**Bakalářská práce**

# The Influence of a Dominant Community Language (Czech) on Heritage Language Acquisition in Terms of Social Factors

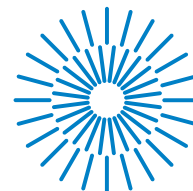| | |
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**Zásady pro vypracování:**

This bachelor's thesis examines the impact of the dominant community language, Czech, on heritage language acquisition by investigating various social factors. The research draws on the work of Maria Polinsky, an esteemed scholar in heritage language studies, to provide a theoretical framework. Alongside Polinsky's work, minority languages in the Czech Republic are looked into and their significance in society is identified.

The practical part involves administering a survey to individuals in the Czech Republic who possess a heritage language. The questionnaire explores participants' experiences and perceptions related to heritage language acquisition within the Czech-dominant community. By analyzing the survey data alongside the theoretical framework, this study aims to provide insights into the role of social factors in heritage language acquisition.

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Brinton, Donna M./Olga Kagan/Susan Bauckus (2007): Heritage Language Education: A New Field Emerging. New York: Routledge.
Krashen, S./McQuillan, J./Tse, L. (1998): Heritage Language Development. Language Education Associates.
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Polinsky, Maria (2018): Heritage Languages and their Speakers. Cambridge: Cambridge Univerisity Press.

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1. prosince 2023                                                     Nariman Nabhani

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# Anotace

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá osvojováním a učením jazyka v komunitách kulturního dědictví v České republice. Zkoumá vliv dominantního jazyka komunity, češtiny, na osvojování jazyka dědictví prostřednictvím zkoumání různých sociálních faktorů. Dále se zabývá menšinovými jazyky v České republice a zjišťuje jejich význam ve společnosti.

Praktická část zahrnuje zadání dotazníku jednotlivcům v České republice, kteří mají jazyk dědictví. Dotazník zkoumá zkušenosti a vnímání účastníků v souvislosti s osvojováním jazyka dědictví v rámci komunity s převahou češtiny.

Analýzou dat z průzkumu spolu s teoretickým rámcem si tato studie klade za cíl poskytnout vhled do role sociálních faktorů při osvojování jazyka dědictví v České republice.

**Klíčová slova:** jazyk dědictví, dominantní jazyk, osvojování, bilingvismus, úbytek jazyků.

# Abstract

This bachelor's thesis looks at language acquisition and learning in heritage communities in the Czech Republic. It examines the impact of the dominant community language, Czech, on heritage language acquisition by investigating various social factors. Additionally, minority languages in the Czech Republic are looked into and their significance in society is identified.

The practical part involves administering a survey to individuals in the Czech Republic who possess a heritage language. The questionnaire explores participants' experiences and perceptions related to heritage language acquisition within the Czech-dominant community.

By analysing the survey data alongside the theoretical framework, this study aims to provide insights into the role of social factors in heritage language acquisition in the Czech Republic.

**Keywords:** Heritage language, dominant language, acquisition, bilingualism, attrition

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# Introduction

Language is not only a means of communication but also a vital component of cultural identity and heritage. In communities where a dominant language prevails, individuals who possess a heritage language face unique challenges in acquiring, maintaining, and developing proficiency in their ancestral language. This research delves into understanding how the prevalent language, Czech, in the community impacts the acquisition of heritage languages. It seeks to investigate and analyze the effect of different social aspects on the process of learning and maintaining heritage languages among individuals in the Czech Republic. The study aims to uncover the interplay between the dominant language and heritage language acquisition by exploring the influence of social factors such as family support, stigmas associated with heritage languages, cultural prestige, and other pertinent elements affecting language acquisition in this context.

Heritage language acquisition refers to the process by which individuals develop and maintain skills in a language other than the dominant language, to which they have familial, cultural, or historical ties. The acquisition and maintenance of a heritage language are complex phenomena influenced by a range of social, cultural, and linguistic factors. As previously mentioned, this research specifically focuses on the *social* factors that shape heritage language acquisition within the Czech-dominant community context.

