates, like New York Times and The Wall Street Journal, for example, were not publishing information for the larger masses' awareness. This resulted in participants feeling like the United States, the country in which most participants were born, is not supportive of their ancestral background. Take for example Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which was covered for days on multiple news outlets. While perceptions of the United States was not a focus in this dissertation, previous research has highlighted how monolingual US born bilinguals, bilingual US born, and bilingual non-US born differ in their attitudes towards bicultural experiences, with monolinguals feeling more negative in their experiences (Imbens-Bailey, 1996). Further explored in subsequent sections of this dissertation, coverage by larger media and news conglomerates is crucial for the health of the diaspora. Ariana talks about how she cannot keep up with any kind of Armenian media after the war. She states that she thinks it is selfish, because she can tune these things out, while the inhabitants in Armenia have no choice but to face the realities and the aftermath of the war every day. Similarly, Sophia talks about this when reflecting on her past experiences in Armenia. She talks about how, as

Armenians, we have “really high high’s” where we historically have Tigran the Great and other various leaders, while “our lows can get really low”, bringing up past historical trauma related to the Armenian Genocide. After the war, Nayiri stopped reading the news as much because she “just didn’t have the emotional capacity anymore.” She found herself questioning the purpose of continuing to keep up with the news. While the importance of the news, particularly when the war first broke out, led to increased engagement with Armenian content in the Armenian language, it eventually led to an aversion of this same type of content. This aversion in turn results in the adverse effect of participants reading less content in Armenian, further damaging the process of heritage language maintenance.

While participants talk about media consumption in the Armenian language being fairly steady for years before the 2020 Artsakh war, the notion of engaging with Armenian content, specifically literary content, to the point of overconsumption was commonly shared. More on engagement with media, in particular with humor, will be analyzed in the following sections when answering research question two.

> “I remember when an Armenian keyboard application was made at one point for the iPhone like we all got so excited and like we used it for a couple days, but then you forget about it” (Alice).

Ten participants shared the sentiment that maintaining a constant and consistent connection to Armenian language content was a challenge. Mary states “I like to think I’m fairly in touch with my culture and roots, sometimes not as much as I’d want to be” when talking about her experiences growing up in an Armenian household. To Mary, a Los Angeles resident, everything has an American spin to it. While Los Angeles has a huge Armenian population, Mary feels like the Armenian side of her identity can be overshadowed. To compensate for feeling like she is not Armenian enough, Mary volunteers for Armenian organizations and takes

Armenian classes. The motivation to enroll in Armenian courses will be discussed in the following sections. While Alice also shared the notion of not being "Armenian enough", in contrast, does not take any actions to remedy this feeling. While participants had a difficult time maintaining a consistent connection to the language, they engaged with their Armenian community.

Engagement with Community

This next section will cover participants' engagement and involvement in their Armenian language courses. Before assessing students' attitudes about the Armenian language classes they enrolled in, I first asked students, *what were the reasons why you decided to enroll in an Armenian language course,* and the responses varied from an easy A and scheduling reasons to seeking community members, wanting to learn the language, and feeling a sense of obligation. This question also gauged their engagement with the community through a language course. First, I will describe the participants' pursuit for Armenian community members. Then I will elaborate on the sense of responsibility and reasoning behind enrollment in Armenian language courses.

Seeking Belongingness

Throughout my interviews, a sense of kinship amongst the Armenian community was a frequent theme in my participant interviews. This feeling results in Armenians deliberately seeking other Armenians in the diaspora as a way of finding others with shared experiences and validation from community members. For example, George feels pride and happiness when he sees another Armenian. He related that to there not being "a lot of us out there". George also feels a sense of trust automatically when he sees another Armenian, without even knowing the person. Harry, who was raised in a town with a smaller Armenian population in California,

experienced a culture shock when he moved from a small town to Los Angeles, where the Armenian population is so large. The first time he saw an Armenian in a coffee shop, he could "just tell she was Armenian". While recounting this experience, he reflected on how happy he was seeing an Armenian that he did not know.

> "Even still to this day, like after being here for like four months, five months and, something like that, it's still kinda like. I still can't, I don't know, getting excited is the right word, but like I don't know I just still like meeting other Armenians" (Harry).

Amelia echoed a similar statement when talking about meeting Armenians outside of Los Angeles. Her decision to enroll in Armenian language courses was driven in large part to meet Armenians outside of the friends and family she grew up with. Broadly, Amelia believed that there are two main reasons to take any language course. The first is the sense of community from your classmates. The second is to learn the language and culture more in depth.

> "When you go to a foreign country, and you hear someone talk Armenian, you get happy, and I feel like it's the same in this case. Like why don't we take Spanish classes? We can take that and learn a new language, but we are always seeking out for one another. We feel dear to one another. And all this aside, you still learn a lot about our holidays. You learn more in depth like what is the meaning behind these holidays in your Armenian courses" (Amelia).

Furthermore, Nicole was interested in meeting the people who enrolled in an advanced Armenian class. She says "I was so curious who else is going to take this class. I want to meet more Armenians". Nicole took the class online, as it was being offered remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lamented the missed in-person connections she could have forged with her fellow classmates.

Edward did not have many expectations for the course, beyond the fact that it was recommended from upperclassmen. This point is shared by two more participants. He also thought it could help him build a little more community since he was a commuter student.

Edward did not even think he would really strengthen his language skills, however, he recounts meeting some of his best friends in that course, something that he did not anticipate. George talks about how his classmates were quick to help him since he was taking a standard that was different from his native learned standard. This will be covered more in depth in the section on negative experiences in the classroom.

In one instance, Hailey took the Armenian course as a way to usher herself into the Armenian community. She did not have any anchoring cultural references growing up half-Armenian in a town that was not populated with Armenians. Hailey and her sister wanted to be like the American kids, and the American kids did not speak Armenian. She recounts trying to attend an Armenian Students' Association event her freshman year in college and feeling rejected because she did not look Armenian, she did not speak Armenian, and she was not from Los Angeles.

> "I think the Armenian language classroom was this sort of, kind way to usher me into the community, because I feel like a lot of the ways in which I sort of make sense of the world, and even make sense of myself and my own identity is through language. There's always this aspect of self-discovery that's tied to it and because when you're learning a new language it's like you're looking at yourself in the world through these like new frameworks… like a kind way to usher me into that community and then, as the years went on like I ended up meeting some other half Armenians and the Armenian Students' Association, I felt like just became so much more inclusive and I sort of like watched it become this is sort of inclusive [environment], blossom like before my very eyes, during my years of undergrad so it was really special" (Hailey).

While many participants mentioned they were seeking community when enrolling in their language courses, few participants also mentioned that they were just looking for an easy A or that they enrolled because there were no other courses available for them to enroll in during orientation. Harry wanted an easy class that quarter since he had a lot of hard courses, though he was also interested in learning formal writing, punctuation, and grammar. Nayiri also wanted to

take this class as an easier class compared to her science classes, but also as a way to refresh her reading and writing. Lastly, she wanted to be in a classroom where everyone was Armenian.

Community Responsibility as a Language Consumer

While a handful of participants identified their reasoning for enrolling in an Armenian language course was in search of the Armenian community, many also provided other reasons, like obligation or responsibility as a college student as well as a heritage language speaker. A few participants stated they would like to maintain their language skills. They thought that they would not make time on their own to read or write in Armenian, so taking a course was a way for them to set aside time for them to intentionally use the language.

For example, Sophia enrolled in the course because she wanted to learn how to say things grammatically correctly.

> "I just didn't want to be stuck. I didn't like that my Armenian was not that strong. I just wanted to be able to speak properly without getting embarrassed and being insecure about how I speak Armenian" (Sophia).

After realizing she had forgotten how to write, Mary decided to enroll in a course to re-learn Armenian writing and to connect with her Armenian heritage. She felt like her American life is more prominent than her Armenian life, implying that the two are separate. One participant, Victoria, felt that taking the class was a way for her to set aside time in her life to use the Armenian language actively and intentionally. She highlighted the need for an occasional refresh or restart because she finds it difficult to carve out time to read or create in Armenian.

Talin, Nicole, and Ariana talk about a sense of responsibility to take the Armenian language course that their school was offering.

> "I find it very unique for my university to have this Armenian course and it's exciting and I was thinking, if I'm not taking it I don't think anyone else is going to be taking the class…who else would be showing interest if not us" (Talin).

> "I could not miss out on that opportunity of going to university that had things in Armenian studies and to not take. It would have been the biggest regret of my life and luckily, I didn't have to have that regret. I wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to have an extremely accomplished Armenian Professor and I wanted to know what they would say and what they would teach us. I wanted to experience learning Armenian on another level" (Nicole).

> "I want these classes to be offered for people that don't have any experience with this stuff and the only way they're going to be offered is if we take them, so mostly, I was like kind of half and half like I was just like okay like we need to take these classes, so they continue having them and then also like I want to sharpen some of my like reading, writing skills" (Ariana).

Some participants also felt pride that their school offers Armenian courses and were shocked during their orientation when they learned their school offers Armenian courses. Paulina talks about how she found out about these Armenian courses when someone during orientation asked what foreign language course they should take, and she jokingly said "Armenian!" This realization then prompted her to take an Armenian course, as she never expected the person from orientation to take Armenian, so she felt she should enroll in it herself.

Those who enrolled in a language standard that was different from the one they spoke at home did so because they wanted to relate to friends or family that speak the other Armenian language standard. For example, George, a native Western speaker, enrolled in the Eastern standard in order to be able to connect to his fiancé and her parents more. Vahe, also a native Western speaker, was interested in the Eastern standard given that he has family in Armenia. Participants felt that they should take an Armenian language class to be able to connect with other community members more.

Summary of Engagement with Heritage Language

Overall, a thematic analysis found three main themes in the ways that heritage language speakers are engaging with their linguistic heritage. These included engagement with identity negotiations, engagement with media in the Armenian language, and engagement with the

Armenian community, including taking Armenian courses. The findings in this section relate to participants' experiences with the language, with a strong emphasis on the role language plays in the construction of Armenian identity. The following section will discuss participants' experiences in the course, including interactions with humor in the classroom and “in the wild”.

Experiences with Armenian Language Courses and Humor

To identify how participants are experiencing Armenian humor in the classroom, I conducted a thematic analysis of the participant interview transcripts. This led me to break down participants’ experiences into three different categories. First, I will share findings on participants’ experiences in the course. Next, I will describe students’ experiences with humor broadly. Lastly, I will describe my findings on participants’ experiences with humor specifically within their language courses.

Armenian Language Course Perceptions and Experiences

Participants discussed their experiences in the Armenian language course through activities that they enjoy, fond memories, and positive sentiments. The following sections discuss their experiences in the course fall into three categories: positive experiences, negative experiences, and identity negotiation within the course.

Positive Experiences

In order to assess experiences in the course, I asked participants to recall events that they enjoyed in the course, if they perceived any unique methods that were used in the course, and what their perceptions were of the course overall. Participants generally talk about positive experiences in the course from two aspects, one from positive experiences with feelings of an inclusive classroom, and the other from a perspective of pedagogy. All but two participants recalled specific negative events, which will be discussed further in the following section.

Acceptance of Varying Proficiency Levels

Nicole felt comfortable in her proficiency level in the course, along with feeling comfortable making mistakes in her assignments, highlighting that anyone can contribute to the course and to their writing, no matter their proficiency level.

> "Our professor wanted us to join at whatever level we had and to not feel ashamed about how much we could contribute. I'll never forget that they really insisted that we think and create in Armenian. And their philosophy of like anybody can improve was, I don't know, was very attractive to me in a class. We're so grateful to have that class" (Nicole).

Nicole felt the course was inclusive of all proficiency levels. This sentiment is also echoed in Sophia's interview. Sophia loved her classes – in particular, she enjoyed the discussions and the presentations where she was able to practice her speaking skills. Her professor encouraged making mistakes in the course, which Sophia mentioned had a huge impact on how much she learned in that class. Alice had a similar experience in her course, where she reflects on her professor being patient and inclusive of code-switching between Armenian and English if they did not know the Armenian word. This usually occurred when they would hold discussions in class.

> "I think my professor saw the power of engagement, which some professors unfortunately don't. They would make it very clear that we are going to be patient with people who are not as fluent in Armenian. And we are going to let them try and if they have to use mixed Armenian English because it is difficult for them, that is okay… as long as they get their thoughts across. So I think that was important because I think you see in classrooms a lot where if somebody is trying to participate, but it's clear that the professor is frustrated with them not understanding the concepts or anything like that, it feels dismissive as a student and when you see that, with the professor, first of all, the culture of the class changes because you're like okay only like people with perfect answers can respond. But it was really cool to see how our professor would engage with him, 'like hey if you don't understand anything I'm saying, let me know'" (Alice).

The acceptance of varying proficiency levels within the classroom by professors created a comfortable environment for students to freely discuss topics, ask questions, and practice their linguistic skills. Many participants alluded to the "back and forth" between them, the students,

and their professor, highlighting the interactive classroom. Many participants also enjoyed being able to talk in the course and discuss topics with their fellow classmates. They enjoyed having a direct and tangible way to put the language to use with purpose. Hailey's professor created a safe space for students, which was an important aspect of her experience.

> "Just by fostering that inclusive environment from day one, and saying it, you know, saying like we're all coming in with different levels, we're all Armenian in our own way, everyone's Armenian enough, like this is a safe space" (Hailey).

Her professor's ethos was to ensure the growth of each individual in the course by providing individualized feedback and many opportunities to share their work and progress on assignments. Hailey explained that her professor made sure "every type of Armenian person felt welcome in the classroom" no matter what their linguistic heritage was (Eastern or Western), and that was an affirming feeling for her. Hailey noted having non-Armenians in the course, who were there to learn for fun and to communicate with their Armenian friends. Her professor involved those who were beginners and would teach them without expecting prior knowledge, which felt inclusive. Hailey also provided some examples of activities that they would partake in as a class. Her professor infused a lot of free writing in the course and would encourage them to write poems about the political elections and how that improved her creativity in the Armenian language, giving her more fluidity and ease with the language.

