Motivation of Heritage Language Learning: Is Heritage Attachment Enough?

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21st century, heritage language studies have drawn unprecedented attention from language-related research areas. Despite the flourishing research on heritage language learning, relatively few studies have examined the motivational profiles of L1 English speakers engaged in heritage language learning. Theoretical explorations of heritage language learning motivation over the past decade have been largely informed by L2 motivational self guides, leading to the development of two closely related concepts: the *rooted L2 self* and the *indigenous heritage self*, in which emotional connections to heritage history and the language maintenance and revitalization obligations are deemed prominent motivational forces. However, the cognitive mechanism underlying the two self concepts remains unclear. Moreover, how well the two heritage-related concepts account for L1 English speakers' motivation to learn a diminishing heritage language requires further investigation. This paper proposes that 1) Norton's *investment theory* could be applied to explain the cognitive processes underlying the heritage convictions of the rooted L2/indigenous heritage self; 2) the *ideal multilingual self* may generate motivational force to learn a heritage language as part of an internalized identity of rejecting monolingualism.

Keywords: *Ideal Multilingual Self, Rooted L2 Self, Indigenous Heritage Self, Anglophone Heritage Language Learner, German*

[1]Introduction

L2 motivation research has been closely aligned with the field of psychology since its inception

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in the middle of the 20th century. In addition to reflecting theoretical advances made in mainstream psychology, L2 motivation research has simultaneously nurtured itself with developing theories mainly from fields of second language acquisition and sociolinguistics (Clément & Norton, 2021; Ushioda, 2012). In addressing the issue of globalization, particularly how English has become the lingua franca for acquiring global identity, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) pointed to a paradigmatic shift in L2 motivation retheorization which recruited contemporary notions of self and identity.

One prominent conceptualization that brings self and identity to the core of this L2 motivation rethinking is Dörnyei's (2009) *L2 Motivation Self System* (L2MSS). By drawing on the psychological theory of *possible selves*, Dörnyei developed the L2MSS, which consists of three constituents: *ideal L2 self*, *ought-to L2 self*, and *L2 learning experience*. The construct is developed in the context of learning English as the target language, and may therefore not be applicable to the context of learning languages other than English (LOTEs). Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie (2017) argued that the repercussion of the inexorable rise of Global English has made English learning motivation "decontextualized", whereas the motivation for learning LOTEs tends to be highly contextual and intertwined with community-based historical ties. In response, researchers in L2 motivation have called for theoretical expansion and innovation in language learning motivation, especially the motivation of learning LOTEs (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017).

Historical colonization and subsequent language contact have endangered a lot of heritage languages. In the United States, some colonial heritage languages, such as various dialects of German, are facing irreversible language death. Within traditional Anglophone countries, German as a heritage language bifurcates into two strands: diminishing colonial German variants and standard German sustained by recent immigrants, which gives German heritage learners rather distinct heritage backgrounds. Despite the burgeoning research on heritage language learning, the motivation of Anglophone heritage language learners is a surprisingly understudied topic (Thompson, 2017, 2021).

Building on the notion of "possible selves", MacIntyre et al. (2017) and Huang and Chan (2024) developed two self concepts, the *rooted L2 self* and the *indigenous heritage self,* to focus specifically on heritage language learning motivation, proposing that affection and obligation attached to heritage languages are critical motivational forces. However, we argue that emotional connection to community-based "rootedness" and commitment to language preservation are not sufficient to explain the motivation to learn a dying heritage language. By presenting the specific cases of Texas German and Alberta German, this paper reexamines the conceptualization of the rooted L2 self and the indigenous heritage self. Particularly, we propose that Norton Peirce's (1995) *investment theory* can complement the cognitive dimension of the two heritage-related self concepts. Moreover, we suggest that the *ideal multilingual self* (Henry, 2017) is a critical self concept to facilitate L1 English speakers' engagement in heritage language learning by enabling future multilingual identity construction.