The theoretical part will first be focused on introducing and defining keywords crucial for this thesis like acquisition, heritage language, and dominant community language. This will ensure clarity and consistency in their usage throughout the research. The description of different heritage languages and heritage language communities will also be included. Additionally, the significance of

minority languages in the Czech Republic, recognizing their cultural and linguistic value within the broader societal context will be examined. Lastly, the theoretical part will discuss various social factors like language usage, available educational or cultural resources, etc., that have the potential to influence heritage language acquisition.

The practical part of this thesis will involve conducting a survey to gather data from individuals residing in the Czech Republic who have acquired a heritage language. The questionnaire will be designed to explore the participants' experiences and perceptions related to heritage language acquisition within the Czech-dominant community. It will include questions that examine language attitudes, language use and exposure, social pressure and conformity, family language practices, community support and resources, and intergenerational language transmission. The collected data will be subjected to analysis through the utilization of graphical representations and tables, complemented by descriptive commentary to elucidate patterns, trends, and correlations discerned from the findings.

While the theoretical section offers a framework based on established concepts and scholarly discussions regarding heritage languages, the questionnaire analysis supplements this by providing real-world data, insights, and firsthand experiences of individuals.

# 1 Theoretical Framework

## 1.1 Keywords and their Definitions

Before exploring and examining the different social factors that could potentially influence one's heritage language acquisition in a country where a (different) dominant language is spoken, it is crucial to establish a foundational understanding of the key terms that will be central to this study. This section, therefore, aims to provide comprehensive definitions of the essential key terms that will be frequently encountered throughout this thesis.

### 1.1.1 Language Acquisition and Language Learning

To begin, it is necessary to know and understand what language acquisition and language learning is. As Montrul (2016, 1) states, "language acquisition is the growth of language – and, more specifically, growth of a grammatical and communicative system – in the mind of a speaker". Put simply, language acquisition is the natural ability of individuals to absorb, comprehend, and employ a language's structure and rules without explicit, conscious efforts to formally study or memorize it.

Language learning, as opposed to acquisition, can be defined as actively and consciously studying and practicing a language in order to obtain knowledge about it and be able to use it. The process of learning tends to take place in an educational setting, at school, for example. When a language is learnt, usually the points of focus are grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary and not really the practical usage of the language (Sun 2019, 1018).

### 1.1.2 Attrition

Heritage speakers, whether simultaneous or successive bilinguals, commonly experience a transition in language dominance during their early school years. Initially dominant in their heritage language, they often shift towards the majority language's dominance as they enter school. This shift leads to reduced exposure and usage of their first language, potentially causing attrition or weakening of their L1. As a consequence, the language spoken by adult heritage speakers frequently differs from the standard non-heritage variety or the language input they received during childhood (Lohndal and Westergaard 2021, section 4.2.).

### 1.1.3 Heritage Languages and their Speakers

The term *heritage language* is crucial to this thesis as it can be considered the core topic of this study. The coinage of the terms *heritage language* and *heritage speaker* is a relatively recent development and is studied in North America and many parts of Europe at the moment due to migration. Despite their recent introduction, the phenomenon they describe likely dates back to the emergence of language contact situations resulting from migration. However, heritage languages are not only tied to countries which have experienced the arrival of migrants. Therefore, section 1.2. should highlight the different types of heritage languages (Benmamoun et al. 2013, 132).

The native languages of immigrants in host countries can be typically regarded as heritage languages and are passed down from one generation to another. Therefore, the term *heritage speaker* is pertained to second generation immigrants, who grew up in a bilingual/multilingual environment and whose dominant language is usually that of a host country. Their heritage language competence, on the other

hand, might not be as developed as their competence using the dominant language (Benmamoun et al. 2013, 132).

It is essential to mention, that as opposed to their children, first generation immigrants tend to be more competent in their native language and not that of the host country. However, this group can experience language attrition which involves the gradual loss of certain aspects of the mother tongue over time. Attrition can occur due to a language being used less frequently and can go as far as a native speaker being perceived as a non-native speaker by their peers (Benmamoun et al. 2013, 132).

To give an example, an Arabic-speaking couple migrated from the Middle East to the United States in pursuit of enhanced career prospects. Their offspring, born and raised in the US, experienced the fusion of two linguistic worlds – Arabic, their heritage language, and English, the dominant language of their host country.

