

## **Language transmission in heritage languages without official status: Insights from Cognian, Cypriot Turkish, Westphalian and Zazaki**

Vocabulary is a foundational component of heritage language competence and may serve as an early indicator of syntactic development or erosion (Polinsky, 2006). This study investigates patterns of language transmission, focusing on vocabulary, in heritage languages that lack official status and are often overlooked in both public discourse and academic research. Most research on heritage language acquisition has concentrated on national languages in diaspora contexts (e.g., Spanish in the US, Turkish in Germany; Fridman & Özsoy, 2024). In contrast, our study centers on lesser-studied and/or marginalized heritage languages: Cognian, Cypriot Turkish, Westphalian, and Zazaki. These languages are marked by restricted domains of use, lack of standardization, and the absence of institutional recognition in both their homelands and diasporic contexts.

Shabtaev et al. (2024) show that different diasporic contexts can meaningfully influence heritage language maintenance and that culture-specific vocabulary tends to be more resilient than neutral or basic vocabulary. Beyond the domain-specific cognitive capacity of language, we also examine the relationship between heritage language maintenance and the domain-general capacity of inhibitory control. Shan (2024) is the first to assess inhibitory control in heritage speakers using the Stroop task, revealing correlations between cognitive control and heritage language experience.

Set in the context of lesser-studied heritage language communities, our research addresses the overarching question: To what extent does heritage language maintenance differ among heritage speakers with distinct sociocultural backgrounds and across generations? We then explore three sub-questions: (1) How does knowledge of culturally salient vocabulary differ between rural and urban speakers? (2) How do background variables, such as education, residence, and cultural identification, relate to vocabulary knowledge? (3) How do identification with the heritage language and background variables modulate inhibitory control?

We collected data from six participant groups, differing in generation, sociolinguistic background, and education: Cognian speakers in Germany, Cypriot Turkish speakers in the UK and in Turkey, Westphalian speakers in Germany, and Zazaki speakers in Germany and Turkey. To address our research questions, we developed a web-based experiment using PCIBex (Zehr & Schwarz, 2018). Participants completed three tasks: a vocabulary translation task with heritage language vocabulary, a Stroop task (in the dominant language: German, English, or Turkish), and an adapted version of the HeLEx questionnaire (Tomić et al., 2023). The vocabulary task, based on Shabtaev (2024), examined how region and exposure context (e.g., family vs. school) affect lexical knowledge. A key aim was to investigate the retention of basic and culturally salient vocabulary despite reduced input and limited community support. The Stroop task was included to examine potential relationships between inhibitory control and heritage language maintenance. Our study takes an exploratory approach, analyzing how education,

residence, and heritage language identification contribute to individual differences in inhibitory control.

We apply Bayesian binomial generalized linear mixed-effects models, with vocabulary translation accuracy and Stroop task scores as dependent variables. Independent variables include Age, Place of residence, Education, Exposure, Identification, Self-rated proficiency, Country, and Language. Participant and Item are included as varying effects.

We anticipate finding divergent trajectories of transmission: Some languages will exhibit signs of intergenerational disruption, with younger speakers showing mainly passive understanding, while others may show more robust retention in specific diasporic or familial contexts. We expect higher retention rates for culturally salient vocabulary across all groups.

Ultimately, our study highlights the multifaceted nature of heritage language maintenance, where social networks, ideologies, identities, and background variables all contribute to transmission outcomes. The absence of official status does not inherently lead to language loss, but it alters the pathways through which these languages are learned and used. The observed vocabulary trends are likely to reflect deeper morphosyntactic developments. By centering lesser-studied languages, this study contributes to a more inclusive perspective on heritage language research and emphasizes the urgency of supporting linguistic diversity beyond dominant, state-supported languages.

## References

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