

The role of critical experiences, positioning, and agency in the dynamic, emergent construction of heritage speaker selves

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Abstract

Previous research has proposed a crucial role for critical experiences in language learning to better understand how learners understand and discursively construct their self-concept (Mercer, 2011, 2016; Serafini, 2020a; Thompson, 2020). However, studies have mainly explored critical experiences in the narratives of foreign language learners of English with little attention to how heritage speakers of languages other than English (LOTE) draw on critical experiences in discursive constructions of self. To address this gap, this study aims to explore the impact of critical experiences in university heritage Spanish speakers' self-narratives. Twenty heritage Spanish students completed a background questionnaire and peer-facilitated, video-recorded interview. Emergent, recurring themes were identified in transcribed interview data following tenets of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Findings underscore the key role of positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990) in dynamic conceptions of self, particularly how heritage speakers (re)imagine and discursively construct past, current, and future self-states. Positioning was also linked to agency (Ahearn, 2001) in relation to students' critical reflections on

experiences of racialization and resistance to, or reproduction of, dominant language ideologies. Overall, the study provides valuable insights for (heritage) language educators seeking to enact critical pedagogical principles in their classroom and curriculum.

Keywords: heritage language selves; complex dynamic systems; critical experiences; positioning; agency

1. Introduction

In distinct language learning contexts around the world, scholars have increasingly paid attention to different dimensions of language learners' self-concept as a way to better understand their variable motivational trajectories, achievement outcomes, and developing social identities as second language, bilingual, and multilingual speakers. The number of self-related constructs stemming from social and educational psychology and applied to the domain of learning a second or foreign language (L2/FL) has proliferated – from self-concept (Mercer, 2011), self-efficacy (Goetze & Driver, 2022) and self-discrepancy (Lanvers, 2016), to self-determination (Noels et al., 2000) and possible learner selves (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), to name a few. The possible selves strand of research has been particularly productive in terms of its conceptual evolution, thus accounting for a broader range of learner profiles across social and educational contexts through, for example, the anti-ought-to self (Thompson, 2017) and multilingual self-guides (Henry, 2017; Thompson, 2020).

In recent years, this research has recognized and moved away from the monolingual bias characterizing limited conceptions of the “L2 learner” and the field of L2 motivation as a whole (Henry, 2017; Ushioda, 2017). For example, scholars have explored whether bilingual and multilingual individuals who have learned two or more languages in childhood feel that they have multiple selves, as well as what key factors “shape individuals' perceptions of the relationship between their languages and selves” (Pavlenko, 2006, p. 6). The inherent complexity and dynamicity of selves phenomena have led researchers to increasingly draw on key concepts and principles afforded within complex dynamic systems theory (CDST). From the perspective of CDST, language development, language learners, and language itself are viewed as holistic, relational systems that are interconnected with other complex, dynamic systems (e.g., Beckner et al., 2009; Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2002, 2015; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007). This way of “seeing” possible selves has transformed the ways we conceptualize and conduct research on learner selves (Serafini, 2020a), reflecting the current

dynamic shift in L2 research (de Bot, 2015). However, in contrast to L2 speakers, little research has explored the possible selves of heritage speakers within a complex dynamic framework.

Heritage speakers are broadly defined as speakers with cultural connections or “a heritage motivation” (Van Deusen-Scholl, 2003) to learn the language, but who may minimally understand or be able to use the language. In addition to familial or ancestral ties, some scholars assert the key role of agency in defining heritage speakers in the US context in terms of “exerting their agency in determining whether or not they are heritage language learners of that heritage language and heritage culture” (Hornberger, 2005, p. 607). A broad view of who heritage speakers are encompasses not just how one sees and positions oneself, but also how one is viewed and positioned by others (Davies & Harré, 1990) within the sociopolitical context of learning and teaching (Hornberger & Wang, 2008). Importantly, definitions and terms used for heritage language are not neutral, but rather their meaning is “inevitably contested and ever-shifting in their national contexts” (Hornberger, 2005, p. 608). While relationships between language and identity have long informed heritage language (HL) education in the US, research has only recently begun to investigate the construction of HL speaker identity in instructed contexts (Leeman, 2015).

While heritage speakers have long been present in US language classrooms, it was not until the early 1980s that scholars and educators began to critique the lack of attention to their academic, affective, linguistic, and social profiles and needs (Valdés, 1981). Similar to their erasure in the classroom (Leeman, 2005; Martínez, 2003), there has been a lack of scholarly attention to heritage students in the strand of *selves* research as well, which is a key gap this study aims to address.