Multilingual Learning Motivation

The L2MSS is conceptualized in a monolingual mindset with English as the target language of the theorization (Henry, 2017). However, despite its ubiquity and pervasive influence, the "Multilingual Turn" in the second decade of this century has highlighted the shadow that

Global English has cast over languages other than English (Douglas Fir Group, 2016; May, 2013). As the editors of the special issue of *The Modern Language Journal* that focused on motivation research in a multilingual and multicultural world, Ushioda and Dörnyei (2017) addressed the "English bias" in the empirical exploration and theoretical analysis of L2 motivation research. They called for a critical look at the motivation to learn LOTEs in an era of multilingualism. One prominent question raised in the dedicated special issue was whether the self and identity reconceptualization of L2 motivation, which is grounded in the context of English globalization, could do full justice to the motivation to learn LOTEs. As one of the researchers who intended to address this question through the lens of the future self guides in the L2MSS, Henry (2017) proposed the concept of *ideal multilingual self*, which reflects a person's "aspiration to be/become multilingual" (p. 554).

Henry (2017) pointed out that L2 motivation research had a strong monolingual bias. The few motivation studies that have concentrated on multilingual learning tended to treat the motivation systems of different languages separately, overlooking the cognitive interconnection between languages. He suggested that the focus of research into the motivation of multilingual learners needed to be directed to "the dynamic interactions of the Lx and Ly motivational systems and the emergent motivational properties arising therefrom" (p. 549). In his conceptualization, Henry expanded on the existing theory to argue that the ideal multilingual self could emerge from the dynamic interactions among multilingual learners' language-specific ideal selves. He also argued that, as a higher-level self concept, the ideal multilingual self could provide stable motivational support to maintain a harmonious relationship between distinctive language selves when they are simultaneously active in competing for cognitive resources in an individual's multilingual language learning and use. Henry (2011) exemplified this by referring to his study of a Swedish learner of L2 English and L4 Russian. In this specific case, the learner developed a strong self identity of being multilingual. As a result, when the learner's superior competence in L2 English threatened to suppress the cognitive activation of Russian, his ideal multilingual self functioned as a mediating force. It buffered the dominance of L2 English, boosted the resilience of the learner's Russian selves, and motivated strategic actions to reverse the potent impact from English and to remain committed to learning and using Russian.

The overarching strengthening effect of the ideal multilingual self is discussed in multilingual contexts with the target group being individuals who learn English and LOTEs simultaneously. This precludes language learners from traditional English-speaking countries. Obviously, the population whose first language is English usually lack motivation to learn LOTEs somehow because it is deemed as "lack of necessity" (Thompson, 2021) since "English is the only essentially important language" (East, 2012, p. 130), or due to some other concerns (Fishman, 2006). Lanvers (2016) and Thompson and Vásquez (2015) addressed the L1 English speakers learning LOTEs in the United States and the United Kingdom respectively, proposing the *anti-ought-to self* and the *rebellious self* to indicate the LOTEs learners' "push-back" determination to a commonly imposed image of Anglophones being satisfied monolinguals as well as incompetent language learners. The learners are then driven towards learning LOTEs as a way of showing defiance and revolt against the undesirable identity. Although there are some Anglophone learners of LOTEs rejecting monolingualism, Lanvers (2016) argues that additional language learning in the traditional English-speaking countries like the United

Kingdom, the United States, and Australia is all in crisis. Motivation studies examining L1 English speakers or bilingual English-dominant speakers learning LOTEs are far less numerous compared to the research on the ESL/EFL learners or bilingual/multilingual learners whose L1 is not English (Lanvers 2012, 2017; Lanvers et al., 2021; Thompson, 2017, 2021).

Motivation of Heritage Language Learning

Despite the well-documented cognitive, intellectual, and tangible benefits of learning additional languages, according to a report released in 2023 by the Modern Language Association (MLA), the total college and university enrollments in LOTEs have dropped by 16.6% between fall 2016 and fall 2021 in the United States. Although this decline might be partially due to an overall decrease in the number of students enrolled in higher education, compared to the 8% drop in higher education enrollment, the 16.6% fall in postsecondary LOTEs enrollment remains prominent. Despite the declining enrollment in LOTEs, an interesting trend has emerged: more heritage language learners are registering in postsecondary LOTEs programs or courses to learn, relearn, or advance their heritage language (Montrul, 2010, 2016; Thompson, 2017).