Though the children were exposed to Arabic within their family unit, English became their primary means of communication in their social milieu. Their proficiency in Arabic, albeit present, could not mirror their English fluency. Consequently, they are proficient English speakers, integrated into their English-speaking society, and are therefore native speakers of English.

In contrast, the parents had a different linguistic voyage. While embracing English as a necessity for effective societal engagement, they adhered to Arabic as their linguistic core. The parents acquired English, yet it remains a functional tool rather than a part of their identity. Arabic persists as their dominant language and remains a symbol of their heritage. Thus, identity plays a significant role in the status of a heritage language, as it is closely intertwined with an individual's sense of self, cultural belonging, and community ties.

### 1.1.3.1 Identifying Individuals as Heritage Speakers

Heritage language literature offers diverse perspectives on heritage speakers, represented by various researchers such as Benmamoun (2013), Montrul (2016), Polinsky (2014, 2018), among others. Despite their differences, these characterizations commonly agree on three aspects.

Firstly, heritage language speakers are usually part of a minority language community residing within a majority language environment. Secondly, they are bilingual, possessing fluency in both their heritage language and the dominant language of their larger community. Finally, as they mature into adulthood, heritage speakers typically display a higher level of proficiency in the dominant language of their national community (Lohndal et al. 2019, 4).

Researchers recognize the wide-ranging proficiency levels among heritage speakers, which stem mainly from social influences and language exposure. Polinsky (1995) underscores the heterogeneous nature of heritage speakers, existing along a spectrum from those with a basic understanding of the language to highly proficient individuals who might lack proficiency in certain registers. Some portray heritage speakers as "incomplete" learners, defining them as individuals whose first language was replaced by another dominant language (Lohndal et al. 2019, 4).

While studies of simultaneous bilinguals during early childhood have often been excluded from the concept of heritage speakers due to their apparent distinction from "incomplete learners," recent views suggest incorporating them under the heritage speaker category. These bilinguals, who develop their languages similarly to monolinguals, may face challenges in acquiring the minority language as they are exposed to the majority language from birth (Lohndal et al. 2019, 4-5).

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Lohndal et al. (2019) propose a definition of heritage speakers as individuals actively using a minority language in a particular national context, having a parent or grandparent who used this language as their primary language during the individual's early childhood. They advocate for including any individual meeting these criteria as a subtype of heritage speakers, irrespective of their language proficiency compared to monolinguals. This definition avoids assumptions about acquisition outcomes, emphasizing the non-random influence of extralinguistic factors and avoiding distinctions based on the social standing of different minority languages (Lohndal et al. 2019, 5).

## 1.2 Heritage Language Communities

### 1.2.1 Immigrant communities

The movement of immigrants seeking better opportunities abroad leads to the migration of their families, influenced not only by economic and sociopolitical factors but also by cultural and linguistic aspects. When the native language differs from the host country's language, immigrants and their families often become bilingual, impacting each generation differently based on age and upbringing (Montrul 2016, 23).

Immigrant adults, originating from their native countries, possess varying educational backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses, some even being native speakers of regional varieties or potentially illiterate in their native tongue. The first generation, typically those immigrating as adults, are fluent in their native language but may gradually learn the host country's language (Montrul 2016, 23).

Heritage speakers, children of adult immigrants, fall into two categories: those who move in childhood with their parents and those born in the new country. They grow up in a bilingual environment. Subsequent generations see a decline in

bilingualism within the family, with the heritage language gradually fading, often resulting in the dominant language becoming predominant within a few generations despite ongoing immigration efforts supporting heritage languages (Montrul 2016, 24).

There are different patterns of language dominance and proficiency of heritage speakers and the parental generation. It is not infrequent that the first generation (parents) are dominant in their native language and have non-native proficiency in the dominant language of the host country. The second generation (children), tends to be dominant in the dominant language and has low to high proficiency in the heritage language based on different factors like language exposure, for example. Like the second generation, the third generation (grandchildren) are fluent in the dominant language but their proficiency in their heritage language ranges from intermediate-low to monolingual in the dominant language of the host country (Montrul 2016, 24).