The present study takes a complex, dynamic approach to exploring the temporal and contextual dimensions of heritage selves with a focus on the potential key role of “critical experiences” as constructed in heritage speaker self-narratives. Following Sarah Mercer, critical experiences are defined here as those that occurred in the past and which learners retrospectively interpret as having some degree of significance in their language learning development (Mercer, 2011). In prioritizing attention to critical experiences in heritage speakers’ discursive constructions of self, the current study not only highlights the importance of past selves (Falout, 2016), but crucially provides a more situated and nuanced look at how Spanish heritage speakers’ perceptions of these critical experiences interact with context (Ushioda, 2014), how they position themselves and others (Davies & Harré, 1990), and the way they envision possibilities for enacting agency (Ahearn, 2001).

2. Literature review

2.1. A complex dynamic systems framework

Whether they occur in the natural world (e.g., climate change), the corporate world (e.g., price inflation), or the language classroom (e.g., feedback), all complex systems share certain core characteristics. They are composed of variables that are both independent and interconnected, and “mutually affect each other’s changes over time” (van Geert, 1994, p. 50). Complex dynamic systems exhibit behavior that is emergent, highly complex, and in flux – it is neither random nor totally predictable. Language development has been proposed to exhibit the characteristics of a complex, dynamic system (e.g., Beckner et al., 2009; Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2002, 2015; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007) and over time, these principles have transformed how we understand and research learner individual differences (IDs) in general and learner *possible selves* in particular (Serafini, 2020a).

Possible selves, or *future self-guides* originate in self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and encompass a form of *self-knowledge* related to “how individuals think about their potential and about their future. They are also the selves we could become, and the selves we are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). The ways that individuals conceptualize and imagine their current and future self-states or identities in different domains serve as guides for present behavior, which elucidates the link between self-concept and motivation (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Within the domain of L2/FL learning, Dörnyei and colleagues (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009) influentially proposed that language learners’ desire to lessen a perceived gap between current and future self states, or to ideally possess certain attributes (i.e., becoming fluent in the target language), greatly influences their motivation. In other words, this desire to reduce the gap is integral to one’s imagined identity as a speaker/user of the target language (i.e., *ideal L2 self*), and thus will positively or negatively impact L2 development.

Over time, the *ideal L2 self* has come to be predominantly viewed as a dynamic construct that is inherently complex, multidimensional, and relational in nature, and one that emerges and fluctuates along contextual and temporal dimensions (see Serafini, 2020a for an in-depth review). In the following section, we review core concepts underlying a dynamic conception of self and emphasize the key relevance of *past selves*, which has not previously been theorized or researched with heritage speaker populations. Then, we consider the limited extant research on heritage speaker selves conducted to date and motivate the need to examine heritage speakers’ constructions of self in relation to ideological context with a focus on the role of critical experiences, positioning, and learner agency.

2.1.1. A dynamic understanding of the self in language learning

Over the last 10-15 years, the conventional conceptualization of learner ID constructs has evolved from representing independent traits that deviate from a norm to multicomponential resources, or higher-order integrated wholes, composed of cognitive, motivational, and emotional components (Dörnyei, 2010). Conceived in this way, IDs function as “powerful attractors” or “stabilizing forces” (Dörnyei, 2010, p. 261) in the language learning process. In this process, the self operates as a situated, nested system (Avineri, 2015) that exists “within ecologies of other motivational systems, but also within other psychological, psycholinguistic, and social systems” (Henry, 2017, p. 561).

Research advancing the multi-dimensionality of the self has largely been motivated by a rejection of the monolingual native speaker of the target language as the assumed reference point (and goal) in traditional models of L2 motivation. As researchers such as Henry (2017) and Ushioda (2017) have argued, this bias ignores or simplifies the reality of a globalized, multilingual world in addition to negating other languages that the learner may desire to learn, be it in the process of learning or already use to communicate. Dynamically-oriented work in this realm has focused on examining the representation and interaction among language-specific selves in multilingual speakers (e.g., Henry, 2017; Jessner, 2008; Thompson, 2017, 2020; Thompson & Erdil-Moody, 2016; Ushioda, 2017) as well as to what degree multilingual self-guides may emerge from the interaction among their language-specific ideal selves (e.g., ideal L1 self, ideal L2 self, ideal L3 self, etc.). This research lends empirical support to the existence of “a higher-level multilingual motivational system” (Henry, 2017, p. 549) in which a learner’s different languages operate as interrelated systems.