Discussion in class

Many participants spoke about the value of including discussions in the course. For many of these heritage language speakers and learners, beyond their family, their professor is likely the only other person they would be able to converse in Armenian with. Particularly about higher order topics, as participants mainly talk to their family members about everyday topics. Edward's professor incorporated a lot of speaking exercises in the class.

> "I like the fact that our professor would put us into situations where we had to go up and talk about an experience in Armenian. It's almost like a public speaking thing. You wouldn't expect it at any rate, especially in a college level course. That's some of the things that I enjoyed about this class. Coming from philosophy classes, where it's 'hey read this book that a guy wrote a thousand years ago and interpret it like this, because this is what my professor is telling us it means'…With our Armenian class, our professor encouraged us to think more creatively, to think more on our own, asking us what we think about this or that. And a lot of it was that our professor was funny" (Edward).

Alice echoes a similar sentiment for the same professor.

> "It's a fun environment, and it has the added bonus of you know tying me back or bringing me back to like [talking about] more of the literature and the reading and the writing that was great" (Alice).

Talin had an interesting take on her perceptions of the same professor as Alice.

> "I wish I could evaluate my professor as a teacher separate from being an Armenian, but I think our professor being Armenian had a big impact on our classroom experience, because the things they were explaining and the current events that were taking place were affecting all of us very personally. So, it wasn't something you could detach yourself from, it wasn't something that our professor could detach from. So, it was familial, because we were dealing with the same issues and that closeness was kind of inevitable, one because our professor was Armenian, and two because we were dealing with all this stuff like, The Velvet Revolution happened just a current every couple years prior. And then, after the class a few years later, the war broke out and there was just something tying us all together, and I think that kind of led to like an informality, where it was like we're family and we're friends more than you are like this authoritative like teacher figure" (Talin).

All participants talked about how they could tell when a professor cared about students. Taking a personal interest in the students and implementing new and creative activities in the classroom were the determining factors in the participants' perception of their professors' passion in the course. Participants talk about this level of care being unmatched in their other courses. Even the students who had negative experiences felt that was not a reflection on the professor's level of care for students or their commitment to the language.

Negative Experiences

While the majority of participants' experiences were positive, there were two instances where negative experiences were shared. Below, I will highlight these experiences. In all my participant interviews, I asked if there was anything they would change about the Armenian language courses they had previously enrolled in at the college level. I also posed a hypothetical scenario asking if they were to take a language course today, what would they need from their professor, along with how a professor would make students feel comfortable in the course. I will share findings from those questions as well.

One participant thought his course in Eastern Armenian felt very mechanical and robotic. He noted that every week, all they would do is read a short story, translate every sentence in the story, and do a few writing exercises. As a native Western Armenian speaker, he was constantly corrected by the professor to write in Eastern Armenian. The two standards have slightly different orthography, where Eastern Armenian uses a reformed orthography with, as some scholars say, a Russian influence, but Western Armenian and the Iranian dialect of Eastern Armenian uses the classical orthography. The difference is primarily in the usage of a couple of letters, which makes this correction all the more frustrating for this participant. While he recounted some positive experiences, like being exposed to Armenian poetry and literature, he felt as if the class was unstructured and boring.

Another participant shared a similar sentiment about being corrected to speak or write in a standard different than his own.

> "I remember one time, like I said something in Western [Armenian], like, you know, I can't help myself and my professor is like, no, that's wrong. And I'm like, is it wrong though? Really? They're like, yes, it's wrong. You have to say it like this. And I'm like, okay. I felt like both dialects are Armenian."

This participant also thought the course was not well suited for those who are coming in with zero knowledge of the language, where the professor expected students to know and learn Armenian as well as a heritage Armenian speaker.

> "I remember we had a couple students that just didn't know Armenian at all. They were like, not even of Armenian descent and our professor wasn't easy on them. Like they kind of expected them to learn Armenian as perfectly as we did. If you didn't know Armenian in that class, you were kind of screwed."

He noted the class was toxic because the professor had high expectations and that the professor would cold call on the students often. It got to the point where the participant did not even care about learning, he just wanted to obtain answers ahead of time to respond to the professor. He therefore solicited a lot of help from his classmates. He felt high pressure to answer correctly, and his frustration was evident in the interview, noting how he would have appreciated some understanding from the professor. As a native Western speaker, he says he had to "rewire" his brain to learn Eastern Armenian. In this instance, we see how cold calling on students in the course riddles them with anxiety. Not only are the students in fear of answering correctly, but they also get publicly humiliated by the professor if they are not able to answer.

> "There was a cultural disconnect if you a Western speaker, but if you were Eastern, you could definitely relate to the professor and the course. He didn't make it open for everyone."

Both experiences highlighted above were a native Western speaker enrolling in an Eastern standard course.

> "The whole time I was in fear of my grade and I feel like my professor kind of took away that pleasure and that want of me wanting to learn Eastern in a way, just because at a certain point I was doing whatever I could to just get a good grade in that, in that class."

When I asked all participants what they would change about the course they had previously taken, most participants noted that they would appreciate more discussion, especially on topics like work, philosophy, and other topics they do not have adequate vocabulary for so

they can build on their skills. Ariana wanted more discussions about topics that she does not generally talk about to increase vocabulary, like politics.

One participant mentioned that one thing she would change about Armenian courses would be the cold calling on students to read out loud. Reading in Armenian gave her a lot of anxiety and reading after a more fluent reader would heighten her anxiety. She would want to establish a baseline of skills before having to read in front of the class. In contrast to this, some participants enjoyed the cold calling aspect of their Armenian courses because it helped them to pay attention and spurred them to prepare their homework with the knowledge that they might be randomly called on.

Identity Negotiation

While language seemed to be the greatest indicator of Armenian identity for the participants, I was curious to see if the language course played any part in participants' identity negotiation. Towards the end of this portion of the interview, I asked participants, *how did (if at all) the course help you negotiate your previously mentioned Armenian identity?* As previous studies show, identity is one of the driving factors that pushes people to enroll in language courses (Carreira & Chik, 2014).

Participants noted that the use of word borrowings, religion, various topics of conversations, and self-discovery all played a part in their identity negotiations. For Harry, the Armenian language course influenced him not to use Russian borrowings as much. While aware of the words that Harry would use in Russian, he talked about how learning the equivalent Armenian words allowed him to use Armenian vocabulary more often. George had taken an Eastern language course for a certain reason; to improve his Eastern speaking skills in order to converse with his fiancé's father more fluently. When I asked George if he met his goal of

increasing fluency in conversation with his soon-to-be father-in-law, he mentioned the course motivated him to try to speak better. Both Harry and George talk about how the course inspired them to use the Armenian language more.

> "It kind of reminded me of my values again, and me wanting to brush up and, uh, it enhanced my Armenian speaking skill was my knowledge. So, it just worked out perfect" (George).

Alice talks about how the course helped her negotiate the religious part of her identity. Families from the former Soviet Union tend to hold atheist views on religion. Alice, a product of two parents from the former USSR, held these views in their household and as a result, Alice adopted them. She talks about how she never really knew why she held this view and how the course, and more particularly her professor's knowledge on the topic of theology, opened her mind and views towards other aspects of religion. She also adds that this course made her feel more comfortable in her insecurities about her linguistic proficiency.

> "I was an atheist before coming into the class and hearing an expert talk about [religion] shone some light onto the gray areas and the acknowledgement of it made me appreciate that class and aspects of it. It also instilled me that it's ok to mess up and make mistakes. Before taking this class, I was so scared that I would fail but once I took it, I felt like my language skills increased tenfold" (Alice).

These instances made Alice feel more comfortable in her identity, allowing her to negotiate aspects of her religious views as well as form a stronger connection with her linguistic heritage. A few participants were able to have conversations and discussions in their Armenian courses about topics that are not necessarily talked about with family or friends. For example, the professors shone a light on topics like religion, politics, and sexuality, whereas the traditional nuclear families of these participants would not entertain these topics. Echoing an earlier finding, the participants wanted these discussions in the class, but on a much more detailed level. The

part of Ariana's identity that was strengthened was her desire to consume more media in the Armenian language, like literature, which she says elicit emotions in her.

> "I think it strengthened the part of me that wanted to consume Armenian literature a lot more. I find that even with songs like when I'm at my saddest, I'm listening to Armenian music" (Ariana).

Nicole thought the course would help her not only with her language, but also with her cultural identity. The course was heavily advertised on her school's Armenian student associations page, which prompted her to also want to enroll. Hailey thought the course helped her find herself.

> "I felt like there was something there to discover about myself, about the world, about my ancestors, about my Armenian community, and it was sort of through those language classes, that I began to become more comfortable within my Armenian identity" (Hailey).

Hailey thought that the language courses should be five days a week for an hour a day, to keep it consistent, like other language courses, as opposed to only two or three times a week. She was struck by the many different standards and dialects that exist to speak Armenian and how seeing the "whole scope" of Armenian helped her feel valid in her identity by strengthening her bond to the language. Like most heritage language speakers, Hailey negotiates her identity through her heritage language. For Alice, the course played a role in language remembrance and historical connection.

> "Taking these Armenian classes was a way for me to say, like hey I know the language, I may have forgotten and I don't remember how to write my own name and then it just came back so easily and then, especially with the way my professor taught was like you want it to be a part of it, and just even while we were learning about the language we were also still learning about the society and the historical implications and all of that" (Alice).

Most participants talked about refreshing the fundamentals and brushing up on their skills after so many years of not reading or writing in Armenian. They concurred that they did not appreciate learning the language when they were younger. However, taking these classes again

with professors who teach not only the fundamentals, but also cover interesting topics and allow for freestyle writing boosted their appreciation for the language, while widening their previously held notions of Armenians and the language.

Experiences with Humor

During the interview, I asked participants to list all the media that they consume in Armenian. News and humorous content were prominently mentioned. Eight participants organically brought humor into the interview. Of the remainder that did not mention humor as a form of media that they consume, when probed, five said they watch humorous content, while four participants said they do not watch any humor at all. Below, I will describe the findings from the 13 participants who watch humorous content and Armenian comedians, Armenian sitcoms, and follow humorous pages and posts on various social media sites.

Recognizable

Participants mention that they enjoy feeling seen on social media platforms. For example, one participant mentions, “I’m also on this platform and I can see the reach that it is having with many people”. Every participant talked about humor being relatable, where both American and Armenian identities, languages and cultures exist and are in use side-by-side. Furthermore, the content of the comedy is relatable, as it fuses elements of social commentary and comedic sketches to create a synthesis of engaging and germane comedy.

Heritage language speakers, especially those that feel minoritized, want to be seen and want to be heard on global, widely known social media platforms. Having their community portrayed on Instagram, through comedy, eliminates notions of feeling alienated in their host country. Nicole refers to things you experience as an Armenian but cannot really talk about. She says, “it’s nice to see yourself in someone else’s storytelling I think is very appealing because

Americans will never see us, they'll never incorporate us into their media". Nicole highlighted how seeing Armenian content on these widely used social media sites holds a value for Armenians who do not see Armenians as lead actors in mainstream movies. Seeing thousands of other Armenians interact and engage with this content makes Nicole feel less alone. For example, here she talks about one comedian which she watches on Instagram and how intermingled the humor is with culture and language.

> "He's simply funny and he reinforces what I thought about myself, and seeing him, it's totally awesome, like his using Farsi words that I use, and I get to understand what you're saying. So, it makes me more comfortable, I mean maybe I'm the only one who feels this disconnect between Persian Armenians and other Armenians. I just want to feel like I'm enough as an Armenian and I don't know, maybe not getting to relate to the humor I can get over that, but not getting to relate to other cultural aspects is tough and those are the cultural things that translate directly into the humor so it's like we can't have one without the other" (Nicole).

Nicole highlighted the connections between humor and cultural competence. Having a comedian who does skits in the Iranian dialect of the Eastern Standard made her feel seen and understood. Similarly, when consuming humor, participants started to see elements of their lives in these skits. Alice could imagine someone in her family recounting or telling these jokes.

> "I find it funny, and I find it like interesting because then you can see the societal differences between like American humor and Armenian humor and then it's also just nice to hear jokes in your like heritage language because it just feels funny, it feels like quirkier or whatnot because I can imagine my dad or my uncle saying it" (Alice).

Alice explained that these jokes feel more familiar, whereas American humor is funny, but fleeting. Participants concurred that they noticed the emotions they felt from American humor would quickly pass, while the sentiments from Armenian humor lingered. Amelia shared insight on the humorous content that one of her friends created.

> "One of my friends makes TikToks about her mom and what she says, and a lot of things are similar. And all these Armenian families have similarities between them and the parents. Things unfold the same way in our families, and we really connect to each other. Because Armenian families and parents are the same, we connect more, and the more we

> connect to the humor the more we learn about ourselves. For example, the way we talk, how we are, so many things. Even if you don't speak that dialect it doesn't matter, it's the same environment at home, so you can understand it across the different dialects'" (Amelia).

Amelia noted a key understanding that cultural commonality and unity makes life seem as if it unfolds in the same way for all Armenian families, making them feel connected to one another. The more they connect the more they want to learn about themselves. More on how humor can teach individuals about their heritage and identity appears in professor interviews, to be discussed in the following section. Ethnic humor touches upon some of the topics that participants have and experience at home. Participants express the honesty and open-minded approaches that comedians use to highlight instances, shortcomings, and similarities in the Armenian community.

Cultural Broker

Participants stressed how some of these comedians bridge their Armenian and American communities together with the content they produce. This creates material that heritage language speakers can bond over in both of their identities. For instance, the Armenian vs. American skit has become popular over the last several years and it incorporates both languages and cultures into its videos. There is a troupe of men who put together these skits. One of their videos is focused on the way Armenians say goodbye. The video starts by saying "American Goodbye" and portrays a standard goodbye that ends at the threshold of the door. The next clip showcases an Armenian goodbye, and it shows the host and the guest lingering at the door, alluding to Armenians taking hours to say goodbye to a guest. The guest does not want to initiate that they want to leave while the host doesn't want to admit that they want their guests to leave, so it is a very slow and sometimes hours long crawl toward the door, often leading to a short walk to the car and then lasting a little longer there. This video spoofs this concept by showing the American

farewell by showing a somewhat abrupt and the Armenian one lasts all the way to the point of the host tucking their guest into their bed. Understanding the Armenian language is critical to understanding the content of the skit as well as the humor, yet these skits function as cultural brokers for Armenian heritage language speakers living in the United States.

