Refugees, language, well-being, and education: A case study from a heritage language program in the US

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We describe a community-based research project involving Mon refugees in the US. We begin with a brief discussion of the value of heritage language education in terms of well-being, acquisition of dominant culture language, and academic success. We then discuss our research and preliminary findings involving ethnic Mon youth participating in a Mon heritage language program. We motivate the study and share findings that support the claims of earlier research in different communities regarding the benefits of such programs. We conclude that heritage language programs like that of Mon refugees and immigrants in Fort Wayne motivate the call to provide education in more of the 90% of the world's languages not used for education if the UN Sustainable Development Goals are to be attained and resettled refugees and immigrants are to successfully integrate into new communities. Further, that such research can significantly add to understanding and debates regarding the goals of the UNESCO Chair on Language and Technology.

Keywords minorized language, heritage language, well-being, heritage language education

1. Introduction

To begin we would like to remind readers of some important facts regarding languages around the world:[1]

- of the estimated 5,000-7,000 languages less than one third have a written form;
- less than 10% of the world's languages are used in education;
- 10% of EU citizens speak a language other than the official language of their country;
- six of the top ten languages spoken in the world are languages of colonization;
- 90% of those living in Africa do not know the official language of their country;
- Microsoft's operating system, which runs on approximately 90% of the world's computers, only allows for 6% of the world's written languages or approximately 100 languages, to be used with its software; and
- the United States has the world's second largest Spanish speaking population, but continues to have an Americanization through English approach to education (see Bischoff 2017 for discussion).

Next we want to review some of the important findings over the last 40 years regarding heritage language[2] use, maintenance, and education of the kind that relates to additive multilingualism such as demonstrated in the Mon study under discussion. Such findings motivate the study under discussion and lend support to the idea that the benefits of providing opportunities for heritage language education significantly outweigh any costs incurred and help alleviate many issues related to social and economic concerns of many nation states (e.g. educational attainment, incarceration, crime, health care, assimilation, economic growth, social welfare costs).[3] The following illustrate such findings:

[1] The data presented in this section, unless otherwise noted comes from The New Internationalist. There are numerous studies and resources making similar claims but we chose to get our data from The New Internationalist because (a) it has a long standing working relationship with the United Nations producing books, films, and various other materials regarding development issues; (b) the data is extensive; (c) the primary source is easily and freely accessible online at the following link https://eewiki.newint.org/index.php/Languages_big_and_small_-_the_facts with original source referencing.

[2] Here we use "heritage language" to include notions related to what others might refer to as L1, mother tongue, first language, community language, and minority language.

[3] Here we rely on the Child Language Research and Revitalization Working Group (2017) for similar reasons as above: (a) EDC has a long and respected history of work with major international organizations and (b) the original resource along with primary referencing is available free online at the following website https://www.edc.org/sites/files/uploads/RouvierWhitePaperFinal.pdf. While the resource does focus on indigenous languages of the

- researchers have identified numerous cognitive advantages for bilingual young children;
- bilingual youth have been shown to outperform monolingual youth in tasks involving executive functioning;
- bilingual youth have been show to do better on focusing, memorizing, and decision-making tasks than monolingual peers;
- a number of physiological and social emotional advantages have been identified for bilinguals;
- young children regularly exposed to more than one language have improved social and communication skills compared to monolingual peers and a greater capacity for empathy;
- multilingualism has been shown to have school achievement benefits for learners if sustained over time;
- knowledge of heritage language and culture is correlated with academic success and retention; and
- cultural and heritage language continuity are correlated with lower levels of suicidal behaviors and diabetes, and more positive mental health.

In short, there are numerous reasons to support heritage language use.