In the US university context, Thompson (2017) found that students studying a range of languages other than English (LOTES) with at least a basic beginning level of proficiency in a third language (higher-level multilingual students) possessed significantly stronger ideal selves than their bilingual peers and lower-level multilingual students with less than basic L3 proficiency. Importantly, these data revealed the importance of learning a language because of family heritage, which, as Thompson notes, is not a common theme among those who study global English. Given the importance of a strong internal desire to learn a language (*ideal self*) and out of obligation (*ought-to self*) tied to family connections, Thompson recommends “further investigation of how family heritage (regardless of the language proficiency of the learner) affects the L2MSS [L2 motivational self-system] in a foreign language context” (p. 49).

In addition to multidimensionality, complex, dynamic principles have transformed how individual learners are viewed in relation to their environments,

which aligns with Ushioda's (1996, 2009) "person-in-context" view of L2 motivation. This model emphasizes "the agency of the individual person as a thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, a person with goals, motives, and intentions" (Ushioda, 2009, p. 220). Rather than conceiving context as a static, external variable that unidirectionally impacts learning, relationships among individuals and context are proposed to be continuously changing, mutually influential, and co-adaptive (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007). In this way, the learner forms part of a learner-context ecosystem that embodies a "fluid and complex system of social relations, activities, experiences and multiple micro- and macro-contexts in which the person is embedded, moves, and is inherently part of" (Ushioda, 2009, p. 220). From the micro-level of interpersonal interactions to the macro-level of culture (Mercer, 2016), the pedagogical, physical, cultural, cognitive, and social dimensions of context shape and are shaped by learners themselves (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2007; Ushioda, 2014).

Given that heritage speakers have been exposed to the language in a home or community setting from a young age, aspects of the *temporal* context are particularly important to consider in the development of heritage speaker selves. The need to study "language learner characteristics and behavior across various time-scales of activity" (King, 2016, p. 2) can reveal rich insights into the dynamic construction and emergence of self in relation to the past, present, and future (Mercer, 2016). This focus on the temporal foregrounds the schemes of perception, thought, and action that language learners bring with them to every communicative interaction and that have developed over a lifetime, and likely have some influence on their language learning experiences (Young & Astarita, 2013).

2.1.2. Past selves

As described above, temporal dynamism is an inherent feature of the *possible selves* construct in terms of understanding "learners as holistic beings nested within the bigger systems of their personal histories and the entirety of their lives and multiple contexts" (Mercer, 2011, p. 427). That is, individuals' *possible selves* are theoretically based on imagined self-depictions from the past – "possible selves derive from representations of the self in the past and they include representations of the self in the future. They are different or separable from the current or now selves, yet are intimately connected to them" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Further, the repertoire of possible selves any individual is free to create "derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences" (p. 954).

Falout (2016) was one of the first to highlight the importance of attending to learners' past selves, emphasizing that "people are ever refiguring and reevaluating who they possibly were in the past" (p. 51).¹ The potential impact of past experiences is interpreted by Falout and colleagues in terms of antecedent conditions (Christophel & Gorham, 1995), or "a mixture of beliefs surrounding how learners relate their present self-worth in learning particular school subjects to their past successes and failures" (Falout, 2016, p. 52). In the context of EFL university learners in Japan, antecedent conditions were equated with "academic emotional baggage" or "emotional-cognitive states that can be overall positive, negative, or mixed" (Falout, 2016, p. 53). They also found that past and future selves were most strongly correlated in EFL learners and giving them the explicit opportunity to reflect on their educational experiences and beliefs allowed learners to unpack their own academic emotional baggage in relation to language learning, leading to a "more positive and clearer sense of temporal self-continuity" (Falout, 2016, p. 58).

In sum, retrospection about the past is proposed to be strongly tied to prospection about the future and this process of critical self-reflection and potential reframing is argued here to be particularly empowering for Spanish heritage language speakers in the US who often speak socially stigmatized, or "nonstandard" varieties of Spanish and who have likely been exposed to harmful, deficit ideologies about standard language, whether at home, in the community, in the classroom, or elsewhere (Lee-man, 2015, 2018). To date, there is some research investigating the possible selves of heritage speakers of Hindi (Syed, 2001), Chinese (Xie, 2014), Japanese (Kurata, 2015), and Korean (Kim, 2023), and the link between Spanish heritage speakers' academic self-concept and literacy development (Beaudrie, 2018) but the majority of these studies have taken a purely quantitative approach. This limits our understanding of heritage speaker selves as an emergent phenomenon and one that is complex, dynamic, and contextually-situated. Further, directly transplanting Dörnyei's sociodynamic L2 motivational self-system and other models rooted in second language acquisition to instructed HL contexts is questionable (Prada, 2018) given that heritage speakers have distinct language learning experiences and different relationships to the target language and culture compared to their L2/FL peers.