Variations exist among immigrant groups, influencing how heritage speakers acquire, retain, or lose their language. These differences stem from factors like the size of the immigrant community, children's age upon immigration, parents' socioeconomic status in both home and host countries, community initiatives for preserving the language through education, and unique cultural practices specific to each immigrant group (Montrul 2016, 24).

## 1.2.2  Non-immigrant minority communities

Aboriginal or indigenous languages, as well as historical co-official languages found in many nations, have endured for centuries within their respective territories due to colonization and territorial annexation. Despite their longstanding presence, speakers of these languages face challenges similar to immigrants and their

descendants regarding language use, access to education, public life, and transmitting their language to the next generations. For indigenous languages, the migration from rural to urban areas in pursuit of better opportunities contributes to the level of bilingualism and proficiency in the minority language among speakers, influenced by interactions with the dominant culture and language in urban settings (Montrul 2016, 31).

In Europe and Latin America, minority languages typically are considered those spoken within a nation-state that aren't its official language. Some historical minority languages might even hold official or co-official status within certain territories. These languages, like Irish in Ireland or Euskera in the Basque Country, may have smaller or larger speaker populations, such as Catalan speakers in Catalonia or Quechua and Aymará speakers in Peru and Bolivia. Despite their numerical representation, these minority languages coexist alongside politically dominant languages like English and Spanish, with most speakers being proficient in both the minority and dominant languages, the latter being part of the national school curricula. However, the degree of government support and educational availability for these historical minority languages varies significantly (Montrul 2016, 31).

The condition and sustainability of a heritage language heavily rely on local circumstances, where governmental policies and education systems sometimes fall short in preserving the language. Take Irish, for instance. Despite being constitutionally recognized as a national and official language in Ireland, proficiency in Irish has declined noticeably in the past two decades (Montrul 2016, 32).

Despite attempts to create primary schools teaching content in Irish, children aren't achieving full proficiency due to being outnumbered and surrounded by English speakers. Similar findings in studies on Welsh in Wales highlight that school

environments alone struggle to safeguard minority languages against substantial pressure from the dominant language. Additionally, the prestige associated with English significantly influences language use and preferences among speakers of Irish and Welsh, as English is deemed highly prestigious compared to Irish and Welsh (Montrul 2016, 33).

Indigenous languages in the Americas typically lack significant government protection and often lack support within a comprehensive elementary education system. A major hurdle is the absence of writing systems for many of these languages, resulting in no established written or literary traditions. Despite sporadic attempts to offer education in these languages, maintaining such programs has proven consistently challenging. Among heritage languages, indigenous languages face the greatest risk of extinction and eventual disappearance due to these limitations and lack of support (Montrul 2016, 33).

## 1.2.3 Returnees

Some families immigrate to a new country and later return to their home country after a period. Their children, born in the host country, adopt the dominant language, which becomes their main language at school. While abroad, the family language is their heritage language, but upon return, it becomes the new societal majority language, and the previously learned host country's language becomes a form of heritage language for the child (Montrul 2016, 36).

This shift in language status creates challenges, especially for children returning to their home country, as their proficiency in the former heritage language might weaken compared to the local standard. For instance, Mexican-American children who return to Mexico face difficulties integrating into the educational system due to their English heritage language, which is not well-regarded compared

to the local Spanish. Despite English having a higher status in Mexico than Spanish does in the United States, these returnees feel compelled to preserve English due to its perceived value (Montrul 2016, 37-38).

The experience of these returnees highlights a heritage language reversal caused by the family's transnational movement. When a language becomes a minority language in their new environment, it risks decline or stagnation in development. Ultimately, the concept of a heritage language varies based on the circumstances and environment of the speaker (Montrul 2016, 38).

## 1.2.4  International Adoptees

Children who immigrate with their families may vary in their exposure to the family language, resulting in some becoming receptive bilinguals, understanding the language without being proficient speakers. Receptive bilingual heritage speakers usually possess limited productive abilities in their family language, contrasting with internationally adopted children who often lose their native language abruptly post-adoption, leading to sequential monolingualism (Montrul 2016, 38).