> "Okay, any of those like kind of social media comedians recently I love it and I'm so happy for the work that they're doing because it's bringing so many parts of our generations and cultures together it's like a middle ground for like being funny and I think I think it's good content" (Nicole).

In addition to the 13 participants that consume humorous content, the four participants that mentioned they do not watch comedy added that they do follow a lot of meme pages on Instagram. These meme pages produce funny content based on mainstream media. The content is typically something related to events occurring in a typical Armenian household, the Armenian diaspora community, or things related to Armenia. For example, the coffee culture in Europe is well known, where individuals will attend a café with their friends to enjoy a cup of coffee over conversation for hours. This culture is not as common in the United States, where Americans embody a "grab and go" culture. One aspect that the comedians highlight and draw attention on is the number of Armenians that hang out in the parking lot of coffee shops like Starbucks, since America, and Los Angeles in particular, does not have the same coffee culture that European countries do. The majority of individuals spending hours in a coffee shop in America are doing so because they are typically studying. Heritage language speakers enjoy this content because much like humor and comedians, it is related to their daily bilingual and bicultural lives. Many participants talked about how the comedians are exploring the interplay between their coexisting Armenian and American cultures.

Humor comes from shared experiences otherwise it has the potential to become awkward. That is where ethnic humor comes in, playing into the stereotypes and negative experiences. For example, Ariana talks about the connections between Armenians and various other cultures. There are only a couple of female comedians in Los Angeles, and one female comedian troupe based in Armenia. The female comedians in Los Angeles highlight a lot of issues that women in Armenian culture face, for example, Armenian as a patriarchal, male-dominated culture. This culture makes it extra difficult for women to express views on certain topics, especially in the Armenian language, both from the perspective of cultural taboo and lack of vocabulary. These women pick up on this and through their comedy, provide heritage language speakers with the comfort, knowledge, and encouragement for women to also express themselves. Not only do they empower women by showcasing their stance on the matter, but they also do so in the Armenian language, providing heritage language speakers with an opportunity to be exposed to vocabulary they otherwise would not have heard in their day-to-day conversations.

> "I think comedy is a great way of addressing or making light of issues within your community so like in the same way, I like women comedians. I feel like we can make light of things that might not be positive, all the time, but are just like everyone's had this unifying experience, and so it makes you feel like other cultures" (Ariana).

When probing Ariana, I asked her if comedy has shaped her identity in any way. She indicated that the things she laughs about are relatable things and they have the potential to influence her identity subconsciously. George talked about how important the bicultural identity is in shaping the humorous aspects of ethnic humor.

> "I feel like it's an adaptation of Armenian culture and American culture, like a melting pot. And it's really cool. It's creative and I feel like my parents won't kind of understand that humor, but I would, because I was born and raised here and have Armenian heritage, so it definitely speaks to people during my time, my generation" (George).

Nayiri echoed this sentiment.

> “It's a lot more relatable because they're Armenian [...] but it can be like applicable to your daily life, like somehow, we all have the same parents, and we all have the same family so it’s a lot more relatable, maybe that's what makes it funnier, because it's in the Armenian language” (Nayiri).

Here, we see all participants who consume humor mention that they appreciate it for the binding element between their two worlds, crucial to Armenians in the diaspora. Figure 2 below summarizes the types of humor that were brought up by participants.

Figure 2

Summary of Types of Humor Inspired by Participants in Interviews

Types of Humor or Skits	Comedic Description
Women Comedians	Highlighting what it means to be a modern-day Armenian woman in society
American vs Armenian skits	One example of this would be Armenians prolonging a goodbye whereas American goodbyes seem abrupt in comparison
Farsi/Russian vocabulary borrowings woven into humorous dialogue	All comedians in the community highlight the linguistic differences between Armenian standards and dialects
Showcasing the phonetic differences between Eastern and Western Armenian	A compilation of words that change phoneme and thus change meaning, often causing confusion
Meme Pages on Instagram	Coffee culture in America compared to coffee culture in Europe, for example this would be labeled "Armenian in Los Angeles starter pack"
TikToks/Reels	Things Armenian moms say daily that otherwise do not make much sense, for example, կրթվիր որպեսզի մարդ դառնաս [get educated so you become something]

Experiences with Humor in Armenian Language Courses

For the final section of student participant findings, I will discuss the connection between ethnic humor and humor used in the classroom, as experienced by my participants. First, I will discuss the findings on how heritage language speakers experience humor in the classroom. Secondly, I will discuss instances where humor was brought up in interviews as a tool for language learning.

Regular Occurrence

This section focuses on the participants' experience when their professor used humor in the classroom. In the final section of the interview, I asked participants, *in what ways do your professors employ humor in the classroom,* along with*, what are your perceptions of including elements of Armenian humor in the classroom?* This section includes findings on the overall use of humor in language learning outside of the classroom as well, as a couple instances naturally came up in interviews.

All but two participants talked about how humor was a regular occurrence in their classrooms. Amelia noted that humor was a constant presence in the background of her class.

> "Whoever knows Armenians, knows that humor is a big part of our culture. We can't live without humor. Humor is very important to us. We joke about ourselves a lot. In class, we would have a discussion about politics, and at some point, the arguments would get heated, and the professor would make a joke, we would all laugh, and that would be that and we would all move. There was always humor in the background. Because there is a place where all Armenians gather it's impossible not to have humor. The professor wouldn't necessarily teach through humor, but it was definitely there" (Amelia).

Amelia explained how her professor also brings in cultural references of the different student backgrounds. By using ethnic humor, Amelia observed that the energy in the room changes as her professors engage more and more students in the lesson. Nicole's professor was funny overall and knew how to lighten things up when it was necessary. Similarly, Nayiri

reflected on how she felt about class, recalling that humor was a regular occurrence. Comparably, Ariana stated there was humor in her Armenian classes, however, she thinks that the humor was unintentional; rather than being a deliberate element of the professor's teaching pedagogy, it was a natural element of the professor's personality.

George noted that his professor would relate the content of the course to their own life and share personal stories, which were always funny. George said, "the explanations my professor would use, the words he would use, it was just making the lesson more relatable and enjoyable."

Hailey recalled there being a lot of laughter in her Armenian language courses. Through using culturally relevant jokes, her professor would dispel stereotypes commonly held in the Armenian community. A very common stereotype is about the Iranian dialect of Eastern Armenian and how Iranian Armenians speak in a very "sing-song" way, typically because they follow the intonation of Farsi. Another example is when growing up in an Armenian household, kids are often told to only speak in Armenian, however, in an Eastern Armenian household due to all the word borrowings, parents from the former Soviet nation use Russian vocabulary and can say full sentences using mainly Russian words and the kid will understand, showcasing how parents subconsciously go against their own rule for speaking only Armenian in the house. Another example is how common it is in Western Armenian families to call their children "mama" and "papa", even though they are just children. This is also common in the Eastern Armenian speakers from Iran. Calling their children by "mama" and "papa" is a way of showing endearment, much like calling them "sweetie" or "honey". Much like how Eastern Armenian speakers will add ջան [dear] after saying someone's name.

The most obvious differences in Eastern and Western Armenian are the differences in pronunciation. For example, Eastern Armenian has three series of stops: b/d/g (voiced stops) and p/t/k (unvoiced, unaspirated stops), and p(h)/t(h)/k(h). To showcase the differences in p/t/k and p(h)/t(h)/k(h), imagine the English words “spot, stop, and skip” and “pet, tan, and kit”. There are five sets of three letters in Armenian that are voiceless, aspirated, and voiced. In Western Armenian, for those five sets of letters, there exists only voiced and aspirated. Therefore, in Eastern Armenian, these 15 letters have distinct sounds, however, in Western Armenian those 15 letters only have 10 sounds. The comedic differences and styles of the Los Angeles comedy scene has been studied extensively in a previous study (Pogossian, 2018). There are about nine main comedians and great variety and diversity in the standards and dialects that these comedians speak in their daily lives and use on stage. In order to highlight the vast linguistic diversity, one comedian highlights the phonetic differences in Western and Eastern Armenian, highlighting a word that is spelled the same, but in one standard means one thing but, in another standard, has a different sound, and a different meaning. The word door, for example, is spelled դուռ [door]. The first letter in the word is pronounced with a voiced stop in Eastern Armenian but an unvoiced stop in Western Armenian. However, when Eastern Armenian speakers hear the unvoiced version, the meaning of the word changed and becomes թուռ [sword].

While these nuances and misconceptions are funny to the Armenian community, Hailey reported that her professor would employ these jokes as part of a lesson, accompanied with an explanation of why things mean what they do. Her professor would also show some comedian skits in the course, which was an enjoyable experience for Hailey. Many comedians in the Armenian community capitalize on the linguistic differences between Eastern and Western Armenian. One comedian, who speaks both Eastern and Western Armenian, creates videos in

which the entire time he is making jokes about both standards, while explaining what each word or phrase means. One example of this includes the dramatized phrases in which Armenians will say something along the lines of, in a literal translation, կարոդա առյուծի կաթ ես խմել [have you been drinking the lion's milk], which in context means, "you are very brave".

Harry shared concrete examples of when his professor used humor in the classroom to teach vocabulary.

> "My professor showed one funny thing. There is this documentary basically, like a show in Armenia that's very similar to National Geographic and there's a comedy version of it. It's only a parody of it about a specific group of people, and my professor basically showed us that video, but the point of it was that there was a lot of vocabulary in there. Vocabulary that maybe not everyone in the class knew what that was but knows that's a term that you know comes up. So, our professor used that like it was funny but also extracted a lot of vocabulary from it" (Harry).

The general sentiment from most participants was that these Armenian courses were fun, comfortable, and enjoyable, with humor as an ever-present element.

Humor as a Tool for Language Learning

The first part of this section reviews my findings on how participants use humor to learn new vocabulary words to improve on their cultural knowledge. The second part provides the participants' perspective on the benefits of using humor in the course.

One participant, Ariana, stated that when she is trying to be funny, she speaks in Armenian. In this instance, she pushes herself to use Armenian as part of her own personal sense of humor. When participants spoke about watching humor, three participants mentioned seeking an explanation when they hear something they do not understand. For example, George states, "if I don't understand the humor, it makes me want to ask someone or like, investigate why I don't understand this". Similarly, Alice said, "sometimes I will not understand some of the words and like after everybody's done laughing, I'll have to turn around and ask my mom what this

word meant because they're using words that I'm not familiar with". Nayiri also states that when she does not recognize a word, she will try to figure out what it means. Humor and comedic content make the participants curious about what they do not know.

I also asked participants, *what are your perceptions of including elements of Armenian humor in the classroom?,* followed by, *how do you think humor can impact language learning?* Most participants stated that humor can keep students engaged, which in turn can lead to better grades. Nicole believed humor can make others feel comfortable, and in a classroom, humor can provide an opportunity for the students to put their guard down, allowing themselves more opportunity to engage with the material, without "having to feel so on edge".

> "When a person in a position of authority makes you laugh because they intended to or not, they lighten the mood somehow through some form of humor. I think that is so important because it makes you stop being nervous about them as a person of authority and it just helps you kind of relax and get what they're teaching without being afraid of them" (Nicole).

> "I think it just makes it a more enjoyable experience. I do think it's easier to remember and retain certain things when you are having a good time, when you are laughing, when you do find something humorous, I think it is easier" (Talin).

Harry, who was born and raised in California, noted how his mom would tell him that these humorous skits are enhancing his linguistic abilities.

> "She noticed that my vocabulary would get enriched. Whether in a good way or bad way, but she said you're expanding your vocabulary from watching it. Like I would know sayings that you can really apply in modern [life in Armenia]. Like you can't really know [these things] unless you live there [Armenia] and I would say that to my mom and my mom would kind of be shocked, she's like all you're picking it up from these shows…those things are now just part of my normal vocabulary through just hearing it so much and then saying it. Then, when you hear something in a show, then you hear it like in a conversation you kind of connect the dots and it just becomes a part of your vocabulary. Overall, yeah, these shows, whether comedy or not, affect your vocabulary" (Harry).

Many participants expressed the high importance of using humor in the classroom. Victoria conveyed that having an environment where everything is serious all the time leads to

students feeling emotionally exhausted, burnt out, and bored. She thought humor taps into a different side of her creativity, and especially critical for Armenians dealing with their history:

> "Because growing up the emphasis on being Armenian was essentially entirely coming from the fact that "oh the Turks killed us, that is why we are Armenian" [said in Armenian] and that was it. To be Armenian meant to be an offspring of Genocide. That was the main defining characteristic and that's obviously part of the big reason why I really didn't, I didn't want to be part of the Armenian community for years, like at least a decade I want to say or maybe more, I don't know. But humor, yeah of course, we may have dark things in our history, but survival doesn't come from rehashing pain, you know it comes from finding joy, it comes from finding humor" (Victoria).

Victoria alluded to the painful past of Armenians but emphasized that Armenians should find joy and laughter in humorous content in spite of past suffering. Hailey rehashed how learning any language can make someone nervous, so incorporating humor, as echoed before, breaks down some barriers, making it easier for participants to share during classroom discussions. However, two participants were cognizant that too much humor has the potential to backfire. Victoria mentioned that having humor interjected is key, but too much of it and students will start to lose attention and will not take a professor seriously. One participant noted that using humor in the course can be a way to reset your brain, so your attention span does not "die out". While learning in a relaxed environment is ideal, it should not be too relaxed, humor is a juggling act.

Engagement in the course was of paramount importance for my participants and they observed how humor can help break down the social barriers that then created the conditions that encouraged students to speak with one another. This in turn developed an environment that is welcoming to engagement and interactions, which facilitated the learning process within the classroom.