3. Current study and social context

Given the lack of previous research exploring how heritage speakers understand and discursively construct their possible selves in relation to time and context, the current study seeks to explore the following points of inquiry:

¹ As Falout notes, this interrelatedness is further supported by brain imaging evidence showing that self-narratives of the past, present, and future share neural space and function.

1. What critical experiences across time and context can be identified in Spanish heritage speakers' self-narratives?
2. What is the impact of critical experiences on heritages speakers' discursive constructions of self?

In pursuing these questions, we pay particular attention to probing the under-researched notion of *past selves* as it is perceived and construed within the micro-level interactional context of the family and community as well as to identifying relevant aspects of the macro-level sociopolitical context that influence notions of self more broadly, including societal attitudes, beliefs, internalized ideologies about language and bi/multilingualism, and the perceived social status or prestige of the heritage language.

In the context of the United States, Spanish is unique as a majority minority language with deep historical roots. It is also the most studied additional language at all levels of language instruction (American Councils for International Education, 2017). Within the US public education system, language minority children, the vast majority of whom speak Spanish at home, represent the most rapidly growing segment of the K-12 US student population, accounting for 5 million, or 10.2% of all public-school students with a predicted increase to 40% by 2030 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). However, students who speak home languages other than English in the United States have significant obstacles to language maintenance given state and national language education policies that overwhelmingly promote English monolingualism (Leeman & Fuller, 2021). Underlying these policies are English-only ideologies and discourses that portray bilingualism and proficiency in non-English languages as a threat and an impediment to acquiring English (Wiley, 2000), underscoring what Ruiz (1984) describes as a pervasive "language as problem" orientation in US language policy and planning. As a consequence, in immigrant families there is a widely-documented shift to English language dominance/use and loss of the heritage language often by the third generation (Fishman, 2001). While Spanish is sometimes maintained beyond the 3rd generation, this is typically only observed in areas with a strong Spanish-speaking presence and continuous immigration patterns (Villa & Rivera-Mills, 2009).

Amid this sociohistorical and sociopolitical backdrop, the present study seeks to examine how university heritage Spanish students in Northern Virginia (NoVA) construct their possible selves through self-narratives in peer-facilitated interviews. We draw on three key concepts that we propose are central to understanding the complexity and dynamic development, emergence, and fluctuation of heritage speaker selves: critical experiences, positioning, and agency.

Critical experiences are broadly defined as past events to which learners have retrospectively assigned some special significance in their development as

language learners and may do so in order to justify and understand their current self-concept (for further detail see Mercer, 2011, pp. 146-158). Following Davies and Harré (1990), the discursive process of *positioning* is viewed as one in which “selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (p. 48). Positions are identified “by extracting the autobiographical aspects of a conversation in which it becomes possible to find out how each conversant conceives of themselves and of the other participants by seeing what position they take up and in what story, and how they are then positioned” (p. 48). In this sense, one’s identities can be multiple and contradictory at times based on which positions are created, taken up, or resisted through discourse (Abdi, 2011). Finally, *agency* is seen here as a contextually-bound situated construct that represents a learner’s “socioculturally-mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn, 2001, p. 112).

While previous research has explored critical experiences in the narratives of EFL learners (Mercer, 2011), no study has investigated how heritage speakers (re)interpret past critical experiences to understand and construct their possible selves from a complex, dynamic perspective. By focusing on identifying and analyzing critical experiences, the current study holds the potential to further refine our understanding of the dynamic link between past, current, and future selves and reveal not only the language ideologies that heritage students are or have been exposed to, but also whether they reproduce or exhibit agency in challenging those ideologies through the multiple ways they discursively position themselves and others.

4. Method

4.1. Local context

This study was carried out in the state of Virginia, where 14.9% of people aged five years and over reported speaking a language other than English at home (44.8% reported Spanish as their home language; United States Census Bureau, 2015). Fairfax County, where the principal researcher’s home institution, George Mason University, is located, is the second most racially and ethnically diverse county in Virginia and the fifth most diverse in the nation. Further, George Mason is recognized as the most linguistically and culturally diverse university in Virginia according to the latest rankings by US News & World Report (2023).