With the above facts in mind, we now turn to discussion of our Mon study and preliminary findings that support some of the claims above, but perhaps more importantly, support the stated goals of the Mon community itself and goals of assimilation regarding refugees espoused by numerous politicians in the US. We first provide background information regarding the Mon community in Fort Wayne and their language school. In section 3 we outline our study and present two of our preliminary findings we believe germane to the goals and themes of the UNESCO Chair of Language and Technology's objectives. We conclude that it is in the interests of governments, multi-national government agencies such as the UN, NGOs, educational institutions, and others to actively promote minorized and heritage languages to address social, cultural, political, and economic issues dominating global discourse.

2. Background

The Mon began arriving in Fort Wayne in the early 1990s. Historically the Mon homeland is Burma (Myanmar)[4] where there are today approximately 743,000 Mon living (Lewis 2009). Due to political and military conflict over 100,000 Mon live outside Burma with most living in Thailand and significant numbers living in Singapore and the United States. In Fort Wayne the community has maintained a strong ethnic identity which is intimately linked to Theravada Buddhism, the local temple, and language. The Mon have a long history of written language and thus literature which has played a key role in their efforts to maintain their language and culture in Fort Wayne through their language school founded in 1999 and located at the Mon community temple. This is reflective of the long history of persecution the Mon have suffered and their tradition of maintaining a cultural identity through language preservation and maintenance (South 2005). As South notes, and as we have seen in the community, Mon language is crucial to Mon identity. Mon community leaders motive the language school as follows:[5]

> Main Purpose of Summer Mon School is
>
> - to let Mon children know that they are Mon people and proud to be Mon;
> - to have them learn the language of their parents;
> - to make them know the Mon language and culture;
> - to make them stick with the Mon community; and

Americas the supporting evidence for claims made cover various other populations and do not diminish, but support, the claims made here. For discussion of these issues as they relate to Mon and other ethnic languages of Burma see Thompson (2017). Also see McCarty & Snell (2011) and Whalen, Moss, & Baldwin (2016) for further discussion of educational and health benefits related to heritage language maintenance. Fran□ois Girn (personal communication), who specializes in the economics of language, notes that the costs of supporting heritage languages in the US would be significantly less than current costs of not of supporting them due to the impact that heritage language maintenance has on educational completion and the associated costs of when students to not complete education in the US.

[4] The Mon refer to their country of origin as Burma rather than Myanmar. We use their term here.

[5] We present the Mon co-authors words as if quoted in order to highlight the fact that these words represent a Mon perspective and Mon personal experience.

- the community expects them to look back and help the Mon people.

> Survival of the Mon language in the United States is not easy, it is like "swimming against a strong current," as the Mon children here use only the English language in communication with each other. English is their first language. The Mon language, their mother tongue, has become only a second language for them. They learn more and more English every day in US schools, while their Mon-language knowledge does not increase, except a few words that are used at home in their communication with their parents who do not know English. The Mon language may be dead in the United States after the next generation or at the time of our grandchildren. Seeing this negative trend, Mon parents and community leaders are very concerned for the survival of the Mon language here.
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> The summer Mon-Language school in Fort Wayne opened at the Mon Buddhist Temple in the year 2000, with the objectives to teach the basic reading, understanding and writing skills of the language to the Mon children living in Fort Wayne. Over one hundred Mon children attend the summer Mon-language school in Fort Wayne each year. The Mon community of Fort Wayne has over 500 members, most of whom are children and young adults who are attending or used to attend the Mon-language school of Fort Wayne. Since there are Mon communities in other parts of USA now, there are also several summer Mon-language schools there. The Mon-language school in Fort Wayne is the oldest one in the United States, open for the last 17 years.
>
> The language is central to the existence of the Mon people. There is a well-known saying, "*If the Mon language is dead, the Mon people will be extinct*."[6] Learning the Mon language, both spoken and written, may greatly strengthen the Mon patriotic spirits among the Mon children when they grow up. Children of Mon blood who do not speak the language at all may have little or no feeling of attachment to the Mon community. So, teaching and learning the Mon language is so important for the Mon people everywhere. Keeping the language alive is part of the struggle of the Mon people today, since its use has significantly been dwindling even in their original homeland, Burma.