Summary of Experiences in Armenian Language Courses

The findings for Research Question two demonstrated the different ways that students are experiencing their heritage language in an Armenian language course. This included positive experiences, negative experiences, and experiences with humor. With their humor experience, I probed participants to recount their experiences with humor inside the classroom and outside the classroom. The following sections discuss the findings from the interviews conducted with professors and elaborate on how professors are using humor and other various pedagogical tools in their classrooms.

Armenian Language Professors

The final section of this chapter addresses the findings for Research Question 3, *what pedagogical tools are professors using in their classrooms to facilitate heritage language learning and maintenance in university-level heritage language courses, including the use of humor?* In my discussion of the findings for Research Question three, I explore the different pedagogical tools employed by professors and the role that humor plays in their curriculum. These findings were informed by thematic analysis of the interviews, supplemented by classroom observations and available syllabi or course descriptions. I present three major themes in this section: teaching philosophy, teaching methodology, and goals for students.

Teaching Philosophy

I started the interview by asking each professor about their background history, however, the extent of the background information will be limited due to concerns with confidentiality and identification. For the remainder of this section, Professors will be identified as Professor A (PA), Professor B (PB), Professor C (PC), and Professor D (PD). After gathering background information on each professor, I probed what their teaching philosophy entails, how they form their curriculum, i.e., what material and lesson plans they use, how they create or find material

for their courses, how they decide what topics and themes to teach on, what technology they utilize in their classrooms, what role humor plays in their curriculum (if any), and how they recommend students to continue engaging with the language after they complete their course. All four professors had similar philosophies and goals for their students. Below, I discuss the findings on their philosophies before discussing their instructional methods in detail.

While all professors wanted to ignite the love for the Armenian language in their students, they approached it many different ways. PA fostered an interactive classroom environment, encouraging students to be active participants in their course. PA expected students to leave their class knowing how to read, write and have basic conversational skills in Armenian. PA's lesson structure included lecturing for the first half of class, followed by opportunities to engage in dialogue with fellow classmates who are on similar proficiency levels. For these reasons, PA emphasized that "the language is alive, the language is living and in the now."

PB's class was centered on allowing the students to explore and understand who they are. PB employed various ways to pursue this type of self-exploration through language. PB would draw students' attention through the use of humor, making it relevant to their daily lives. PB emphasized the importance of contextualizing lessons; vocabulary words out of context will not stick with the students, but when incorporated into something more interesting, then the language becomes sustainable. For example, when PA introduces new themes into the classroom, they include vocabulary words that the students may not know or do not use often in their everyday lexicon. One example of this can be found in the two ways in which Armenians say կերեկուր [food, formal] and ջաշ [food, informal], one being more informal and used in everyday conversation, while the other is not used as often in colloquial speech.

PC's courses employed a creative literacy philosophy, where the students focus more on creating in Armenian, rather than simply acquiring the language. It is important to note the emphasis first on creation, then acquisition, and not the opposite. PC's emphasis was on bringing the Armenian language into the students' world, for example, applying the Armenian language to non-Armenian subjects, by non-Armenian people. This allowed PC to create not only consumers of the Armenian language, but also producers of the language. For example, PC argued that the way to maintain language vitality in the diaspora is to create producers of the Armenian language, and that is what they intend to accomplish in their courses. PC guided students in their creative writing journey, offering students an outlet to express themselves about various topics like love, death, identity, and feelings, in the Armenian language. They mentioned at the beginning of the quarter that there can be an opportunity to publish the work that students create in this course. Some of PC's former students have gone on to publish books of poetry that started from their time in this course. Most of PC's students are diaspora born and raised Armenian heritage speakers. PC reveled in how astonishing it is to have heritage language speakers publish literary works in the Armenian language rather than in English, their primary language.

PD highly valued the communicative classroom and focused on building speaking skills. For example, the "how to's" are a part of their curriculum, i.e., how to ask for help in Armenian, how to complain nicely, etc. PD provided a lot of vocabulary learning opportunities that are contextualized, much like PB, in order to ensure the vocabulary sticks with students. One way this is done is by providing exercises where the students can read, highlight, and talk about various famous sites and places in Armenia. By providing the context of these students' homeland, Armenia, and providing pictures and necessary vocabulary words for both the monument's official name, but also the vocabulary word for "statue" or "museum" grounds

students' learning in real-world experiences. While doing the classroom observation, PD asks students if they had ever visited Armenia. Only one-third of the students had previously visited Armenia, however, the students add even though they have been there, they have not been to the monuments or places that their professor is showing and teaching them about.

Teaching Methods

Building from the previous section on their teaching philosophies, below, I review the methods that professors shared in our interviews. All professors had an objective to make the course enjoyable. Two professors emphasized that making the course enjoyable will, in return, bring in more students through 'student advertisement' (e.g., students who have taken the course will recommend other students to also take the course). Three of the four professors felt they had to adjust their instructional approaches and content each term they taught. Every term, the combination of student's backgrounds and proficiency levels are different, therefore, they adjust and customize the curriculum to meet the students' needs as the duration of the course unfolds. One professor talked about how in some terms, the course moves fast and in other terms it moves slowly. Three of the four professors used a textbook for reading purposes but added additional material to supplement the course. One professor created all their own material, while the others included a combination of previously published textbooks and materials that they create themselves. In three out of the four interviews, humor came up naturally as professors were talking about teaching style and pedagogy. PB highlighted making the course relevant to students' everyday lives. These professors also identified as being humorous in general. Throughout the interviews, all professors articulated the importance of using humor in the classroom, however, they incorporated humor in different ways. Two professors utilized resources from community members or the internet, while two professors used their own innate,

personal humor in their lessons. Below, I describe the professors' methods, along with their employment of humor.

PA employs a hands-on learning approach in their courses, which includes incorporating a lot of "public speaking" exercises in front of the whole class, conducting interviews in Armenian with local members of the community, and inviting well-known members of the community as guest lecturers, including local comedians from diaspora. PA thought using humor is of utmost importance, otherwise the students would get bored. Part of employing humor included inviting comedians as guest lecturers to their course, which was an important way to display the Armenian language being used in real time. Findings from the student interviews showed that many participants in this study are spectators of the particular comedian that PA brings into their course. PA mentioned that the students provided the impression that this course is fun and attributed that to the professor being very passionate about the Armenian language and about teaching.

PB brought ethnic humor into their course to inject relevancy into lessons on vocabulary, grammar, and other course topics as a way of fostering language maintenance.

> "I tried to make it very interesting with a sense of humor, drawing their attention, making it relevant to their daily lives. It's very important, because if you teach words, vocabulary and they don't relate to those words it's meaningless, they forget" (PB).

This quote from PB highlighted how they try to create a fun atmosphere for vocabulary learning. PB identified as having a natural sense of humor that they enjoy bringing into the class. A lot of the humor stemmed from ethnic comedy, such as making jokes about stereotypes, cultural references, and beliefs that the Armenian community holds. This is also incorporated into the assignments that they give students, for example, recording themselves cooking and serving an Armenian meal to their family members. PB wanted to dispel the patriarchal

stereotypes of the Armenian community that women should be the only ones to cook by making sure the men in the course also cooked an Armenian meal for their family members. PB believed that through humor, students learned about themselves.

PC talked about making the course fun for themselves first, which is then followed by the student's finding enjoyment in the course. Professor C talked about teaching to have fun. They talked about how there is no formula to the course, and in turn, making the course enjoyable for themselves makes the course enjoyable for their students. This remark was also observed during my classroom observations. It was also noted that PC uses a lot of antics in the course, sharing experiences and humorous instances from their personal life. Through creative literacy, PC proves that heritage language speakers can write complex and difficult texts in Armenian, that heritage language speakers do not need to have all the vocabulary in order to create in a language, and proves that if someone wants to do something, then they will.

Professor PD talked about showing funny YouTube videos from comedians to highlight cultural instances in the community. Not only do these videos highlight cultural instances, they also portray modern ways of thinking pertaining to regions in Armenia, Armenian dialects, and ways of thinking about topics that may be considered "taboo" to talk about. Being creative is not something that the schools teach you to do. One professor talked about how teaching programs will teach you how to teach, but none of them will teach you how to be funny. PD also incorporates a lot of games into their classroom. For example, PD has created a game where the students roll some dice, and depending on how the dice falls, the students must either: act out a word, describe the word without using the word, draw the word, use synonyms of the word, all in Armenian. PD talked about how their lessons contain words that are common in heritage

language speakers' vocabulary, and those that are not as common, providing a mix of frequently used words and uncommon words so there is something for everyone to learn.

Two professors mentioned challenges that they have and those were administrative, how every term they need to prove that their course is important. And secondly, that they don't know the students' motive for enrolling in their course, are the students there for an easy A or do they care about the language. Two professors talked about lots of cultural things in class and have themes, for example, one week for food, one for family, etc. On the contrary, two professors talked about how it's enough; we cannot keep overwhelming our students solely with Armenian things. These professors talked about bringing Armenian to the students' world, as an attempt to deconstruct compartmentalization. They further push that bringing Armenian into a students' world opens the possibility of language vitality and maintenance, otherwise, using Armenian only for Armenian food, culture, etc, will ensure the language's demise.

All professors talked about being one of the only people in these students' lives that would provide them with deeper knowledge about Armenian culture, history, and linguistics. While two professors emphasized the depth of the historical and cultural knowledge that they instill in their students, the other two professors shared in the techniques of how they instill higher linguistic skills in their classes. While the former allows the student to learn about their cultural history and deepen their rather "superficial" knowledge on topics like the Armenian Genocide, the latter two professors' techniques place a heavy emphasis on the results of their course coming to fruition in their students learning how to use the Armenian language for things that are beyond 'Armenian' topics. The latter two professors described how Armenians need to start using Armenian for topics beyond just Armenian culture and history. We also see some of the student participants highlight that their professors widened their knowledge on topics while

also broadening the lens in which they previously saw religion, culture, and history. Taking these two findings together, we can begin to inform professors, thus utilizing their role as an educator not just for the linguistic development of these heritage students, but also as a role in strengthening heritage identity. See Figure 3 below for a summary of professors and their key pedagogies.

Figure 3
Summary Chart of Professors Philosophy, Methods, and Examples

Professor	Philosophy	Method	Example
PA	Language is Alive	Hands-on Activities	Guest lecturers and interviews from community
PB	Relevant and Sustainable Teaching	Ethnic Humor	Relevant jokes about community Students cook Armenian meals and film themselves
PC	Creative Literacy	Free Writing	Reading Kant in Armenian Writing poetry, short stories, and making funny videos
PD	Communicative Classroom	Speaking Activities	Games to improve vocabulary and speaking Drifting from speaking in Armenian about "Armenian things"

All professors talked about creating a safe environment for students to use their language skills. This included a combination of not correcting them for how they speak, allowing them to make spelling mistakes, and talking to them about having confidence in their abilities. PA does not correct them for how they speak, they emphasize that their dialect is rich for our culture, PC

talked about how it's ok to make mistakes, and PD emphasized to their students to be confident in their abilities.

The findings for professor methods include their responses as to how they conceptualize their teaching style and how they execute their lessons. While all professors had different approaches, the underlying premise of their methods were the same; all professors wanted to ignite a love for the language in their students.

More than just a language course

All professors talked about their course being more than just a language course. While language is a big component, professors also included historical, cultural, and social, and even psychology components in their courses. PB talked about how most of the students coming into their class have a superficial knowledge and understanding of Armenian history and culture. They talked about all these things throughout the term.

> "Knowledge is the basis of feeling comfortable with yourself, with your identity. So, I talk about psychology, all these things combined, it is not only about the ABCs and reading and writing. Because, after all, when you're learning a language, you're also learning about the culture of that language, the culture behind the language, the lifestyle of those people, the mentality, the worldview, the religiosity, or non-religiosity of those people, so I combine all these things as much as possible in one class and it makes a big difference" (PB).

Two professors' desired outcome for their students is that they become producers of the Armenian language, or at the very least consumers, thus, speaking more Armenian. One professor hoped their students walk out of the class with basic reading, writing, and speaking skills, stating that, if the students love the course, they will advertise it.

PA talked about doing things in their class that the students will remember for the rest of their life. They do this by making students active members of the community, hence the reasoning behind inviting community members as guest lectures (pre-COVID19 pandemic) and

having students go out and interview members of the community. PA talked about how they give students resources to be involved in the Armenian community, especially in Southern California, where there are so many things' Armenians can be part of, i.e., Armenian institutes, Armenian lectures at various universities, various online groups, organizations, museums to visit, local churches, and youth centers. Giving students these resources help them find something they enjoy and can maintain participating in.

When asked about how to continue learning Armenian after students leave the classroom, PB mentioned that they tell students to pick a hobby to continue and to find the symbolism in it. "Whether it's cooking or painting or music or something else, make it a lifelong fun activity and have fun in the process" PB emphasized that everything has a meaning and a purpose behind it. PB also encouraged students to start speaking more often, telling them "don't be afraid to make mistakes. People may pull your leg, they may make fun of you, don't listen to them just speak Armenian, even with difficulty". PB stresses that students should continue to speak Armenian, despite the ridicule from the lack of linguistic proficiency, stressing how important it is to speak Armenian in order to remain Armenian and preserve identity. PB posed to students, "how are you going to teach your kids if you don't know Armenian, if you don't speak Armenian?".

Course Descriptions

While the course descriptions were obtained, it did not include any information about what type of curriculum is offered in the course. All descriptions included the basic information: this course will be an introduction (or continuation) of the fundamentals of Armenian, which includes, reading, speaking, and writing. Only one course description included that customs and culture will also be part of the course. The other three course descriptions did not provide any fruitful information that highlights the amount of cultural, historical, and psychological

information that the professor participants highlighted in their interviews. However, the one syllabus that I was able to obtain included more detail as to how the course was structured. It also included reading material, as well as class structure. All in all, these course descriptions do not provide detailed information for someone who is considering taking the course. This is an issue because, as professors mentioned in their interviews, they mainly rely on student advertisement for student enrollment. However, if the course descriptions included more information about the types of content covered in the course, as well as mentioned the use of or inclusion of humor as a style of discourse covered in the class, then there is a potential for enrollment numbers to become more stable over the years.