At the time of the study, the Spanish program within the Department of Modern and Classical Languages offered a major and minor degree in Spanish as well as a master’s program. At both the graduate and undergraduate levels, courses are offered in a range of disciplinary perspectives, including applied linguistics,

sociolinguistics, and language pedagogy with a focus on language and identity, sociolinguistic variation, Spanish in the US, and critical approaches to Spanish heritage and second language teaching, as well as Latin American and Peninsular literatures and cultures, border studies, and film and visual media studies.

4.1.1. Participants

A total of 20 participants (16 female, 4 male) who self-identified as native, heritage or bilingual speakers of Spanish were recruited to participate in the study via classroom visits and announcements from instructors of upper-level Spanish courses. Participant demographic and language data, as well as academic background data were gathered via an online questionnaire described below. The age of participants ranged between 18 and 43 years old ($M = 22.8$ years; $SD = 5.48$). Eight students were seniors, six juniors, four sophomores, and two were in their first year of study. In addition, the majority of students were pursuing a Spanish major (eight) or minor (four). One student reported being undecided, and the rest of the sample were studying different majors and minors, such as psychology and global affairs (see Figure 1).

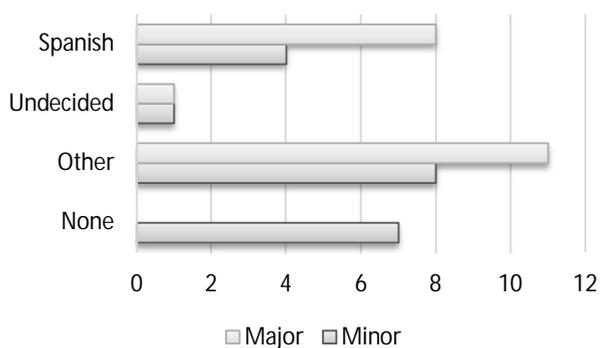


Figure 1 Participant majors and minors

Most participants reported learning only Spanish in childhood (14), while the rest of the sample studied Spanish simultaneously with English. Among the participants, five were born in the United States, and four participants reported first exposure to English before age five, and one participant between age 6-12 years. Of the remaining participants, fourteen were born in a Spanish-speaking country, one of whom reported a Korean heritage. Four participants arrived in the United States before age five, five between ages 5 and 13, and five arrived when they were 13 years or older. Two participants reported English as their most

frequently spoken language, and one reported Spanish. The remaining reported speaking Spanish and English equally. With respect to language proficiency, all but three participants rated their Spanish skills as native-like or advanced across all skills; three participants reported having intermediate or functional skills in reading and writing. Similarly, all but three participants rated their English skills as native-like or advanced, while one participant reported intermediate reading and writing skills, and the other reported intermediate reading skills.

4.1.2. Data collection

Following informed consent procedures, students completed an online background questionnaire created and disseminated through Survey Monkey that elicited participants' demographic information, place of origin, age of arrival to the United States, languages spoken, and self-ratings of Spanish and English language proficiency. Then, following Mercer (2016) and Thompson and Vásquez (2015), student self-narrative data were collected through open-ended interviews with the goal of providing "the opportunity for language learners to reflect back upon their lifelong language learning processes" (Thompson & Vásquez, 2015, p. 161). A trained bilingual heritage peer conducted the video-recorded interviews in English and/or Spanish. Following Leeman and Serafini (2021), who also carried out peer-led focus groups, the decision to employ peer-facilitated interviews aimed to reduce potential power asymmetries between professor/researcher – student and to increase chances that participants would feel uninhibited to respond freely.

Twenty interviews were recorded and transcribed for a total of nine hours and 45 seconds. Interviews ranged between 13 to 54 minutes ($M = 28$ min 53 s) and broadly covered topics related to: (1) language use and frequency, (2) identity: self-perceptions and external perceptions, (3) perceived relationship between language and identity, (4) attitudes towards Spanish, (5) reasons for studying Spanish, (6) classroom anxiety and experiences, (7) sense of belonging and experiences in the Spanish-speaking community, and (8) language maintenance. The trained student interviewer used an interview protocol with open-ended questions in English. Participants were encouraged to respond in English, Spanish, or both; the interviewer followed up using the language(s) preferred by the participant.