Montrul (2016) points out that heritage language speakers and heritage language learners are different. Heritage language learners may or may not be heritage speakers, but they have a cultural connection to the language and actively seek to learn it. Due to the different epistemological lenses embedded in the term "heritage language", it is always difficult to reach a unanimous understanding of what defines a heritage language. Out of the ten descriptions of heritage language listed by Ortega (2020), only two features are commonly shared: a familial connection to the language and the hierarchical majority-minority relationship between languages. In this paper, we define heritage language from a sociolinguistic perspective (Fishman, 2006) by foregrounding two traits which echo the two commonalities mentioned above: (1) heritage languages are languages other than the nationally dominant one, and (2) heritage languages have an association with a particular ethnicity. Following this definition, heritage languages have the broadest scope, including indigenous, immigrant, colonial, and even refugee languages (Fishman, 2006).

The 21st century has seen unprecedented attention to the study of heritage languages in various language-related research areas, such as linguistic development, sociolinguistic experiences, and language education (Ortega, 2020). Early motivation studies of heritage language learning are interested in the motivational distinctions between heritage language learners (HLLs) and non-heritage language learners (non-HLLs), and usually draw upon the concepts of instrumental and integrative orientations proposed by Gardner (Lu & Li, 2008, as cited in Comanaru & Noels, 2009; Noels, 2006) and the self-determination theory by Noels (Comanaru & Noels, 2009; Noels, 2006; Noels, 2013). Recently, in parallel with the mainstream L2 motivation research, the perspective of self and identity has been adopted as a central framework for understanding motivation of heritage language learning (Banegas & Roberts, 2022; Berardi-Wiltshire, 2012, 2018; Huang & Chan, 2024; Huia, 2017; Kim, 2017; MacIntyre et al., 2017).

MacIntyre et al. (2017) discussed the connection between traditional artistic performance and the revitalization of the heritage language, Scottish Gaelic on Cape Breton Island, revealing how active heritage artistic practices like music and dance could motivate heritage language

learning. The study proposed a new concept of the rooted L2 self to indicate "strong feelings of connection to speakers of the language, which can be tied to specific individuals … but more generally a defined community" (p. 512). This self concept emerges through a long-term development of "community-rootedness", which exhibits both attachment to the ancestral root and the future-oriented obligation. The researchers argue for the coexisting affective and cognitive processes within the rooted self, suggesting that heritage passions (emotional connection) and heritage convictions (belief systems) are the two key sources of motivational power. The findings reveal that, in the context of heritage language learning, the rooted L2 self integrates the language learners' future self guides (the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self) with their shared identity from the history. Contrary to the ought-to L2 self in the framework of L2MSS which indicates passively encompassed compulsion of learning the given language, the rooted L2 self reflects a voluntary obligation to heritage language preservation and promotion.

Huang and Chan (2024), in their study on indigenous language learning in Taiwan, introduced the concept of indigenous heritage self which shares a similar conceptual interpretation of the rooted L2 self. The study specifically addressed the conceptual distinctiveness between the indigenous heritage self and the ideal/ought-to self constructs within the L2MSS framework, indicating that the indigenous heritage self is more reflective of a learner's current self. As also noted by MacIntyre et al.'s study (2017), Huang and Chan's study demonstrates that the indigenous heritage self encapsulates both heritage passions and heritage convictions, and is emotionally and cognitively driven. The affective attachment to the shared history, identity, and cultural legacy not only engages the main gear for the language learners' motivational drive but also entails the responsibility for the language and cultural maintenance and revitalization. MacIntyre et al. (2017) and Huang and Chan (2024) both argue that the rooted L2 self or the indigenous heritage self reflects connection to the past, the present, and the future. The connection articulates appreciation to the shared past, the learning experience of the present, and the responsibility for the future. In both studies, heritage language learners demonstrate enthusiasm for language preservation and revitalization. However, what if a heritage language is virtually dying and there is no perceived need to preserve it, such as colonial heritage languages? Aside from the rooted L2/indigenous heritage self, what possible motivational factors might influence the decision to learn a moribund heritage language?