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations took place for two professors over the course of a few days: one professor was observed online through Zoom and the other in person. During this time, I took notes on salient things that were happening including: humorous jokes or instances in the classroom, observations that matched what was said in the student interviews, and any other instances where the professor would use humor to help lessen student anxiety in the course. I will break it down by professors below, talking about professor one and professor two.

Professor one. During the classroom observations, one of the first things that professor one told students when one student was having difficulty with reading was “no stress”, proceeding to give an example of how professor one was told not to stress repeatedly while she was in school. This resulted in the students chuckling, after which, I noticed the energy in the classroom start to shift. As the course continued, the students transitioned to learning about the different cities in Armenia, in particular, another major city called Gyumri (formerly called Leninakan). This city is known to have a stereotype of residents enjoying talking a lot (think

chatterbox, a nickname given to those who enjoy talking and chatting), and professor one opened the lesson by saying an anecdotal joke about this city and the stereotypes associated with this city. As the observations continue, I notice this professor providing the students with past examples and instances where she had made mistakes while learning a language, proceeding to call her students "friends", signaling that she sees them as equals in the classroom.

These observations with professor one highlight instances of ethnic humor where the professor brings in stereotypes and common misconceptions about different cities in Armenia. Not only does this add to the student's language abilities, but it also teaches them about culture in Armenia and how the different regions and cities interact with one another. Secondly, this professor shared a lot of humorous instances from her life, including mistakes she made while learning a new language and its grammatical rules. This, in turn, seemed to make the students more comfortable in the course, becoming more confident in reading aloud and sharing pieces of their homework.

Professor two. Professor two began his course by providing a comical reference to something that occurred in his life, making the students in the course chuckle. Professor two also takes the time to get to know their students. He then brings up references from earlier in the term and highlights the reference in their respective perspective. For example, professor two might make a joke about how an Armenian from Armenia views something compared to an Armenian from Lebanon, oftentimes sharing experiences and instances from his life. Lastly, in his advanced course, professor two has students create comical skits in Armenian as a process of creative writing, record themselves performing the skit, and share it with the class. Professor two initially introduces this assignment by showing a clip from a well-known comedian in the field. The majority of the students recognize this comedian, however, now students are tasked with

creating their own humorous skit, using the portrayed comedian as a reference point or inspiration for style.

Professor two highlights that when the students are proud of what they produce and create, they will be motivated to create more in the Armenian language and make the language more approachable and useable. Both professors utilized ethnic humor in the classroom by alluding to situations that are unique to the Armenian experience, i.e., cities in Armenia, Armenian's country of origin. These instances noticeably made the students feel at ease in the classroom while also reducing overall tension and facilitating engagement.

Summary of Armenian Language Professor Findings

All professors highlight how their language course teaches more than just language: it is a combination of "group therapy", psychology, history, and culture class. Students come into the course with superficial levels of understanding and knowledge, and their goal as professors is for their students to leave their course enlightened, with a newfound love for the language. All professors said that making the course enjoyable is of utmost priority. Professors use humor to connect with their students by bringing in the elements of personality, community members, ethnic humor, and comedian content from social media. College classrooms, particularly heritage language classrooms, are regarded as highly serious, highly stressful places and the professors have taken the time, either through their own experiences living in the community or observing the community, to conduct the class in a 'human way'. The personable relationship really makes a difference. It allows the professor to sometimes have tough conversations with the students about certain aspects of history that are not as pleasant to know or learn about, while reigniting a love for the language.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings from this dissertation focus on providing an understanding of Armenian language and identity, the role humor plays in the social and academic experiences of heritage language speakers, and pedagogical approaches used by Armenian professors. Seventeen heritage language learners participated in interviews regarding their engagement with their heritage language, their experiences in an Armenian language classroom, and their reflection on their Armenian identity. In addition, four Armenian language professors were interviewed about the details of their teaching philosophies and pedagogies, with an emphasis on the role of humor. This chapter presents the interpretations of the findings in connection to existing literature and theoretical frameworks mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2. It begins with an overview of the findings organized by research questions. The chapter then gives a summary of the findings through the lens of the theoretical frameworks. The chapter continues to discuss implications for research and for practices, as well as recommendations for future studies, limitations, and concluding remarks.

Summary of Findings

Participants in this study identified many critical elements that compose a person's heritage identity, how that influences their interactions with their heritage language and their perceptions about Armenian humor. Many of the findings reflect previous literature on heritage language speakers' experiences in the diaspora and the broader literature on experiences with humor (i.e., language and identity, seeking community, appreciation of humor, and experiences in the classroom; Phinney, 1989; Pogossian, 2019; Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014). The study extended previous research by examining the Armenian community closely through the lens of

ethnic identity and the humorous content they encounter in their daily lives, as well as exploring the pedagogy of Armenian language professors. It identified novel findings on interactions with humor in a heritage language classroom in colleges and universities, including findings on how students are interacting with their heritage language and how humor can help strengthen that connection. Research question one finds three prominent themes regarding students' engagement with their heritage language; their influence on identity, influence from current affairs, and the responsibility as a diasporan to enroll in Armenian language courses. For research question two, the data was divided into three parts: heritage language learners' experiences in the course, experiences with humor, and experiences with humor in the language course.

Research question three in this study examined what pedagogical approaches Armenian language professors are using in their university level courses. Previous literature has suggested that optimal pedagogy for the heritage language course includes a project-based curricula (Kondo-Brown, 2010) and does not include any research on the effects of using humor as a pedagogical tool in heritage language courses. The current study found that using humor in an Armenian language classroom came naturally to three professors, while also benefiting the social and communal aspects of a communicative classroom. It also provided new perspectives on teaching philosophy, methods used in language courses, with an emphasis on humor, and revealed instructors' goals for their heritage language students.

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature

Engagement with Linguistic Heritage

Engagement with Identity

Research question one asked, *how are bilingual students of Armenian heritage engaging with their linguistic heritage in the community and in the classroom?* All 17 of the study

participants listed factors that they believe make them Armenian. Most students listed a combination of culture, food, religion, and language, however, 13 participants rated language as the number one factor in identity determination. This study's findings aligned with previous research establishing language as a main factor in identity development (Crawshaw et al., 2001; Joseph, 2006; Shi, 2006, Warschauer, 2000), as my participants described language at the forefront of identity.

However, participants use Armenian only with immediate family members and only to function as a private language in public places. We see that the participants' choice to speak Armenian is not one that they are making for themselves, rather, it is a choice to speak Armenian based on the interlocuters' perception of what the participant should do. Similarly, Edward does not choose to speak Armenian with his newly immigrated friends voluntarily, instead, Edward is speaking in Armenian out of obligation because that is what his friends are more comfortable with. Compartmentalization was very evident in the interviews. Participants talk about not being able to talk about complex topics in Armenian and as a result, their conversations in Armenian remain simple and about everyday errands and tasks, i.e., what they did that day, what they wanted to eat, etc.

Language and identity are so interwoven the participants cannot speak about one without the other. While participants discuss language at the forefront of identity, they do not use their heritage language often or in their everyday lives. This goes to show that heritage identity is complex and cannot be constructed through any strict combination of components. A few participants made these connections about complex identity as I continued to ask them what makes them Armenian and what being Armenian means to them. Due to Los Angeles's interesting nomenclature of the intermingling between Armenians from Armenia, Iran, Lebanon,

Syria and elsewhere, not to mention aspects of their American identity that plays a role in their daily lives, navigating Armenian identity can get overwhelming with many different cultural influences coexisting. This pattern is also seen in the adolescent Armenian community, as monolingual US born bilinguals, bilingual US born, and bilingual non-US born differ in their attitudes towards their bicultural experiences (Imbens-Bailey, 1996).

This suggests that being attached to the idea of being Armenian is a strengthening bond in the community. Diaspora identity comes from the search of identity (Keshishyan, 2014). Identity formation is relevant to how heritage language speakers are interacting with their heritage language as it shows the relationship they have with the language, as well as the engagement that they seek out. While language was the top factor for Armenian identity, we see that engagement with actual language material to improve their language skills is quite low. This study is important in that it reveals that this might be partly why heritage speakers choose to enroll in heritage language classrooms. The student participant interviews suggest that heritage speakers enroll in Armenian courses in order to negotiate aspects of their identity. Given that diaspora identity lies in the constant search for identity, part of the search of their identity comes from enrolling in the language course. While none of these courses had descriptions in their course information beyond what basic grammar curricula was going to be taught, heritage speakers still took a leap of faith and placed the future of their Armenian studies in the hands of their professor.

Engagement with Media

This study found that current events, like political upheaval, and the extent to which heritage language speakers choose to keep up with news outlets influence how much they use their heritage language. When things in the heritage country are not in equilibrium, heritage

language speakers tend to use their language more, but only for the sake of reading news coming from the heritage country. The increase in motivation to read in Armenian is crucial for the health of the language. As Eastern Armenian is a language with a state, there will always be information and news circulating about Armenia and the state of its current political, social, and governmental affairs. However, this sudden motivation to maintain a conscious effort and stream of knowledge in the Armenian language becomes difficult to maintain for the health of Western Armenian, a language without a state, as any sudden political upheaval in the natural state of affairs will likely be published in Arabic or English. Here, we see culturally and ethnically distinct places becoming salient (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992), as those displaced from their homeland strive to maintain the homeland as their symbolic guarantee of culture and belonging. The link between physical space and identity has been established for some time (Gupta, 1992; Keshishyan, 2014). Belonging and community have become increasingly linked with nation-states. In the absence of territorial belonging, as in the case of the diaspora, the link between place and identity becomes more complex. In this study, I found that current events raise an awareness in heritage language speakers and that gets them more engaged in trying to use their heritage language, i.e., trying to read news sources in Armenian. This finding argues that identity is fluid, at times the search for identity is stronger and other times, not as prevalent. Future studies should examine the varying levels of transnationalism. Transnationals live in the third space where they receive word and news and input from the country of origin/homeland, however, are not physically present, or even engaged in the media all the time (Adamson, 2008).

As the 2020 war unfolded, it propelled participants to take a stance in fighting for their homeland, experiencing political activism. Part of being an Armenian in Los Angeles includes participating in one of the few marches that occur on April 24 to commemorate the Armenian

Genocide. On this day, every year, major streets running through Hollywood and Montebello are blocked while Armenians walk through the streets to honor their ancestors and fight for Turkey to recognize the Armenian Genocide. This day brings thousands and thousands of Armenian together, expressing their civil strife not only on the streets of LA, but also on university campuses. The war that broke out in 2020 propelled another political movement in Armenians exercising their civic engagement to raise awareness, become more informed, and act in the social piece of a war breaking out in their homeland thousands of miles away. Watts and Voight (2011) argue that critical consciousness is composed of three components: critical reflection, political efficacy, and critical action. Critical reflection is the analysis and rejection of societal inequalities, political efficacy is the perceived capacity to effect social or political change by activism, and critical action refers to action taken to change aspects of society (Watts & Voight, 2011). We see in this study the 2020 Artsakh war awakened these aspects of critical consciousness in participants. A connection between political awakening and identity, raising awareness, becoming more informed and moving towards action and social pieces of engagement with their language was evident in this study through the actions that participants took to remain informed and read the news in Armenian, something that was difficult for most participants.

Engagement with Community

Consistent with literature on motivation to enroll in heritage language classes, my study also found that heritage language learners enroll in these courses to meet community members, to increase sentiments about their cultural identity and increase their linguistic abilities (Carreira & Chik, 2014; Carreira & Kagan, 2009). More often, those who are more proficient take the course to meet students while those who are less proficient take the course in order to learn the

language. Often, while not in the case of Hailey, those enrolling in the Armenian course to broaden their community had a higher rating of their proficiency. Language, especially for minorities, is one of the most crucial components of maintaining a strong ethnic identity (Edwards, 1997; Joseph, 204). Ethnic identity reflects a sense of belonging to a group of people who share a common heritage, including language, traditions, religion, beliefs, and lineage (Hecht et al., 1993). I found that my participants hold a sense of community responsibility to enroll in these courses because they believe if they, as Armenians, do not enroll in these courses then no one else will.

Dealing with identity, reading skills and community all feed into the reasons why heritage language speakers choose to enroll in a heritage language course. Seeking ethnic belongingness is primarily a phenomenon that only happens in the diaspora. Armenian heritage language speakers feel a sense of responsibility to take an Armenian language course as well as responsibility to maintain their heritage language. It is unclear if this comes innately or from societal pressures. Future studies can explore this phenomenon.

Experiences with the Armenian Language Classroom and Humor

Experiences in Language Courses

Research question two asked, *how are students experiencing Armenian humor, both as a community member and as a heritage language student?* In this study, all but two participants described positive interactions in their courses. Those that describe negative experiences were students who were taking a standard that is different from the one spoken at home. Their negative experiences were related to grammatical and phonetic differences in their style of speaking. When asking those students what they would change about the course, they added that they would prefer more discussions and a heightened level of understanding that comes from

learning a standard that is different than your own. The preference for more discussion, especially on topics like jobs and politics, was a sentiment held by most participants. Positive sentiments in the course were particularly engendered by participants that felt comfortable attending class at their existing level of linguistic ability. As found in the interviews, the acceptance of varying proficiency levels created a comfortable environment for students to freely discuss topics, ask questions, and practice their linguistic skills.

Knowing what students want in a course can help educators build and cater the courses that are relevant for students. My study shows that these courses help negotiate and navigate ethnic identity. This is significant for the health and transmission of Armenian in the diaspora. For example, Harry states that he stopped using Russian word borrowings and began to use the Armenian vocabulary for things he previously labeled with Russian vocabulary. Some common words for Russian word borrowing are for items like tomato, socks, potato, and other household tangible items. Other participants, like Alice and Hailey, were given a chance to debate and discover their stance on controversial topics. Getting opportunities to explore these aspects of otherwise taboo subjects with professors and classmates provides insight into their own identity. Alice, for example, says, “having this theoretical or even like philosophical kind of light shined on things that we do when we start to negotiate our identity, when we go to college and things like that, is insightful”.