4.1.3. Data analysis and procedure

All interview data were associated with self-selected pseudonyms and recorded interviews were transcribed by two trained Spanish-speaking graduate research

assistants (see transcription conventions described in Leeman & Serafini, 2021). Emergent, recurring themes in the transcribed data were identified by taking an inductive approach following tenets of grounded theory, broadly defined as “a method of conducting qualitative research that focuses on creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data” (Glaser & Strauss 1967, p. 187). Based on theory generation versus theory verification, grounded theory centers the concept of emergence in the data and presupposes a past, assumes the proximity of the present, and denotes a future (Charmaz, 2006, 2008). Importantly, the current approach to data analysis also reflects a constructionist perspective, which takes a critical interpretivist stance and emphasizes the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant in the data analysis process (Charmaz, 2006). In other words, grounded theorists acknowledge the influence of the positionality, identity, and beliefs of the researcher(s) in terms of imposing certain categories and associated meanings.

First, the researchers each individually read, and then discussed the interview transcriptions to get a holistic understanding of the data. Based on these observations and discussions, a coding schema was generated and data were coded, annotated, segmented, and labeled using NVivo 12 Qualitative Research Data Analysis Software. Following the constant comparative method that aims to achieve theoretical data saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researchers determined the primary parent nodes to be Critical experience – Study/travel abroad, Critical experience – Home abroad (e.g., visiting family), Critical experience – home, Critical experience – community, Critical experience – online, Critical experience – peers, Critical experience – school, and Critical experience – work; within these categories, child nodes included references to Past selves, Current selves, and Future selves. The coding stripes function of NVivo was also utilized in order to visualize the coded segments and additional nodes in a particular text selection, which allowed for a visualization of node creation, emergence of patterns, and relationships among nodes. Finally, the researchers further associated coded instances with participants’ positioning of themselves and others and their agency as well as ideologies related to language (e.g., raciolinguistic ideologies), as seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Coding schema of parent and child nodes

Coding categories			
Agency	29		
Critical Experiences		Selves	
Study/Travel abroad	34	Future	1
		Past	15
		Current	19
		Selves	
Community	118	Future	6

		Past	10
		Current	20
		Selves	
Home	222	Future	27
		Past	62
		Current	151
		Selves	
Home abroad	50	Future	5
		Past	13
		Current	32
		Selves	
Online	86	Future	0
		Past	5
		Current	81
		Selves	
Other	90	Future	10
		Past	17
		Current	20
		Selves	
Peer	79	Future	0
		Past	21
		Current	59
		Selves	
School	496	Future	29
		Past	265
		Current	225
		Selves	
Work	106	Future	18
		Past	47
		Current	43
		Selves	
Essentialist ideologies	40		
Positioning	101	Self	38
		Others	63
Racialization	42		
Raciolinguistic ideologies	40		
Sociolinguistic awareness	16		
Standard language ideologies	18		
Total	1559		1302

5. Results and discussion

Broadly speaking, heritage speakers' self-narratives revealed the prevalence of critical experiences in the community, at home, and at school. Out of a total of 1559 coded instances, all participants (20/20) relayed a critical experience they perceived to be meaningful in some way in these contexts and these were the most frequently referenced across all critical experience categories (community – 118; home – 222; school – 496). The next three most referenced contexts were critical experiences at work (106), online (86), and with peers (79).

To further explore the impact of these critical experiences on the dynamic construction of self at home, in the community, and at school, sample quotes from Mateo's interview are included below. In this excerpt, Mateo, who came

to the United States from Perú when he was 11 years old, constructs his past self in relation to how he was positioned by others at school, and he draws on these critical experiences to position and construct his current self in terms of reinforcing his Spanish-speaking identity and commitment to maintaining Spanish. The interviewer asks Mateo how it impacted him to start school in the US when he was 11 years old, to which he initially responds, "Really, 'cause I'm gonna start crying if I say this. Nah I'm just kidding (laughs)." He then elaborates on the loss of belonging and connection he felt in the United States, in contrast to Perú:

You know, it affects me, umm, (laughs) I . . . I . . . I came from Perú . . . when I was, in Perú I was used, use to go out play soccer, in la callecita, right across my house. I used to have friends, they use to scream my name. You know, éramos como bien cancheros, we'd play soccer every minute. . . . But here, and I was only 11 years old, ten, and here, it was, you know, something different. You know, I really didn't have friends. I used to live in Springfield and then, but the worst part, I was the only kid in that neighborhood so I had no friends, basically. And then, when I went to school, there were only a few kids they speak Spanish. I think my friend in America, I think his name was Jorge, Jorge García. He was my friend, he would play in recess. Pero después de clases, nothing. I would go home straight, watch T.V. and then go to sleep. (Mateo)