Research indicates that internationally adopted children, predominantly infants, tend to lose their native language more rapidly than immigrant heritage language speakers. However, some children adopted at older ages might retain aspects of their language. Recent studies on Korean adults adopted by French families showed a complete shift to native-like proficiency in French, with no memory of basic Korean vocabulary or sounds (Montrul 2016, 39).

Some internationally adopted children endeavour to relearn their native language in classrooms, showcasing an advantage in phonetic discrimination compared to instructed L2 learners, particularly in perceiving phonetic contrasts. The age of adoption seems to influence language retention, with those adopted at older

ages showing better retention in certain aspects of their native language. These observations suggest that remnants of the first language persist in adoptees' minds, and total loss of the first language seems unlikely in these cases (Montrul 2016, 39).

In essence, heritage speakers encompass not just bilingual young adults, but also bilingual children exposed to specific language conditions and status, defining them as heritage children. Their language status and learning conditions determine their classification as heritage speakers (Montrul 2016, 39-40).

## 1.3  Types of Heritage Languages

The subsequent sections will delineate three distinct categories of heritage languages within the context of the United States. This categorization is aptly illustrated through the annals of American history. Nevertheless, these categorizations do not only apply to the United States, but also other countries.

### 1.3.1  Indigenous Heritage Languages

"Indigenous heritage languages are spoken by people whose ancestors originally inhabited the area that is now the United States" (Haynes 2010, 1). In the United States, Native American languages hold a unique legal status, which is notable considering the absence of a national language policy. This distinctive recognition stems from the fact that the forebears of these language speakers inhabited the continent long before the arrival of other ethnic groups. The primary aim of this legal status is to safeguard Native American languages. Since these languages originated on American soil, their discontinuation there could potentially result in their extinction worldwide. Although commendable endeavors are underway to revive severely endangered or dormant languages, this task is exceedingly challenging and demands significant ongoing efforts. Australia can be another

example of a country in which native heritage languages are spoken (Haynes 2010, 1).

### 1.3.2 Colonial Heritage Languages

Colonial heritage languages are nonindigenous languages which are present in post-colonial countries. For instance, in the Unites States, small language groups such as Dutch, Swedish, Finnish and Welsh can all be listed as colonial heritage languages. Other bigger language groups include French, German and Spanish. These languages have gradually disappeared as languages passed down through generations in the United States, and today, only place names serve as reminders of their former existence. In addition, it is essential to note that a substantial number of individuals speaking these languages in the United States today do not have ancestral ties to colonial America; instead, their connection is rooted in immigration. Among the colonial languages, only Pennsylvania German, in its distinct form, can boast a noteworthy tradition of being passed down as a mother tongue across generations in the United States. It stands out as the sole colonial language with an ongoing heritage language community life and, consequently, the presence of heritage schooling, although not entirely unchanged (Wiley et al. 2014, 37-38).

### 1.3.3 Immigrant Heritage Languages

An immigrant heritage language refers to a language brought to the country by individuals or groups who have immigrated from their countries of origin. These languages are passed down through generations within immigrant communities, often coexisting alongside the dominant language. They play a key role in preserving cultural identity, facilitating communication within the community, and fostering a sense of belonging. Examples of immigrant heritage languages in the United States encompass a rich tapestry of linguistic diversity. For instance, Spanish, brought by

Latin American immigrants, is one of the most prevalent immigrant heritage languages. The Chinese languages, including Mandarin and Cantonese, persist within Chinese American communities. Similarly, Tagalog remains a significant immigrant heritage language among Filipino communities, and Arabic is retained by Arabic-speaking populations, such as those from the Middle East (Haynes 2010, 1).

## 1.4  English as a Heritage/Minority Language

Montrul (2016, 30) defines a heritage language as one acquired in a minority language environment. Fishman (2006, PAGE) highlights the importance of minority status in this definition, indicating that it might be challenging to consider English a heritage language due to its widespread presence, high prestige, and global accessibility through media and popular culture. However, the argument is made that just like Spanish, French, and Chinese, languages with international prestige, English can also be a heritage language for many speakers in diaspora communities (Montrul 2016, 30).