The negative experiences, while not common in all the interviews, are important to share to inform pedagogy. Armenian language instructors can use this feedback from participants moving forward. While not common across all the interviews, the two negative experiences are highly similar in that both students feel as though they are getting reprimanded because of the standard they grew up speaking. The two negative experiences were from a heritage Western

Armenian speakers enrolled in an Eastern Armenian course. While one may argue that the professors are simply correcting their students to use the Armenian standard appropriate for that class, the negative reaction to this from my participants demonstrates potentially detrimental effects. As language is intrinsically linked to identity, a critique or correction for some heritage language speakers may be seen as an affront on a piece of their identity that they are already striving hard to maintain. Professors may want to consider more tactful, contextualized corrections to language standard code-switching to avoid discouraging students.

Experiences with Humor

Humor provides immediacy to culture. We see in this study that ethnic humor is favored by many participants because it is relevant; it plays on identity; both American and Armenian identities, languages, and cultures exist side by side (Ziyaeemehr & Kumar, 2014). Take for example one group of comedians in Los Angeles who base their skits on comparing Armenians and Americans. More broadly, some comedians will engage in "observational humor", pointing out funny situations related to simple household occurrences and traditions that immigrant parents brought with them to America. My participants and their generation are born to immigrant parents and largely understand both cultures, making this type of humor highly relevant. This humor is accessible because these comedians share it on so many platforms, like Facebook, Youtube, Snapchat, and Instagram. It is also accessible because heritage speakers primarily experience the comedy aspect of it, while language learning comes as a bonus. Comedians try hard to incorporate Armenian in their skits and they take pride in having a role in language maintenance.

Comedians in Los Angeles not only target Armenian/English speakers, but they also target the different standards and dialects of Armenian that exist and are in contact in LA.

Comedians cater the language in their skits to who they perceive their audience to be (Pogossian, 2018). If they know they are attending an event with more Western speakers, they will adjust their performance accordingly. There are also sociolinguistic factors that go into play here. It's also about language prestige—the minority vs the majority language. When heritage speakers see both the majority (English) and the minoritized (Armenian) language in use, it becomes enjoyable for them. This study formed empirical connections of the sentiments heritage language speakers hold about ethnic humor. Through using the Armenian language, these comedians project a symbolic social message, one that positively acknowledges Armenian heritage and where their bilingual and bicultural identities can coexist. Heritage language speakers enjoy ethnic humor because both American and Armenian identities, languages, and cultures exist and are in use side-by-side (Pogossian, 2018; 2019).

Experiences in the Classroom and with Humor

The perceptions and interpretations students hold of their professor's pedagogy reveal critical insights into the dynamics of heritage language pedagogy. One of the strong characteristics that the students articulated was the need for professors to ground their pedagogy in application to discussions that will help promote the use of the language in everyday life and situations. With speaking identified by participants as the most useful skill in their linguistic heritage, opening the classroom for more robust discussions in lieu of grammar drills would help promote the use of the language and ensure that it gets passed down from generation to generation. The cultural competencies necessary for the threshold of understanding humor, being able to employ humor, and using humor in the classroom provides opportunities for heritage language speakers to not only use their related knowledge and skills, but also take command of

the situation by lowering their affective filter or becoming contributing members to the conversation.

Humor is a creation of the community that serves as a tool for classroom management, teaching language, and keeping connections with the culture strong. In the case of one professor interview, humor was leveraged for construction of Armenian identity. Humor used in the classroom can help students approach the language in new and innovative ways, making the language accessible and relatable (Askildson, 2005; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2010). There is a sense of cultural affirmation in the use of humor that provides heritage language learners with a reason to use the language. Understanding the connection between humor and increased positive sentiments about the heritage language can provide students with an opportunity to explore not only the language, but their heritage as well. Similarly, making the course fun through humorous tactics enables the students to fall in love with the language. During the various classroom observations, I observed both professors say jokes in class, make relevant remarks that made the students chuckle, and witnessed the tactics that they talked about in their interviews. This study found that using humor in the classroom lowers the affective filter and increases students' willingness to participate in the course. Participants noted that their professors' humor made them feel comfortable in the class. The discussion on professor findings is included in the following section.

Armenian Language Professors

Teaching Philosophy

Research question three asked, *what pedagogical tools are professors using in their classrooms to facilitate heritage language learning and maintenance in university-level heritage language courses, including the use of humor?* This study found that three professors had humor

as part of their teaching philosophy, while the fourth teacher included aspects of humor in their methods. The professors that incorporate elements of humor in their philosophy do so by inviting comedians to give a guest lecture, providing students the opportunity to explore their ethnic identity by highlight situations that are otherwise considered funny in the community, and by making the course more enjoyable, both for themselves as a professor and for the students.

This study found that professors all want similar outcomes for their students, to be active participants in their heritage language. While three professors held a stance that was more common in sustaining heritage languages, one professor really pushed for advancing the Armenian language. This study also found that heritage language classes teach more than just the language. Given that heritage language speakers enroll in heritage language classes to learn about themselves and their heritage, it comes as no surprise that these classrooms would also entail aspects of psychology, history, and culture.

Pedagogical Approaches

All professors had unique approaches to their pedagogy and style. One professor created all their course material, whereas the other three professors employed a combination of materials that were already establish along with creating supplemental material. The professors that incorporated elements of humor interwoven into their lessons. For example, PB provided comedic relief based on the lesson they are currently covering. PD employs funny videos when they can when going over certain lessons. For example, PD includes a humorous video that happens to also showcase the Lori accent, a region in Armenia, when they learn about different regional areas in Armenia. PA stresses that if elements of humor are missing, then the students will consider the course boring, thus further influencing enrollment.

Krashen's affective filter hypothesis posits that heritage speakers require low anxiety and high confidence in order to learn a language (1981). Connecting the findings of participants stating that humor helps to lower anxiety in the classroom and professor's approaches to incorporating elements of humor in the classroom back to Krashen's hypothesis seems to provide empirical connections in this study for the positive effects of fostering a welcoming classroom. Heritage language learning is much more complicated and nuanced compared to foreign language and second language learning. While some elements of humor have been found to be detrimental and distracting to learning, the heritage language classroom cannot be assessed in the same way. While there was not a strong finding of humor and learning language, the data in this study hints at a relationship between those two variables.

Overall Significance

Understanding the connections between humor and heritage language learning and maintenance can contribute to the literature on heritage language pedagogy. Previous literature highlights previously successful approaches in a heritage language classroom (i.e., content and project based, individualized instruction; Kondo-Brown, 2010; Schwartz, 2001), but does not consider the use of ethnic humor. Previous literature also highlights the benefits of using humor in a foreign or second language classroom (Ziyaeemher & Kumar, 2013), but fails to consider humor's role in the heritage language classroom.

It is vital for the maintenance and transmission of heritage languages that heritage language speakers develop positive sentiments about their linguistic background. As established in the former paragraphs, positive sentiments about linguistic skills, identity, and experiences in the course can be supported using ethnic humor in the classroom. Participants in the current study confirmed the positive psychological benefits of watching humor as well as the relief of

tension in employing humor in the classroom. Despite the presentation of identity struggles, feelings of 'not being enough' and a couple negative experiences in the language course, participants still felt immense pride in their heritage.

Armenian language professors shared their methods and approaches for a successful communicative heritage language classroom. While all professors talked about their teaching philosophy, which included the use of humor in their classrooms, each professor talked about their approaches in different ways. Understanding the approaches that these participating professors employ in their classrooms adds to the limited body of heritage language pedagogy, especially for a minoritized language like Armenian. The classroom observations and professor interviews showcased how nuanced the relationship between professors and students are inside the classroom.

While the data did not fully support the claim that humor can help improve linguistic abilities, I suggest that future researchers consider this a possibility, although it remains a speculation based on data in the current study. This could be due to the limited sample size for both participants and professors. However, my data did suggest that humor aids in heritage language speakers' overall sentiments about their minoritized language, as well as fostering a positive environment in their language course. When participants were reflecting on their experiences in their Armenian language courses, they recalled how their professor's humor made them feel comfortable in the course, lessening their anxiety and directly resulting in feelings of ease in the course. Three professors highlighted in their interviews that if their students enjoy their courses, they will recommend their course to future and prospective students. This is significant for the field of heritage language pedagogy, as it contributes to the findings on

strategies Armenian language professors are using to promote language learning in young adults.

My findings suggest that heritage language speakers seek heritage language courses for more than just learning more about the language. Heritage language speakers use language to negotiate their identity, to negotiate their involvement in the news and their decision to enroll in Armenian language courses. Students are struggling with their identity. Through humor, students see themselves in someone else's storytelling. Ethnic humor can help HLSs work through some of the complexities of heritage identity. What I want to demonstrate is that these professors act as more than just language professors, but someone who is key and influential in adolescent identity development. One way that this was demonstrated in this study is through the use of humor, specifically ethnic humor, used in these language courses and consumed by individuals.

Secondly, when a positive environment is created in the classroom, the students will be more likely to either a) take more of these classes, and b) advertise the course to their friends and colleagues. This in turn can increase not only the use of the Armenian language, but also the reach that these courses have on the Armenian student body. Reaching a higher number of individuals has the potential to create a ripple effect in the community, changing the way the Armenian language is used and socialized.

Based on these findings, one suggestion is professors should use their pedagogical strategies to plan lessons geared towards evoking as much Armenian identity as possible to increase student engagement with the language, which in turn can aid in heritage language maintenance. Given that this study finds participants' engagement with their identity, i.e., engagement with literary aspects of the news, this might be the way to connect the voluntary participation in the Armenian identity to the Armenian language. The finding that Armenian

heritage speakers can choose how much or how little to participate in their identity depending on circumstances, in addition to language (and literacy) being the most identified element of Armenian identity, then this recommendation can come to professors in a tangible, actionable way.

Revisiting Theoretical Frameworks

Ethnic Identity

The framework of ethnic identity was critical to the interpretations of my analyses as identity is central to the importance of being a member of a particular group. The 2020 Artsakh war was salient in how participants made sense of their identity. The war was a large event that catapulted those to look inward and start addressing any questions they had about their ethnic identity as well as the importance of identifying with Armenians from all around the world, as the entire community was experiencing the same pain. This shared sentiment suddenly made participants question their understanding of their identity while participating in political and social activism.

In the wake of the war, participants began to question their identity. Through the identity element, they began to explore avenues of language use, one of the main avenues being the attempt to read incoming news in the Armenian language. The war was a prominent flashpoint moment in the lives of Armenians that propelled the longstanding question of identity into movement, causing Armenians to take to the streets in fundraising events, and to social media for news and activism agendas. The four dimensions of the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (MMRI) were observed in this study (Sellers et al., 1998). Firstly, the 2020 war a particularly a salient and situational event that catapulted participants to explore aspects of their identity whereas prior to this traumatic event, the centrality of my participants identity was sable

and not thought about daily. This changed the way participants regard their identity, showing signs and efforts to identity more positively with being Armenian by trying to read news and political texts in the Armenian language. Overall, participant's' ideologies about being Armenian were disrupted, tested, and ultimately changed since the 2020 war affected each participant in many different ways.

This framework, situated in my study, aimed to highlight participants' sentiments about not only their identity, but the role in which language plays in the construction of their Armenian identities. Phinney (1989) defines the unfolding in ethnic identity in three stages; commitment and attachment, exploration, and achieved ethnic identity. The results of this study support the first two stages: commitment and attachment, and exploration. The participants in this study sought to belong to a group, which is why many decided to enroll in an Armenian language course. During this time, the exploration and engagement with their ethnicity began. In the current study, participants expressed the desire to become more grounded in their language abilities, highlighting an important aspect of attempting to achieve ethnic identity, one in which having a clear sense of what ethnicity means to the individual through their various forms of engagement.

The push and the pull of identity negotiation becomes the only constant in diasporan identity development (Keshishyan, 2013). It is possible there will never be a straightforward answer to what it means to be an Armenian in the diaspora, but the only thing all participants agreed on was the constant evolution and change that occurs in the different moments and phases of their lives. Some of these evolutions are influenced by personal triumphs, and the other influenced by what is happening in Armenia, all of them affecting some degree of change. This is also seen starting from 8-15 years old all the way to young adulthood. Imbens-Bailey finds

that the relationship between knowledge of Armenian and the use of "we" pronouns when talking about Armenian events is complex (1996). This, in turn, affects all stages of development, all the way through young adulthood. All participants recognized the duality, and the accountability, of their Armenian and American identities, struggling with contradicting elements in both cultures currently active in their lives (Karapetian, 2014). Placing language at the core of one's identity grounds identity as something that needs to be performed in order to be fulfilled, which creates a fixed notion of what identity should be, and not what identity can become. Language becomes an act that needs to be accomplished in order to achieve optimal ethnic identity and feel accepted into group membership (Phinney, 1989). This makes language something that is rigid and unchanging in ways, thus making ethnic identity unattainable. Like all performances, the motivation behind it is to please the observer or the audience. In the case of language, the observer is the interlocutor. We see in this study how the performance of Armenian is something that my participants fulfill for their interlocutor. Through the act of performing language, participants also began to negotiate their identity. While some participants felt shut out of the Armenian community due to the lack of their linguistic abilities, others used the language as a means to practice culture, religion, and day to day norms. Language then becomes related to ethnic identity as a vessel or tool that participants use to explore their engagement with pieces of their identity. Ethnic identity and meaning making then lends itself to the model of humor and specific humor use because this insider's humor is leveraged as a cultural asset and a cultural underpinning to make sense of the things happening around them, in their world, in the diaspora and in Armenia.