Mateo's friends in Perú "screaming his name" underscores the sense of belonging he felt when he was younger, in contrast to the social isolation he initially felt after moving to the United States. As Henry (2015) argues, the self is sensitive to feedback and is continuously modified through social interaction and processes of "self-perception, social comparison and self-appraisal" (Henry 2015, p. 89). In turn, complex systems adapt and change "in response to feedback from its changing environment" (Larsen-Freeman, 2015, p. 16). In the quote below, Mateo relates the experience of being racialized in high school and how that critical experience actually motivated him to build a diverse community and strengthened his commitment to maintaining his Spanish:

. . . nunca. I never felt like to leave behind my culture. I don't think so. Creo que con que me decían ellos "you're Chint, you're Spanish, you're Mexican," I think motivated me . . . I knew in high school, I think influenced me to hang out both with more of my friends, my Spanish friends, we made like a little community in high school. We were called . . . since I was hanging out with all Peruvians, I'm a Peruvian, I was hanging out with all Peruvians, we made like a little group and we called each other "The Peruvians," "The Peruvian Crew."

Mateo continued, "Then we had people joining our crew, like Dominicans, Mexicans, Salvadoreans, even some black people, joined us playing soccer and then they'd stopped calling us names." The transformative experience relayed by

Mateo is a striking example of agency in the face of racialization, which instead of being demotivating (Dressler, 2010), strengthened his motivation, sense of self, and belonging to a community.

This sort of critical racialized experience emerged as a common theme in several heritage speakers' self-narratives (14 out of 20). In the following quote, Kaitlin, a Dominican speaker of Spanish who came to the United States in second grade, shares her experience in elementary school in which her teacher positioned her as a monolingual speaker of English who does not speak Spanish:

. . . so I remember I remember like the first week of school when they said ok if you don't speak Spanish on one side, if you do speak Spanish go on the other side; she said in Spanish, so I don't know why the teacher assumed, coz the kids have been learning Spanish, like most kids were Hispanic or they had been learning Spanish since they were young . . . and she was just like "oh you're in the wrong line" and I am like "I am Dominican" like "are you sure?" like "I am sure," I know, like "I speak Spanish, I'm Dominican" so I remember that experience. (Kaitlin)

Here Kaitlin rejects her teachers' positioning and (re)asserts her linguistic expertise and ethnic identity (Rampton, 1990), clearly demonstrating agency. Kaitlin later makes sense of and attributes this negative schooling experience to her race, "So I think sometimes people like, I am African Dominican and sometimes people don't know you are Hispanic unless you speak." In previous research, Black L2 speakers of Spanish have also been reported to experience racialization in study abroad contexts (Serafini, 2020b), which underscores the need to incorporate raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015) as core content not only across the Spanish curriculum but also in language teacher education in order to empower both teachers and students to develop critical awareness of the inextricable link between language and race (Lado & Quijano, 2020; Leeman & Serafini, 2021; Quan, 2021).

Further, the critical racialized experiences relayed by participants underscored the key role of emotions, which supports recent HL research (Driver, 2022; Prada et al., 2020). Laura, who was raised in Chile and identifies as a Korean heritage speaker of Spanish, reflects on the racialization she has experienced throughout her life as people frequently assume she does not speak Spanish because she is Asian. This seems to provoke humor at first but also frustration, and even anger at constantly being questioned and having to "prove" her Spanish-speaking identity. In response to the question asked by the peer interviewer, "Has anyone ever assumed something about you in relation to Spanish or English that maybe wasn't true, felt weird?," Laura states:

Well, I'm Asian, so (laughs). So before I do speak Spanish, no one knows I speak Spanish, so every time I speak Spanish, they are "Oh, did you learn Spanish in school," and

I'm like, oh, nooo . . . Well, I mean, there have been times I'm with my baby brother, I speak Spanish with my brother, and, like, people hear us speaking and are [makes odd face] "oh we lived in Chile" and they are "okaaaayyy." (Laura)

Interestingly, while previous research has found that the most prominent and salient type of critical experience for EFL learners happened through travel abroad (Mercer, 2011), critical experiences abroad, whether studying, traveling or visiting family, were the least frequently referenced by this heritage learner population. This sheds light on key differences in the development of possible selves embedded within "a specific [sociocultural, educational, or personal] context, real or imagined" (Mercer, 2011, p. 19) and highlights the key differences between these two learner groups (HL vs. EFL). On the one hand, EFL learners are more likely to be associated with elite or elective bilingualism stemming from a formal study of the second language, while on the other hand, heritage speakers are circumstantial bilinguals who represent what is often referred to as immigrant or folk bilingualism common in working-class immigrant communities. These two types of bilingualism are associated with different social values and forms of capital (Aparicio, 1998) as well as distinct learning experiences at home vs. abroad.