For example, Viswanath's study in Israel, a nation with a strong English-speaking community, supports this idea. Despite English not being an official language there, its presence in public signs surpasses that of Arabic. The study of thirty-three English heritage speakers revealed their relatively high proficiency but also displayed features typical of non-native speakers, similar to findings with other heritage languages (Montrul 2016, 30-31).

The discussion on English highlights the necessity of applying the term *minority language* at a local level rather than on a global scale when defining a heritage language. Thus, any language, despite global status, can be a local minority language if it is not the dominant language within a particular country or context.

English, despite its worldwide prevalence, falls into this category in certain settings (Montrul 2016, 31).

## 1.5 The Negative Consequences of Heritage Language Loss

The preservation and maintenance of heritage languages within multicultural societies carry profound implications for individuals and communities. However, the gradual loss of these languages among subsequent generations poses significant challenges. This section focuses on the negative consequences associated with the decline or loss of heritage languages, shedding light on the various impacts that language attrition can exert on individuals and their communities.

Contrary to popular opinion, educational researchers have confirmed that maintaining one's heritage language is not a burden, rather that it is beneficial for that person. Cho and Krashen (1998, 31) state that immigrants in the United States rapidly acquire the dominant language, English, the same way they rapidly lose their heritage languages. This loss of language is accompanied by negative consequences namely intergenerational conflicts, problems interacting with other heritage speakers in the community and also using the language in one's homeland.

### 1.5.1 Intergenerational conflicts

Several subjects in Cho and Krashen's (1998, 33) study have confirmed that they feel as though they lack the ability to communicate with their parents on a higher level due to their loss of ability to use their heritage language. They claim that ordinary communication is possible, but communicating more narrow thoughts tends to be more complicated for them.

Frustration on both sides, parents and their children, not being able to fully communicate their thoughts and feelings is one such problem that comes with heritage language loss. In many cases, conversations, arguments or explanations are

cut short due to the disability of both parties understanding each other. One subject, Sandy, expressed that there is a communication problem between her and her parents and that most times she expresses her thoughts once and then repeats them constantly until they understand (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 33-34).

When frustration and tension occur, unnecessary arguments between parents and their children can transpire which can then slowly lead to the weakening of the parent-child relationship. Rosa, for example, spoke about her feelings in the study and said, "due to my lack of vocabulary in Korean, I tend to have a difficult time communicating with my parents. Sometimes it results in unnecessary arguments which could have been resolved quickly. It also makes me feel bad when I can't talk to my grandmother or tell her things" (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 33-34).

Therefore, if the parents and their children had a common language they could communicate in, many of these problems would be avoided. In these cases, either the parents have to fluently learn the dominant language or the children have to work on their heritage language (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 34).

## 1.5.2  Interactions with the Heritage Language Community

The loss of a person's heritage language can also affect the relationship they have with the people within their ethnic group in the community. One might feel isolated and excluded from their community. The subjects in the study mentioned feeling guilty when not being able to speak with people from the same ethnic group and did not want them to feel animosity towards them for not being able to communicate in the language. Other times the subjects were made fun of either because of the accents or lack of vocabulary. Embarrassment was also mentioned by the subject's where they claimed that they felt ashamed of not being able to speak

their heritage language with members of their community which were more fluent (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 34-36).

### 1.5.3 Hardship Using the Heritage Language with Native Speakers Abroad

When a heritage language speaker visits their home country and is aware that they are far from close to the level of a native speaker, they might be faced with ridicule or discrimination among people of their own. A subject named Sue described how when she travelled to Korea, her cousins mocked her for being an "American girl" because she did not have enough knowledge of the Korean language. Instead of relatives making a mockery of heritage language speakers living away from their homeland, they should instead motivate them to speak the language and try not to make them feel bad about not speaking the language fluently (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 36).

Motivating heritage speakers to speak their heritage language has been emphasized by various researchers as crucial in heritage language development. Montrul (2016) and Polinsky (2014) very often in their works argue that a supportive family environment, where heritage languages are encouraged and used, positively impacts the acquisition, maintenance, and proficiency of the heritage language among speakers. When family members, including parents, grandparents, and siblings, motivate heritage language speakers by actively engaging in language use, storytelling, or providing resources, it fosters a stronger connection to the heritage language.