As can be seen, the motivation for the Mon school lay greatly with the desire to maintain both Mon identity and Mon language and culture. In the next section we look at one of the specific cultural values the Mon hoped to instill, what psychologists refer to as "prosocial" behaviors and specific linguistic features that suggest Mon children are acquiring the language but also potentially multiple identities.

3. The study

In 2014 the academic authors began working with an NGO focused on issues related to refugees and immigrants from Burma. Specifically, a language and language attitudes survey was conducted in the various ethnic communities representing those from Burma in Fort Wayne. Out of the study a relationship formed between Thompson and Mon community leaders. Through the relationship a community-based research project was developed that involved the others authors and the Mon community. Mon leaders had expressed concern that students in the language school were not acquiring specific phonological elements (speech sounds found in Mon but not English) and specific morphological elements (specific Mon affixes with no correspondence in English). Together the Mon leaders and the academic team developed a project that would test the fluency and linguistic knowledge of Mon youth in both Mon and English. Further, the medical anthropologist on the team developed a number of tests and a survey (e.g. blood pressure, height, weight, well-being survey), to assess the general well-being (physical and psychological) of Mon youth.

The study was carried out during the Mon language school year (May-September) of 2016. Working with Mon leaders, the language school located at the community temple was the site of the study. Over the course of the school year Mon youth and students from our campus worked with the team to collect data. Students were pulled from language classes to participate in the study for approximately 30 minutes.

[6] The saying actually translates as "if the literature is lost, the nationality becomes extinct". This shows the importance of literacy to Mon identity and explains why writing is emphasized in the Mon summer school.

3.1 The participants

Here we present some of the demographic information related to the Mon youth that participated in our study. As can be seen in Table 1, there were a total of 96 participants with 55% of the those being male and 45% female The mean age of the sample was 14.04 years (SD = 4.73). For the sake of data collection and analysis, the sample was divided into three age groups: 8 to 11, 12 to 18, and 19 to 25 years of age. The youngest age group (8-11 years of age) had a total of 42 participants (50% female); age group two (12-18 years of age) had a total of 35 participants (46% female); and the oldest age group (19-25 years) was the smallest of the three groups with 19 participants (31% female).

Table 1. Age groups by gender

Age Group	Male	Female	Total
8 to 11	21	21	42
12 to 18	19	16	35
19 to25	13	6	19
Total	53	43	96

Table 2 shows the age of the participants at their arrival in the United States. The majority of the participants, 45% of the total group, were born in the US. The second largest group – 27% of the total – arrived before the age of 6. Both of these groups together represent 72% of the data set. This combined group represents children who were likely raised speaking Mon at home until they began school at age 5 or 6 where English was introduced. The third group is those participants who arrived in the US after age 5 but prior to age 12. There were 12 participants or 13% of the total. The age of 12 was used as the cutoff age since 12 is the age at which second language acquisition is often argued to become more difficult to acquire[7] and because well-being studies traditionally identify this as a cut off age. The final group are those older than age 12 at the time of their arrival in the US, and this group represented 16% of the total. The general pattern for the sample is that the youngest participants (8 to 18 years of age) tended to arrive in the U.S. prior to age 6, while those over age 19 tended to be far more recent migrants and arrive after age 12.

Table 2 Age groups and age at time of arrival in the United States

Age Group	Born in US	Prior to age 6	Ages 6 to 12	After age 12	Total
8 to 11	29	10	3	0	42
12 to 18	14	12	6	3	35
19 to25	0	4	3	12	19
Total	43	26	12	15	96

3.2 The study

There were two primary elements to the study. One focused on fluency in both Mon and English. The other focused on physical and psychological well-being. As both "fluency" and "well-being" are complex and multidimensional concepts that resist easy definitions, data was collected on a number of different dimensions for each that are described below. The initial step of the study was for participants to complete a short questionnaire on demographic data and on their use of English and Mon in specific contexts (e.g. school, home, temple) and with specific persons (e.g. family, teachers, friends).