Language socialization

Language socialization theory investigates how novices are socialized to use language as well as how language is utilized to socialize newcomers (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Ochs, 1990). Participants in the current study demonstrated a sentience of the compartmentalization in which they use the Armenian language mainly to talk with their family members about "everyday" topics, added that they are unable hold difficult conversations for long, as they fear they lack the vocabulary for these conversations, therefore, they do not even attempt it. Often, participants also allude to not speaking Armenian "well" enough, or feeling "Armenian enough", acknowledging the inherent power imbalance between novices and experts (Lee & Bucholtz, 2015; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011), however in this case, they would be regarded as the heritage speaker and the native speaker. Participants wrestled with maintaining their friendships in Armenian with friends that speak standards or dialects that are different from their own. While most participants mentioned they want to speak "proper" or "correct" Armenian, for them, perfecting Armenian remains a sought after but oftentimes unachievable goal. Heritage language speakers are under the impression that their linguistic skills are imperfect, and never enough, misleading them to pressure themselves to attain the perfect ideal (Karapetian, 2014), like U.S. Hispanics (Carreira, 2000). For example, a similar situation is seen in ethnic enclaves in Los Angeles, where heritage languages are used in limited contexts and contain analogous features. Some examples include Chinese Americans in Los Angeles who usually speak Cantonese since it is the dominant language in Los Angeles, even if the parents of heritage speakers speak Mandarin or another Chinese variant (Parodi, 2014). In the Spanish speaking community, often heritage language teachers prefer one variety of Spanish over another, leading heritage learners to internalize that their variety of Spanish is not highly regarded, negatively impacting their language development, and resulting in the heritage learner defaulting to English as their

language of communication (Carreira, 2000). The ethnic minorities in Los Angeles have common features: their languages are often official elsewhere, their ethnic enclaves are typically contained within a geographical area, their heritage languages are limited in their range of functions, heritage speakers do not master the language as a native speaker would, and their linguistic variants have an English influence on them.

Limitations and Future Directions

This phenomenological dissertation utilized student interviews, professor interviews, classroom observations, and course description analysis to explore the role of humor in college classroom settings. The qualitative techniques used in this study were successful in filling in the gap of understanding of Armenian humor in Armenian heritage language classrooms, a highly understudied field. However, there are several key limitations that need to be taken into consideration when considering the implications of the study. Limitations are discussed below in relation to sample size, and analyses.

This study documents the experiences of 17 college-aged heritage language learners and four Armenian language professors. The student participants were mainly recruited through social media and snowball sampling. While the flyer was shared on large social media accounts, it may disclude those who do not have an internet presence on social media. Secondly, a handful of the student participants had taken an Armenian language course in the past 3-7 years, meaning participants had to reflect and try to remember their experiences, which is difficult to do. While family language policies and ideologies naturally came up in some interviews, participants were not asked specific questions about how they perceive family language practices impact their language ideologies. The study of family language practices should be extended to provide a holistic picture of these students' experiences learning Armenian in the diaspora.

Diglossia, as discussed in chapter one, is the concept of having one language that you use in one context, while having another aspect in another context. In the case of Eastern Armenian, the H (or high, formal) variety is the language of education, government, and other such settings, while the L (low, informal) variety is used in everyday life. In this study, we see compartmentalization, a related concept to diglossia, in which heritage speakers speak to their family members in the L (low, colloquial form) about every day, mundane tasks. This divide in registers used could be due to the nature of conversations in the home with a combination of language socialization and lack of higher vocabulary in the heritage speaker's lexicon. For example, given that participants are mainly speaking to their parents, i.e., they have minimal engagement with the language, it may be the case that they never had the opportunity to be exposed to higher level vocabulary.

While compartmentalization was evident in the student participant interviews, further research is needed in order to understand the diglossic or even heteroglossic nature of the Armenian language. Diglossia is an important factor to consider when addressing the problem of language maintenance in the diaspora. I suggest future researchers employ ethnographic work with many instances to explore how the language is used in various settings. This may include observing interactions between students/professors, vendors and community members, and family members, in order to more fully and empirically study which language variety is used in certain contexts and why.

Another limitation is that I was only able to recruit four professors. While this provided interesting findings, it is not representative of the Armenian language professors in California or in the United States. While this study focuses on Los Angeles, it might be interesting to see how humor/pedagogy unfolds in other Armenian diasporic communities, i.e., on the east coast or

elsewhere. Furthermore, some professors seemed to be very cautious with how much information they felt comfortable sharing. Firstly, only two professors allowed me to record the interview. This circumstance made data analysis complex, as I relied heavily on memory, field notes, and research memos to analyze two of the interviews. Furthermore, three professors did not want to share their syllabi with me when I approached them for data triangulation. This may be due to the fact that Armenian programs at all universities are under constant threat of closure, continuously facing budget cuts and restrictions, in addition to an added layer of complexity with varying standards taught in schools. These circumstances may lead professors to be more mindful when sharing certain types of information. While this may be the case for two professors, the data collected from the classroom observations and interviews add valuable insight to what it means to teach Armenian as a heritage language in Los Angeles. As the first study to interview Armenian professors about their teaching philosophy, this data can be used as a case study to build upon with future studies examining Armenian heritage language pedagogy. Secondly, because the Armenian language is nuanced with the intermingling of the different standards and dialects in Los Angeles, this study can shed light on how professors are currently approaching the situation. Newer professors can gain insight and tools from this dissertation on how to handle the different dialects and standards that are present in the classroom in Los Angeles.

While the link between humor and language learning was established based on perceptions in this study, future studies should explore this link further. For example, creating an assessment and designing an experimental or intervention study to provide empirical work on the link between humor and linguistic abilities will be beneficial for research and pedagogy in Armenian language learning and teaching. Future studies should also conduct more classroom

observations. Classroom observations, while a small part of the data collection in this study, provided the necessary contextual information for understanding heritage language pedagogy, the landscape of teaching Armenian in college classrooms in Los Angeles, and added depth to the interview questionnaire. Some of the most informative conversations with professors happened in between classroom observations while waiting for the next set of students to arrive. There is something to be said and found of all the different pedagogical tools used by professors and how these findings can contribute to teaching Armenian in a university course in the diaspora.

In addition to conducting further classroom observations, it might be fruitful to obtain data on course enrollment trends. This can provide quantitative data on how many students are enrolling in these courses. While course enrollment concerns are something that worries professors every term, it would be interesting to see if their concerns are backed by the data. Reaching out to the registrar's office and obtaining this information can also bridge a collaboration between the researchers, professors, and students by confirming if the current methods used in the Armenian language courses are tracking with the enrollment data. Not only will this collaboration help contribute to teaching pedagogy theories, but it also contributes to the practice of Armenian language teaching. For example, this research is necessary for professors to understand that they need to be equipped to welcome students of all dialectal and linguistic backgrounds into their classes. One finding in this study was the negative experiences of Western Armenian speakers taking an Eastern language course. While the findings in this study demonstrate that professors act as more than just a language teacher, instances like this need to be addressed so every student feels comfortable in Armenian language courses. At the very least, professors need to be able to teach on, or at the minimum highlight, the main differences in

the standards. This would also help negate the negative experiences that Western Armenian speakers had in their Eastern Armenian course. Given that language is at the forefront of identity, professors need to be extra cautious in their language courses.

Implications

The findings of this study build on existing knowledge in the fields of heritage language learning and in the field of humor as a pedagogical tool. For example, it has extended findings on the experiences heritage language speakers have with humor inside the classroom and in the wild (Pogossian, 2019). It has also contributed by identifying novel techniques used by Armenian language professors in their language classrooms. Many of the findings, on identity development for example, were anticipated based on previous research—for example, I predicted that language would be an important, if not the most important factor in identity development (Phinney, 1989), however, the current study extends on this by establishing an empirical connection between engagement with Armenian media and how that engagement changes based on current affairs. It joins the body of literature on transnationalism, contributing to the understanding of change in identity acting as a constant. Although this study did not measure student's academic success or proficiency levels, the findings suggest that students' levels of engagement, effort, and willingness to participate in the course and further their learning increases based on their professors' approaches and methods of teaching.

This study sheds light on humor as a potential tool for regenerating positive attitudes between heritage speakers and their heritage language. It demonstrates the impact of humor in the Armenian language on heritage speakers by revealing how humorous content can bridge a connection between the heritage speaker and their heritage language. This research also provides important information and a more complete and detailed understanding of heritage language

learning and maintenance, thus offering insight for future language teachers of heritage languages to employ humor in the classroom, making the heritage language more approachable and usable in everyday life.

This dissertation offers a descriptive study of a modern day bilingual and bicultural life with regards to Armenian language classes in Los Angeles. Modern day encounters and uses of Armenian have the ability to disrupt mainstream conceptions of what Armenian should be and can serve as a resource to open language ideologies and enable speakers to adopt a language-as-a-resource view towards their heritage language. It can also provide concrete teaching pedagogies which include concrete actions for language revitalization on how humorous moments are part of a positive, counter hegemonic affective stance that pushes back against negative established ideologies about the Armenian language. By using humor and comedy to adopt positive ideologies about the language and challenge established ways of thinking about the heritage language, we can create an environment where minoritized languages speakers are about to use their language proudly and without apology. The findings from this study can also be extended to other minoritized communities in Los Angeles, where many different cultures and languages are in constant daily contact.

I argue that heritage language speakers need to dispel the language ideology that their Armenian is imperfect and impure and start taking control over their language to make the language something that they use in their everyday lives. One way to dispel this long held attitude would be through the use of humor. For heritage language speakers, seeing their heritage language in use and in action on widely recognized platforms contributes to the notion of "feeling seen", which in turn, shifts their perceptions of their heritage language. I found that the techniques of humor that professors used in their classroom were effective in engaging students

in the course. The holistic approach to teaching Armenian as a heritage language, and therefore including psychological, cultural, and societal aspects in the course, seems to be effective in increasing ethnic identity representation in the classroom. Professors should continue to approach the heritage language *student*, and not just the heritage language *speaker.*

Furthermore, it would be beneficial to utilize quantitative approaches in the field on Armenian language development. Creating a testing scale that can be standardized might be beneficial to study language proficiency changes over time, both in children and in adolescents. In addition, higher education institutions need to regularly offer Armenian language courses. Throughout the interviews, professors alluded to there being budget cut restraints, no support from the institutions, and the struggle to constantly prove the worth of keeping Armenian language courses. It comes as no surprise that when faced with budget constraints, the arts and languages are always the first to go, however, this is detrimental to the vitality of the Armenian language in the diaspora.

Concluding Remarks

The complexities of any language-learning situation are difficult to capture in one study. The phenomena of language maintenance in the diaspora brings to surface nuanced intricacies and sensitivities in each participant. My participants want to maintain their heritage language, which is why they enroll in Armenian language courses in college. They express that they want to be able to communicate about higher order topics and hold discussions where they can be active and engaged contributors. Being unable to convey these complex concepts in their heritage language creates a language disconnect emerges between student and identity. The parallel development of both linguistic and sociocultural knowledge co-occurs simultaneously: one does not exist without the other.

This study shows that language was ranked as the topmost factor in ethnic identity development, and this was the reason that compelled participants to enroll in Armenian classes. Humor is an expression of culture and language. When participants talked about understanding the humor, they also innately understand the humor in the culture and begin to feel a sense of belonging in the sentiment expressed in that joke or humor. This experience begins to engender belongingness to the culture, language, and community. Participants express feeling seen, expanding on the notion that it is not just about the humor or the laughing, but the sentiment that the humor makes them feel towards culture and community. Enjoying a humorous joke is a small aspect of the bigger role those funny skits are encompassing. Understanding the humor means there is an implication that you understand the culture, in addition to a few participants also expressing that they learned aspects of language from the humorous content, i.e., various vocabulary words. As a result, understanding humor may also contribute to feelings of belongingness in the community. As highlighted above, the case of Armenians in Los Angeles is unique in that it is inherently complex and diverse, including Armenians from Armenia, Iran, and Lebanon. For a young Armenian to grapple with questions of identity and belonging, Los Angeles seems to be an interesting place to do so. As other communities in the United States tend to be more homogenous in their immigration patterns, Los Angeles defines what it means to be an Armenian in a melting pot. To further highlight, there are two standards of Armenian, Western and Eastern. This makes the teaching of the language in Los Angeles unique because there is a variety of speakers of both standards, and each has its own additional linguistic and cultural influences.

Professors play an important role in the construction of Armenian identity and development of more advanced linguistic skills. It is imperative that professors acknowledge

their role and make these connections with their students. As the professors interviewed in this study mention, going beyond strictly teaching language but also incorporating elements of culture and society in the classroom help heritage speakers navigate their complex identities. Furthermore, the relevance of incorporating ethnic humor guides students in their identity and language development. This study was the first to empirically explore connections between the role of humor in language development, including elements of ethnic identity. With humor positioned as a mediator between language use and the sentiments held about a language, I believe we can begin to dispel the long-held negative notions of imperfect heritage language abilities and begin to change the narrative to a more positive one for those determined to learn Armenian in the diaspora.

Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

A UCLA Research Study

Hello!

Barev

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Do you come from an Armenian speaking family?

Have you taken an Armenian language course in the last 5 years?

If yes, please share your experiences as an Armenian language speaker for a study exploring language learning in the classroom.

What it entails: The study will consist of a short interview/focus group lasting approximately 45-60 minutes.

To participate: Please contact Anahit Pogossian if you or someone you know is interested and would like to participate or need more information at apogossian@ucla.edu.

Anahit Pogossian, MA is a PhD Candidate at UCLA. Dissertation chair is Dr. Alison Bailey, Ed.D.

Appendix B

Study Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LOS ANGELES
STUDY INFORMATION SHEET

Pedagogy in Armenian Heritage Language Classrooms; An Examination of Humor as a tool for Heritage Language Maintenance

Who is conducting this study?

Anahit Pogossian, MA and Dr. Alison Bailey, Ed.D from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Why is this study being done?

The goal of this study is to investigate culturally relevant pedagogy in Armenian heritage language classrooms.

What will happen if I am eligible and decide to take part in this research study?

If you volunteer to participate in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following:

- *Complete a questionnaire that asks about previous teaching training and experiences*
- *Allow classroom observations in Armenian language courses*
- *Participant in an interview that inquiries about teaching pedagogy and reflection on teaching Armenian, and attitudes about Armenian identity and learning Armenian*

How long will I be in the research study?

Participation in interviews will take approximately 45-60 minutes. Classroom observations will be conducted 3-4 times, each session for 90 minutes.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that I can expect from this study?

This study poses minimal risk to participants.

Are there any potential benefits if I participate in the study?