## 1.6 Heritage Language Shyness

This section explores a potential reason behind the decline of heritage languages, which is termed as *language shyness* observed among heritage language

speakers. This phenomenon, not extensively discussed in professional literature, emerges when a heritage language speaker possesses a reasonable command of the language but not a flawless proficiency, particularly in elements acquired later in life. These elements, usually related to social conventions or status markers rather than affecting basic communication, might be incomplete or imperfect in heritage language speakers (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 41).

The imperfections in the language of less proficient heritage language speakers, who are part of the heritage language group, become noticeable to more skilled speakers. Consequently, these proficient speakers often react by correcting and sometimes ridiculing the less proficient speakers. Unfortunately, such responses can be deeply upsetting for the less proficient heritage language speakers. Instead of aiding their improvement, error correction and criticism have an adverse effect, discouraging them from engaging in the language. This avoidance creates a harmful cycle: reduced interaction leads to diminished exposure to the language, resulting in decreased proficiency. Given the significant role of language in defining social group membership, this situation might contribute to the detachment of less proficient speakers from the heritage language group (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 41).

## 1.6.1 Experiencing Language Shyness in Foreign Langue Classes

Heritage language speakers often excel in foreign language classes as they start at an intermediate level. However, not all heritage language speakers find success in these classes, which typically emphasize the conscious learning of late-acquired grammatical rules that some heritage language speakers might not have acquired. Consequently, individuals not familiar with the heritage language but adept at grammar might outperform heritage language speakers in tests and grades, despite their inability to communicate effectively in the language. This disparity in

assessment further undermines the confidence of heritage language speakers in their language skills and adds to the language shyness (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 43).

Empirical evidence supports this notion. A study comparing Japanese American students and non-Japanese American students in Japanese language courses revealed that both groups attained similar grades, but non-Japanese students devoted more time to study and had higher language aptitude test scores. Interestingly, Japanese American students displayed better conversational fluency and used Japanese more outside of class. However, teachers tended to value and assess language proficiency based on late-acquired aspects, favouring accuracy and writing skills over conversational fluency, which negatively impacted the evaluations of heritage language speakers (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 44).

Despite heritage language speakers' fluency, they often lack confidence in their spoken proficiency, reflecting internalization of teachers' judgments. The study highlighted a weak correlation between comprehensible input-related factors and grades, indicating that success in language classes is not strongly linked to conversational fluency. Ultimately, heritage language speakers find themselves in a challenging situation in language classes, even when achieving high grades, due to the perceived expectations associated with their heritage language group membership (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 44).

## 1.6.2 The Effects of Language Shyness

Language shyness frequently leads to reduced proficiency and heightened shyness, culminating in individuals abandoning their heritage language. This abandonment entails losing the advantages of bilingualism, both economically and cognitively, and may lead to detachment from the heritage language community.

Renouncing the HL can also impact "ethnic emergence," a phase where individuals from minority backgrounds experience a heightened interest in their ethnic heritage. This phase might be vital for fostering a positive self-image and embracing both cultures (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 45-46).

### 1.6.3  How to Deal with Language Shyness

Encouraging stronger heritage language speakers to embrace tolerance and refrain from correcting weaker heritage language speakers' errors, while promoting interaction in the heritage language, would be an ideal solution for improving weak heritage language speakers' competence. However, such a shift in attitudes toward language correctness seems improbable due to the high standards humans hold, where perfection is often perceived as a requirement for group membership. Many proficient heritage language speakers rely on correction rather than comprehensible input for language development, despite evidence supporting the ineffectiveness of this approach (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 46).

Commonly recommended special classes, such as "Spanish for Native Speakers," are based on traditional methods involving grammar instruction, reading comprehension, and writing, which may not benefit weaker heritage language speakers significantly. Studies with Japanese American students in Japanese classes indicated that confidence in speaking correlated more with variables reflecting comprehensible input rather than length of study or academic success. This suggests that heritage language classes emphasizing comprehensible input, which might be challenging to acquire informally, could be the solution (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 46-47).