Colonial Heritage Languages

Despite being included in the heritage language domain, colonial heritage languages in the United States are different from indigenous or immigrant languages. From the perspective of historical justice, colonial heritage languages seem to bear less justification of support for language revitalization projects compared to historically marginalized and oppressed Amerindian speech communities; neither do they possess the invigoration poured in from continuous immigrant reinforcement, such as Spanish. Some colonial languages have lost their capacity for intergenerational transmission. For example, Dutch, Swedish, Finnish, and Welsh are no longer actively spoken by descendants of the eighteenth-century European settlers in the United States. Some colonial heritage languages, although shrinking, have managed to survive as scattered diasporas due to their speakers' carefully guarded identity and physical distance

from the American mainstream. These speech island communities, such as the speakers of Pennsylvania German and Texas German, reside in comparatively enclosed geographic locations (Clausing, 1986; Clyne, 2003; Putnam, 2011). Despite its tenuous survival, it is an irreversible trend that the variants of German are losing their colonial root base in favor of a sociolinguistic status as an immigrant language which benefits from the recent immigration and support from its modern connection with the home country (Fishman, 2006).

German as a Heritage Language

Texas German is a vivid example of the diminishing colonial heritage languages with dispensable language maintenance. The first wave of German immigration to Texas started in the 1830s and 1840s. Since then, German had become the primary language in many German communities in Texas. Donor dialects from different regions of Germany contributed to the formation of Texas German with its distinct linguistic features as a result of geographic isolation and robust institutional support until World War I (Boas, 2009). However, the preservation of Texas German was severely challenged by the anti-German sentiment during both world wars. During the same period, transportation infrastructure rapidly broke the ethnolinguistic insulation, and comprehensively increased the contact of Texas German with English. Declined as it is in institutional support and social practices, Texas German gradually retreats from the public domain and has been primarily restricted to private occasions since the 1960s (Boas, 2009).

Warmuth (2023) pointed out that Texas German as a heritage language emblemed an emotional connection to childhood and old memories, something tied to the "root" of a shared ancestral history. By quoting one of his informants in the study, "you know, the older we get, we get more interested in things we should have probably asked more questions about when we were younger" (p. 135), Warmuth elaborated how the sense of rootedness could intensify as people grew older. However, aging of its speakers is the most vital threat faced by Texas German. Today, there are only 5,000-6,000 fluent speakers of Texas German with the youngest over 70 years old (Boas, 2018). In addition, since the intergenerational transmission had virtually stopped by the late 1940s mainly due to sociopolitical and socioeconomic reasons, it seems that the death of Texas German is foreseeable (Boas, 2009). Wilson (1986) once predicted that Texas German was dying and would become extinct roughly before 2036.

In Canada, a similar situation of German as a heritage language was discussed by Noels (2013). Waves of German immigrants from the 1700s to 1960s made German once the most widely spoken non-official heritage language in Canada. Similar to the German diasporas in the United States, although German in Canada is perceived as a general non-official mother tongue, distinct German dialects and communities in different geographic locations are shrinking. In the case of Alberta German in Canada, just like Texas German, the language is experiencing a drastic loss in the present generation of speakers. German maintenance as a heritage language differs in urban and rural areas, with abrupt decrease of speakers in the former and sturdy stability in the latter (https://sites.ualberta.ca/~german/AlbertaHistory/historyframetop.html). Eventually, the general decline in German heritage speakers and the aging of the group (Patzelt, 2017) will pose a similar challenge to the language maintenance just as what is faced by Texas German.