The results of the research may inform us of the various factors to better understand teaching and learning Armenian, Armenian as a heritage language, and the Armenian language in the diaspora.

Will I be paid for participating?

There will be no compensation for this study.

Will information about me and my participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify you will remain confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained by keeping the data you provide in a password protected computer inside a university office that requires a special access code to get in. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The data will be stored for future use by the principal investigator and/or research team.

The researchers will do their best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential. Information about you will be handled as confidentially as possible, but participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach in confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security.

What are my rights if I take part in this study?

● You can choose whether or not you want to be in this study, and you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time.

● Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you, and no loss of benefits to which you were otherwise entitled.

● You may refuse to answer any questions that you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

● The research team:

If you have any questions, comments or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact: *Anahit Pogossian (PI) at apogossian@ucla.edu or Dr. Alison Bailey (Faculty Sponsor) at abailey@gseis.ucla.edu*

● UCLA Office of the Human Research Protection Program (OHRPP):

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers, you may contact the UCLA OHRPP by phone: (310) 206-2040; by email: participants@research.ucla.edu or by mail: Box 951406, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1406.

Appendix C

Student Interview Protocol

Introductions:

1. Where do you go to school? What year in school?
2. What is your major?
3. Where is your family from? Where do they reside?

Armenian Identity:

1. How do you identify? Why?
    a. Do you identify as being Armenian? Armenia-American, or something else?
2. What makes you Armenian? (or Armenian-American, etc).
3. What does 'being' Armenian mean to you?
    a. Elicit emotions around feelings of belongingness.
    b. What actions do you take to strengthen your identity?

Attitudes about Armenian:

1. How comfortable are you with your heritage language?
    a. Self-reported proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, advance) gauge confidence levels.
    b. Do you speak eastern or western Armenian?
2. Who do you usually speak Armenian with?
3. How do you feel when you speak Armenian with them?
    a. Elicit information about their relationship with the language through who they speak with, etc. Interactions with the language, hinting at relationship with the language.
    b. What are the topics of conversation?
4. What media do you tend to listen to, watch, read, browse? In what language?
    a. So you said you watch/read "name media here", what about humor?
    b. How does humor relate to your Armenian language media habits?

Attitudes about Armenian language classes:

1. What motivated you decide to enroll in an Armenian language course?
2. What do you think of your professor and their style of teaching? Why?
3. What unique pedagogical methods have you noticed your professor use in the classroom? (Select the more novel methods from the list provided to probe, see if they mention humor spontaneously)
    a. if humor is not mentioned, introduce it: what about humor? What are your thoughts about using humor in the classroom?
4. What are some activities/assignments that you have enjoyed, why?

    a. Give me example of lessons you enjoy, tell me about a time where you enjoyed the activity…
    b. How do you feel about the course overall?
5. What are your perceptions of including elements of Armenian humor "in the classroom"?
6. In what ways do your professors employ humor in the classroom?
    a. In what ways do you find X methods (humor, media, etc) useful or detrimental to learning? In what ways does the professor's use of humor contribute to or detract from your experience in the course? What do you like or not like about it?
    b. Do they understand/appreciate the humor? (Threshold of understanding professor's humor)
7. Do you access any humorous Armenian content outside the classroom? Do you enjoy consuming or practicing humor?
8. In what ways does the course help strengthen or negotiated your previously mentioned Armenian identity?
9. Can you nominate a professor that you think employs the methods you previously listed in the course? (i.e., humor, media, interesting lectures, interesting assignments, etc).

Appendix D

Professor Interview Protocol

Semi-structured Interview

Part 1. Focused Teaching History (sent as questionnaire)

1. Background Information and Teaching history

Part 2. Details of Teaching Pedagogy

2. Describe your teaching philosophy.
    a. What has influenced your teaching pedagogy?
    b. What role does institution play in supporting you in improving your pedagogical practices?
3. Walk me through your curriculum development process.
    a. What themes do you teach on?
4. Tell me about a typical day in your classroom.
5. How do you engage students with different language proficiency levels?
6. What technology applications have you utilized in the classroom?
7. Describe the role that humor plays in your curriculum. (i.e. funny jokes, videos, pulling from comedians etc).
    a. Describe how you incorporate humor into your classroom.
8. What culturally relevant things do you incorporate into your classroom?
    a. What about students' cultural heritage/ community resources do you often plan to incorporate when putting together the course material?
    b. Culturally relevant pedagogy, food, family, holidays, politics, modern life (i.e., marriage, music, etc), anything in the student's home/community
    c. Explicit or implicit style when teaching
9. Tell me about your experience as a professor—materials, lessons, how are they going etc.
10. Would you say you are/how are you able to relate to the students that are in your class?

Part 3. Reflection on meaning of teaching and learning Armenian

11. Why did you decide to become an Armenian language professor?
12. How would you define your identity as a teacher, Armenian scholar, or your ethnic/racial identity?
13. How do you view/what are your views on Armenian language maintenance in the diaspora?
14. How do you conceptualize using modern literature, humor, and media in facilitating language learning?
15. What do you see your role as having a part in language maintenance in the diaspora?
16. *Talk about specific instances that occurred during the classroom observation.*

Appendix E

Classroom Observation Protocol

Observation #:	Date/Time:
Location/Scene:	
Visual Map:	
Number of Attendees:	
Key Participants* & Roles:	
Key Activities:	

Class: _____
Date: _____
Instructor:_____
Number of students present: _____
Number of students enrolled:_____

Running Record:

Time	Observation	Observer Comments

	(My observations will include the following: ● *Interactions with ……* ● *Peer-to-peer, peer-to-instructor interactions (especially in classroom)* ● *Activities such as … a grammar or vocabulary drill, role-play, reading or writing or listening assignment, etc.)* ● ***Skills emphasized…** (speaking, reading, writing, listening) ad sub-skills (phonetics, intonation, grammar, vocabulary, practiced*	

Research Questions	What I learned from this observation/interview	Questions/what else do you want to know, other areas to focus on, explore, etc.

Questions to consider:

1) Did the class incorporate elements specific to heritage language learners?
2) Did the teacher relate to the students?
3) Was the lesson differentiated (designed to meet the needs of various levels)?
4) Pay attention to language use: how much English did the instructor use and how much HL? What about the students?
5) Error correction: Did the instructor explicitly correct errors? What mistakes were or were not corrected? What techniques did the instructor use to correct errors?
6) Were there any group activities? Did students seem to enjoy these?
7) Was there direct grammar instruction? Did students seem to be understanding and following the instruction?
8) Was the lesson thematically driven (centered on theme such as family, food, travel, etc.)?
9) Was there new vocabulary introduced?
10) Was the class student centered or teacher centered?
11) Did the instructor use authentic materials and/or media?
12) Did the instructor use cultural components? Was it engaging and effective?

Appendix F

Student Interview Codebook

Themes	Codes	Description	Example
Engagement with Identity	Language as Top Factor	Participant lists language as the most important factor in what makes them Armenian Any instance where the participants talk about trying to use or consume in the Armenian language	"I'd probably say language, more than anything. Because you know, like I don't want to go into genetics and blood…I don't really eat Armenian food every day either… so I think it's mostly language"
	Communication with Friends	Anytime the participant mentions talking in Armenian with their friends, either as a secret language or as a participating interlocuter	"I guess in situations where it would be rude to speak in English and it's like I have the fallback of speaking in Armenian and you know, trying to figure out a 'plan of attack'. "
	Feelings of Guilt	Anytime participants mention feeling guilty for not 'being' Armenian enough, for not speaking enough, not reading enough, cooking enough	"I feel guilty for not knowing as much as I should, for not cooking enough Armenian food."
	Language and Cultural Ties	Anytime a participant mentions culture when talking about language (i.e., how intermingled the two are)	"I feel like I've seen families where they stress using the language and they still speak Armenian… that also comes with keeping Armenian traditions."
	Minimal Engagement	Any instance where there is a discrepancy between what they say and what they do. Also, any instance where they mention small amounts of engagement with the language	"My sister and I obviously we grew up together and we have same upbringing, but I realize, we never speak to each other in Armenian. Like it's just not a thing, we just don't speak Armenian as much. It's like, you know, we will say a couple things or make a joke here and there, but not a lot."

	Feelings when they speak Armenian	When a participant shares how they feel when they speak Armenian (i.e., comfortable, homely)	"I will speak Armenian with my father-in-law as well because, for some reason, it feels more respectful to speak Armenian with him."
	Complex Identity	Any instance where participants struggle to answer identity questions, or specifically mention it is complex/arbitrary/can't put into words.	"There's such a disconnect between all these things that we think we are, that we think we have to be, and nobody knows the true answer of what is it that we're striving for? Because there's no like concrete thing that we can attach ourselves to. "There's just something there's one quality that you just can't explain, and I don't know, I can't really put it into words."
Engagement with Media	Urgency	When participants express a sudden need to engage in material from Armenia due to a change in the home country	"There was this like influx of information coming at me, and it became overwhelming. There was so much information out there, that I mean not really so much information, but within our own little bubble, there was a lot of information coming in, as opposed to a little bit like a few months earlier so I made sure like if I saw a big body of Armenian writing, I wouldn't shy away from it."
	Reading in Armenian	Participants express trying to read more in Armenian during the War Participants express how they feel when they read	"Being Armenian just means that if I come across some Armenian text, instead of trying to run away from it and not read it, because it's hard, I make myself read it."

	Constantly Changing Identity	Engagement levels with material change based on how engaged they choose to be. This is also dependent on politics and other news Also, if participants mention they would've previously answered one way but now they are answering another way highlights that identity is constantly changing	"During the war everyone was fervently Armenian. And then after things like settle down, then it was like time to think about what it really is for me. So that's where the identity crisis began and continued"
Engagement with Community	Seeking Belongingness	Wanting to build a community on campus as a commuter, wants to meet more Armenians Feelings of happiness when they see other Armenians	"When you go to a foreign country, and you hear someone talk Armenian, you get happy, and I feel like it's the same in this case. Like why don't we take Spanish classes? We can take that and learn a new language, but we are always seeking out for one another. We feel dear with one another."
	Responsibility	Any notion of extrinsic motivation, sense of "had to", worried about what others will say or think. What language others want them to speak in	"I find it very unique for my university to have this Armenian course and it's exciting and I was thinking, if I'm not taking it I don't think anyone else is going to be taking the class…who else would be showing interest if not us."
Experiences in the Course	Positive	Positive experiences and feelings in the course. Anything that hints at the relationship students had with their professors in the classroom	"Our professor wanted us to join at whatever level we had and to not feel ashamed about how much we could contribute. I'll never forget that they really insisted that we think and create in Armenian. And their philosophy of like anybody can improve was I don't know was very, attractive to me in a class. We're so grateful to have that class"

	Professor Acceptance	Participants talk about professors being really accepting of all linguistic proficiencies	"Just by fostering that inclusive environment from day one, and saying it, you know, saying like we're all coming in with different levels, we're all Armenian in our own way, everyone's Armenian enough, like this is a safe space."
	Negative	Negative experiences in the course, feelings of anxiety, lack of understanding, robotic lessons, anything that has a negative connotation	"I remember we had a couple students that just didn't know Armenian at all. They were like, not even Armenian descent and our professor wasn't easy on them. Like they kind of expected them to learn Armenian as perfectly as we did. If you didn't know Armenian in that class, you were kind of screwed."
	Identity Negotiation	Any indication that the course helped them navigate their Armenian identity, either through using Armenian vocabulary to revive their love for literature	"It kind of reminded me like my values again, and like me wanting to brush up and like, you know, uh, it enhanced my Armenian speaking skill was my knowledge. So, it just worked out perfect"
Experiences With Humor	Cultural Broker	Participants express that they feel 'seen' when the comedians highlight things that are happening in their home (not feeling alone)	"Okay, any of those like kind of social media comedians recently I love it and I'm so happy for the work that they're doing because it's bringing so many parts of our generations and cultures together it's like a middle ground for like being funny and I think I think it's good content."
	Feeling Seen	Participants express that seeing comedians on social media platforms and doing skits on stage makes them feel like they 'belong' in the community	"My professor reinforces what I thought about myself, and seeing him, it's totally awesome."

Experiences with Humor in the Course	Regular Occurrence	Humor is described as always there in the background of the course. Either the professor had a funny personality, or they would incorporate comedic relief in the classroom through videos and content from comedians	“Whoever knows Armenians, knows that humor is a big part of our culture. We can’t live without humor. Humor is very important to us. We joke about ourselves a lot. In class, we would discuss politics, and at some point, the arguments would get heated, and the professor would make a joke, we would all laugh, and that would be that and we would all move. There was always humor in the background.”
	Humor as a Tool for Language Learning	Anytime language is talked about when consuming humor (i.e., for vocabulary development, for receptive skills, or overall cultural knowledge)	“She noticed that my vocabulary would get enriched. Whether in a good way or bad way, but she said you're expanding your vocabulary from watching it.”

Appendix G

Professor Interview Codebook

Themes	Codes	Description
Pedagogy/Methods	Cultural References	Professor makes references to cultural aspects of being Armenian, either direct or indirect.
	Pedagogical Struggles	Professors expresses any challenges they face in reference to curriculum or more broadly school climate.
	Curricular Development	Professor makes direct references to how they create material and how they use material. (i.e., what activities do they come up with?)
Philosophy	Perceptions of Influence on Students	Professor alludes to the impact they believe they have over course enrollment and student learning beyond the classroom.
	Humor Used in the Classroom	Professor talks about using humor in the classroom, either through jokes they make or content they share from comedians online.
	Promotes Certain Classroom Environment	Professors talk about techniques they utilize to create a welcoming environment. This can include anything from group work to acceptance of varying proficiency levels, to openness to making mistakes. This can also include their stance on the matter (i.e., making the course fun for themselves first)
Goals	Engages Students Emotionally	Draws on otherwise not talked about topics in the course, anything that will elicit an emotional reaction from students (e.g., related to family, Armenian Genocide, language assimilation).

	Lifelong Learners	Professors talk about giving the students resources to continue learning Armenian after they leave the course.

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