3.2.1 Linguistic ability

To gauge study participants' level of fluency in their heritage language, we examined participants' lexical ability, literacy, narrative ability, communicative ability, and pronunciation.

a. *Lexical ability*: Participants were shown pictures of 30 basic vocabulary items and asked to name them in Mon. We made audio recordings of their responses and measured the accuracy of the responses and the

[7] We make no claims here regarding hypothesized "critical" or "sensitive" periods and refer to the reader to Hoff (2013) and Sampson (2005) for a summary of, and challenges to, such claims in the neurobiological and linguistic literature.

reaction time. Reaction time to naming pictures has been used effectively to determine language fluency (O'Grady et al. 2009; Schafer et al. 2009) and has produced consistent results cross-linguistically (Bates et al. 2003). We felt that, through this measurement, we could gain knowledge both of lexical knowledge and pronunciation for each participant.

b. *Literacy*: The subjects read isolated words written in both Mon and English. Through this measurement we intended to gauge the participants' reading ability and pronunciation.

c. *Narrative ability*: Participants were shown a drawing from a Burmese picture book and asked to describe the drawing. They were also shown a clip of from a Charlie Chaplin film and asked to describe the action. Again, responses were recorded for each language. Through this, we hoped to gain an idea of the lexical, syntactic, and narrative abilities of the students. We measured the rate of speech by determining the overall rate of speech based on the number of syllables per second overall as well as in the overall time minus pauses longer than ¼ of a second and only meaningful and non-repeated syllables. The ability to produce narratives from pictures or film has been studied with children (e.g., Berman & Slobin 2013) as well as heritage speakers (e.g., Polinsky 2008). Taking pauses into account in determining the rate of speech is considered a more accurate method than the raw measurement of syllables per second (Srik and Cucchiarini 1999, Kormos and Dénes 2004). We also looked at the percentage of time speaking relative to the overall time (including pauses) (Towell et al. 1996, Kormos and Dénes 2004). Finally, recordings of the participants' narratives were played to a panel of five native Mon speakers who rated the speaker's relative fluency, and these panelists' scores were then averaged.

3.2.2 Well-being

Studies of the benefits of bilingualism tend to focus on a single area of potential benefit, such as academic outcomes. One goal of the study was to broaden our definition of well-being to include more psychological, social and physiological dimensions of well-being As most survey instruments exploring aspects of well-being are age-specific, participants were divided into three age groups: 8-11, 12-18 and 19-25 years of age. Although all study participants provided linguistic data, participants only provided well-being data appropriate for their age group.

a. *Psychosocial well-being*: Survey instruments were used to assess participants' psychosocial well-being, which includes psychological distress, emotional difficulties, and problems with peer and family relationships. The youngest group (8-11 year olds) completed the KIDSCREEN-27 (KidScreen Group 2006). The 12-18 year olds completed the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman 1997) and the 19-25 year old group completed the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28, Goldberg & Williams 1988). All three are brief mental and behavioral health questionnaires that have been widely used in community studies and research across cultures (Wörner et al. 2004).

b. *Chronic stress*: Measurements of resting systolic and diastolic blood pressure were used as a proxy biological measure of chronic stress. Arterial blood pressure has been used extensively as a biological marker of stress in individuals experiencing racial discrimination, migration, health disparities, and rapid culture change (e.g., Dressler 1999; Dressler & Bindon 2000; Gravlee et al. 2005; Janes 1990). Blood pressure measures consist of the average of three seated, resting readings using a validated, automated upper arm monitor (Omron HEM-780, Coleman et al. 2008). We also collect data on body mass, smoking status and physical activity, to control for the impact of body weight, smoking and fitness on resting blood pressure.

c. *Academic success*: Mean grade point average (GPA) in science, mathematics, social science and English over the previous three academic years are being used as a measure of academic success.

d. *Self-Esteem*: All participants completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES, Wylie 1989), which is the most widely used self-esteem instrument in the social sciences. It is a 10-item Likert-type scale with items answered on a four-point scale ("strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") that measures positive and negative feelings about the self. The scale has been used extensively in cross-cultural research (Schmitt & Allik 2005).