German Heritage Language Learners

Most college-level German HLLs in the United States and Canada are second or third generation immigrants after World War II when the language is unlikely to be learned at home and practiced in public due to intergenerational transmission incompetence (Noels, 2006; Boas, 2009; Dressler, 2010). Fishman (2006) once suggested that to learn or relearn the heritage language in the school system might be the primary pathway for the second or third generation to fulfill a "self-discovery" and explore the identity connected to the legacy. To examine the motivational differences between the postsecondary German HLLs and non-HLLs, Noels (2013) found that the HLLs exhibited stronger German identification, which was then interpreted as the sense of belonging to the German ethnolinguistic group. This connection to German serves as the motivational drive to internalize learning German as a "central aspect of one's self-concept" (p. 74). However, the willingness to self-identify as a German HLL is not supported by Dressler's (2010) study in exploring the motivation and demotivation of college-level German HLLs. The findings indicated that lack of "real" connection to the German root, not being able to speak German as a family language, and the sense of not being an authentic German speaker could trigger ambiguous emotions to the German heritage identity and provoke reluctance to be identified as German HLLs, in spite of a positive attitude toward learning German.

If intergenerational transmission is no longer available and the colonial German variants are doomed to die in the near future, what would be the motivational drive for those who still choose to learn them? Obviously, the obligation to maintain the language is irrelevant because on the one hand, colonial German variants are dying, and on the other hand, German as a recent immigrant language is not endangered due to its connection with the home country. In addition, a positive attitude or affection toward German is not sufficient because German HLLs were demotivated due to the absence of feeling the "real" connection (Dressler, 2010).

"Looking Back" and "Looking Forward"

To revisit the previously discussed concepts of the *indigenous heritage self* and the *rooted L2 self*, both constructs illuminate the dual motivational drives of "heritage passions" and "heritage convictions". While the heritage passions unfold themselves in the emotional connections to a shared legacy by "looking back" and a perceived obligation to language maintenance by "looking forward", the cognitive dimension of heritage convictions remains comparatively underexplored in previous studies.

In the case of dying colonial German variants, if the "heritage passions" have revealed a fragile connection to the inherited identity, and the future of the heritage language is obscure, with preservation efforts lying beyond a realistic sense of obligation, then what fuels the motivational force of looking both backward and forward? We don't have answers to this question yet. However, we propose two tentative directions for inquiry: 1) using *investment theory* (Norton Peirce, 1995) to address the cognitive process of the "heritage convictions", and 2) examining how the ideal multilingual self might promote heritage language learning through fostering a desire of being a multilingual speaker in the future.

First, although the studies of MacIntyre et al. (2017) and Huang and Chan (2024) advocated the emotional and cognitive desires of the rooted L2/indigenous heritage self, compared to the salient attribute of affective attachment, the cognitive dimension (i.e., the "heritage

convictions") of these two self concepts remains vague. Clearly, there is a strong connection between convictions and identity construction. What the heritage language learners believe about the language partially reflects their understanding of the inherited identity and the inspirational identities under construction. To better address this cognitive dynamic, we propose that Norton's investment theory (Norton, 2019; Norton Peirce, 1995) can help elucidate the cognitive processes of the heritage convictions.

Norton Peirce (1995) introduced the concept of *investment* in the context of language learning to refer to learners' "investing" behaviors in learning the target language due to their expectations of gaining higher profitability (the "cultural capital"). During the learning process, learners reevaluate their identities and their willingness to invest further in the target language. The investment theory situates learners within a dynamic framework of identity construction, emphasizing that "identities are both produced and inherited" (Norton & Toohey, 2011, p. 415). In the context of heritage language learning, learners may commit to building multiple identities. Although their initial motivation may stem from an inherited identity, learners may not choose to continue the "investment" in the learning practice if they do not feel empowered. As was pointed out in Dressler's (2010) study, the German heritage learners simultaneously exhibited positive attitude and passive learning practices toward the target language, largely due to their sense of disempowerment during the learning process. This, in turn, led to a reluctance to reconcile their inherited identity with an emerging, produced identity within their language learning experiences.