This differential value is clearly manifested in Nina's positioning of her ability to write in Spanish as "inferior" to her classmate, who is an L2 speaker of Spanish:

Like one of my friends, Johnny, he's from Fairfax, his family is from Fairfax, his native language is English and ummm, his Spanish is better than mine, writing wise. So, it's kind of like, I get embarrassed, this is where I'm from . . . and you're [??] raised here, you've been taking it for a few years, and you write better than me. (Nina)

This reflection by Nina aligns with the reproduction of dominant ideological discourses by both heritage and L2 speakers in mixed instructional settings in terms of assessing academic, formal Spanish as more valuable and professional and devaluing bilingual knowledge and varieties of Spanish as informal and less academic (Leeman & Serafini, 2021).

Finally, heritage speakers' past, current, and future selves were found to interact in dynamic ways as seen in the following quote by Kaitlin who reflects on her fluctuating selves over time in relation to Spanish:

. . . when I was younger like we would go in the streets with my mom and she would speak Spanish to us, you know, can you speak English; I didn't understand the value of being bilingual and both languages and now . . . I know that when I was younger, I didn't understand why my mom always spoke Spanish to us in the household; I didn't understand that. (Kaitlin)

She continued: "Yeah like . . . I think it was fine like keeping it in the home but like that's it, it made me feel good when we spoke it in the house but I feel like

when we went outside out the house, I was like okay now we are outside you can speak English.” Later, upon further reflection prompted by the interviewer, Kaitlin articulated her gratitude to her mom for insisting on speaking Spanish at home, eventually coming to realize the power of her bilingualism: “Definitely I am appreciative that I speak Spanish in the household because that’s the reason why I’m able to speak Spanish, like we only spoke Spanish at home so I’m grateful because that’s how I’m able to speak Spanish.” In positioning herself as a Spanish-English bilingual, she strengthens the vision of her future self as being able to “translate incorporating Spanish into whatever profession I go into.”

6. Conclusions and implications

This study offers novel insights into heritage speaker possible selves as a complex, dynamic construct by focusing on the role of critical experiences, positioning, and agency. In particular, the self-narratives analyzed here underscore the importance of considering critical experiences in the formation of *past selves* and how these interact with current and future imagined depictions of self. By focusing on positioning, the peer-led interviews revealed how heritage speakers discursively constructed the self, which “allows for the possibilities of agency and the influence of our subjectively lived histories as we enter into narratives and story lines with one another” (Clark, 2002, p. 291).

A key finding was the pervasiveness of being racialized, as a majority of participants (70% of the sample) relayed an experience in which they were positioned as languageless (Rosa, 2016) in some way based on their race. Equally importantly, the opportunity to critically reflect on these experiences provided the space to reinterpret their meaning and how they affected their understanding of themselves. Several heritage speakers displayed agency through this reinterpretation and felt empowered to reject being positioned as racialized subjects. In addition to the essential link between language and race, this study also highlighted the need to consider emotion and affect in the construction of heritage speaker selves, which is a key component of the original tenets of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and a focus of recent work investigating learning outcomes in heritage contexts (Driver, 2022; Prada et al., 2020).

Related to these key conceptual insights, the present study also offers valuable pedagogical implications. For example, the opportunity to reflect, either orally or in writing, on one’s own language learning histories can help learners synthesize, consolidate and better understand their own personal trajectory as language users (Falout, 2016), in essence aiding people to reframe how they comprehend and think about past stresses and traumas (Smyth & Pennebaker,

1999). This reframing is argued to help interpret, validate and integrate events into one's self-concept in a way that promotes personal continuity and meaning (Neimeyer & Levitt, 2001). Such experiences can and should be incorporated into both heritage and L2-oriented language curricula (Torres et al., 2018) by taking a critical sociolinguistic approach to language teaching (e.g., Leeman & Serafini, 2016) with a focus on providing practical guidance on promoting critical reflection on "self" and "other" (Abe & Shapiro, 2021). Implementing methods such as oral digital histories (Foulis, 2018) in the classroom is one way to empower students to be able to reflect on, grapple with, and reinterpret critical experiences like the ones shared here by heritage speakers of Spanish.

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