4. Preliminary findings

Early results tell us at least two important things. First, eleven to eighteen year-old participants' (n = 50) level of reported prosocial behavior is significantly related to their linguistic ability in Mon, as measured by tests of literacy (τ = .310, p = .005) and lexical ability (τ = .260, p = .016), and their mean fluency ratings given by a panel of native speakers in providing an oral narrative (τ = .249, p = .019). "Prosocial behaviors" are behaviors intended to help other persons or society as a whole, and cover a wide range of actions, including helping, comforting, sharing, and cooperating with others (Batson and Powell 2003, Eisenberg, Farbes and Spinrad 2006). Prosocial behaviors are associated with empathy and altruism, and are generally perceived to be a central goal of socialization by parents, developmental psychologists, and U.S. educators, many of whom include empathy and prosocial behaviors as part of moral education in primary and middle school curriculum.

The positive correlation of youth's level of linguistic ability in Mon with their level of reported prosocial behaviors is particularly meaningful to Mon community leaders and school founders. Such prosocial behaviors are perceived to be symbolic of what it means to be Mon and to have a Mon identity, something the founders and community leaders hoped to instill in Mon youth through the school. As part of the collaborative effort Mon community leaders had hoped our research might return results that they could take back to the community to demonstrate the value of the school to the Mon youth and the Mon community at large. These are early results, and the relationship is likely to be complex. Some research suggests that the focus on compassion and altruism in Buddhist theology may increase prosocial behaviors and cognitions in those exposed to the religion (e.g., Colzato et al. 2012, Eisenberg 2002). Consequently, the level of exposure to Buddhist thought and practice may be an important additional or mediating variable. Additionally, the correlation we have found cannot prove a causal link between heritage language instruction and prosocial behavior.

In terms of fluency, participants that have grown up mostly in the United States, in almost all cases, speak English better than Mon. Lexical knowledge, reading ability, and sentence construction have all shown signs of attrition but, for the most part, pronunciation has not been affected. The changes in lexical knowledge, reading ability, and sentence construction would seem expected given the role English plays in the daily lives of the speaker participants and the limited domains in which Mon is used. We are tempted to suggest that the fluency in English and lack of change in pronunciation in Mon signals an identity with the dominant English speaking community and a Mon identity among the participants. This is because research has shown that there is a correlation between identity and pronunciation in speakers of multiple languages. Specifically, that pronunciation in speakers of multiple languages can be used as a means of expressing an identity, expressing group affiliation, being perceived as a member of a specific ethnic group, and that speakers can exploit L1 and L2 phonological properties to construct a specific identity (Oksaar 1989; Rindal 2010; Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Magid 2005; among others). What the phonological findings may indicate is that the young Mon speakers are expressing a bi-cultural identity through their language use. To be certain however we will need to conduct more studies.

5. Conclusions

We believe that the above described study and preliminary findings support the growing body of evidence that the promotion of minorized languages through use, education, engagement with the broader society (through research like ours, in governmental settings such as schools and community resource agencies, etc.), and broader community acceptance of such language communities benefit both the minorized language community and the broader community. More importantly however, that allowing for such grass-roots initiated minorized language educational opportunities, such as the Mon language school, through political and social freedoms, such as those enshrined in the political institutions of the US and other countries, is key to ensuring that linguistic planning, technology, and educational and pedagogical practices can be leveraged to foster greater inclusion of minorized languages and their speakers in plurilingual societies. The facts make it clear: promoting, sustaining, and empowering minorized languages enhances educational settings and facilitate information access while making good citizens. Further, heritage language programs like that of Mon refugees and immigrants in Fort Wayne motivate the call to provide education in more of the 90% of the world's languages not used for education if the UN SDGs are to be attained, resettled refugees and immigrants are to successfully integrate into new communities, and minorized languages are to have a stronger presence in the daily lives of speakers.

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