Norton and Toohey (2011) pointed out that if learners could construct powerful identities, their language learning practices could become more robust and enduring. MacIntyre et al. (2017) described the amplifying effect of the traditional music and dance, noting that a small group giving a public performance could activate "one-to-many" communication. Such traditional art forms leverage the impact of the heritage language on a large scale, demonstrating that "even a small number of learners can significantly shift the linguistic landscape through public performance" (p.513). These public acts of expression reflect empowered identities in heritage language learning. Similarly, Huang and Chan (2024) specified that although the use of the indigenous languages was declining, the local government had been providing significant support in legislation, linguistic development, educational curriculum, teacher training, and immersion programs to protect, maintain, and revitalize the indigenous languages. In other words, the institutional and ideological support from the government is also aimed to empower the indigenous language learners. By drawing upon Norton's investment theory, we propose that when heritage language learners believe that learning their heritage language will "increase the value of their cultural capital and social power… [they will] reassess their sense of themselves and their desires for the future" (Clément & Norton, 2021, p. 162), and then decide to invest further in the language learning. As a result, the heritage language learning motivation may be mediated not only by emotional attachment to one's heritage root (i.e., the inherited identity) but also by ongoing cognitive evaluations of empowerment or marginalization within social and linguistic contexts (i.e., the produced identity).

We believe that investment theory could complement the rooted L2/indigenous heritage self in explaining the cognitive processes of heritage convictions in learning the target language. For dying languages like the colonial German variants, emotional attachment alone

may be insufficient to ensure a sustained "investment" in learning the language. Future studies could examine how "empowerment" mediates German HLLs' motivation as the heritage language transitions from a diminishing colonial variety to an immigrant language.

Second, as Henry (2017) suggested, the ideal multilingual self may emerge as a higher-level self concept through the interaction of language-specific ideal selves, fostering additional language learning by promoting a cognitive abstraction of craving to be multilingual. The abstract construal of being multilingual can be motivationally influential simply because it may liberate individuals from detailed contemplation that could impose intimidating constraints on language learning, thereby encouraging a broader commitment to the overarching identity of being multilingual. As noted earlier, the ideal multilingual self is proposed and examined in the multilingual learning context where English and LOTEs are simultaneously learned. In the alarming case of Texas German, if its death as a colonial heritage language is inevitable, and the inclination for the future preservation and renaissance is obscurely tied to standard German as a substitute, questions arise regarding the applicability of the rooted L2 self or the indigenous heritage self to the motivational profiles of heritage language learners who are also L1 English speakers. If "looking forward" as a motivational source is no longer attached to obligations of future revitalization, could it instead relate to the individual's future self of being multilingual? We argue that if English is the heritage language learners' L1 or dominant language, choosing to learn a heritage language might be initiated by the "rooted" heritage identity and the emotional connection. Nevertheless, the ideal multilingual self may serve as a powerful pulling engine, aligned with the rooted L2/indigenous heritage self, to generate motivation for learning the heritage language as part of the internalized value of rejecting monolingualism and embracing multilingual identity. Of course, even in cases where the obligation of maintenance and revitalization are indeed part of motivational potency, the ideal multilingual self can still function as a powerful future self concept by integrating multilingual identity construction into the learners' motivational profiles.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, studies on heritage language learning motivation have drawn heavily on the L2 motivational self guides, giving rise to two related concepts: the rooted L2 self and the indigenous heritage self. This paper proposed a conceptual extension of these two concepts. By addressing the specific case of German as a heritage language, particularly in contexts where language vitality is under severe threat, we argue that Norton's investment theory offers a valuable complement to the two heritage-related self concepts. Even though heritage language learners may be initially motivated by their inherited identity and choose to learn the target language due to the "rootedness", their motivation is subject to continual reassessment in relation to feelings of empowerment. We therefore propose integrating both investment theory and the ideal multilingual self to explore the dynamic motivational trajectory of L1 English speakers' heritage language learning, bringing together community "rootedness", investment assessment, and the aspiration of being multilingual in the future.

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