An effective method to enhance language competence among shy heritage language speakers is through free voluntary reading, an influential form of

comprehensible input that can significantly improve language skills. Teaching popular literature and supplementing classes with subject matter in the heritage language, focusing on cultural aspects like history and current events, can facilitate a habit of reading in the heritage language (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 47).

Research suggests that heritage language development is not only beneficial but also advantageous, offering practical, cognitive, and societal benefits. It fosters interaction between heritage language speakers and their community, aiding in learning from elders. Overall, investing in heritage language development appears to be beneficial for both individuals and society as a whole (Krashen, Tse, and McQuillan 1998, 48).

## 1.7 Minority Languages in the Czech Republic and their Significance

In the sociolinguistic landscape of the Czech Republic, a nation with a rich history and cultural diversity, the existence of numerous minority languages is evident. However, the Czech Republic acknowledges only a select number of languages as official minority languages, namely German, Polish, Hungarian, and Ukrainian (Zwilling 2004, 3). The following subsections aim to describe the significance of each of the languages mentioned in Czech territories today.

### 1.7.1 The German Language

The German language has a rather strong historical and cultural significance in the Czech Republic. It is crucial to mention, however, that its use and status have changed over time. After the second world war, there was political resistance to speaking German, but in the 1960s, it began to regain importance as a language of communication, especially with neighbouring countries like Austria and West

Germany. German became the most taught foreign language in Czech schools after the fall of the Communist regime and is still the second-most popular foreign language today. Still, German lost some influence in Prague and the West Bohemian spas to other languages. "In Prague in the 1990's, German clearly vacated the public linguistic space to the benefit of English, and, in Karlovy Vary, it fell to second place thanks to the influx of Russian immigrants" (Hnízdo 2011, 15-16).

### 1.7.2 The Polish Language

The significance of the Polish language in the Czech Republic, particularly within the historical Těšín region, is, like that of the German language, deeply rooted in a complex historical and cultural context. The Polish-speaking community in this region is considered autochthonous, with its presence tracing back centuries. The division of the Těšín region in 1920 created a historical border between the Czech Republic and Poland, leading to a distinctive linguistic and cultural landscape. The official recognition of the Polish language in the Czech Republic serves as a tangible acknowledgment of its deep historical roots and its vital role in preserving cultural diversity within the nation. Despite historical and political challenges, including territorial changes and population fluctuations, the Polish language in the Czech Republic has maintained its cultural and linguistic heritage. For many years, Polish people have been seeking work in the Czech Republic, contributing to the continued vitality of the language in the region. Regardless of these facts, challenges related to bilingualism and cultural preservation persist (Hnízdo 2011, 13-14).

### 1.7.3 The Hungarian Language

The Hungarian community in the Czech Republic, numbering approximately 14,500 individuals who identified as Hungarian in 2001 as opposed to almost 20,000

a decade earlier, is distinct in its history and character compared to Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries. This community, dispersed throughout the country, historically settled for work opportunities, with concentrations in industrial regions and Prague as its cultural center. Notably, a significant population influx occurred in 1945-1946 when Hungarian individuals were deported from Southern Slovakia to the Bohemian border zone, similar to the deportation of Germans. However, this was not a return to Hungary, and many returned to their original homes when the deportations ceased in 1948. The Hungarian community, lacking an independent cultural organization until 1989, formed the Association of Hungarians Living in the Czech Lands post-political changes. Despite its size, this community remains relatively inconspicuous, with many Hungarians choosing not to openly express their ethnicity, as evidenced by sociological surveys conducted in 1992 (Nekvapil et al. 2007, 59-60).

The Hungarian language is part of the Finno-Ugric language family, setting it apart from the Indo-European languages commonly spoken in Europe. This linguistic distinction makes it unlikely for people to naturally understand both Hungarian and Indo-European languages like English, French, Czech, or other Slavic languages. Additionally, Hungarian has a unique grammatical structure that differs from Indo-European languages, further contributing to the language divide. Unlike some European languages that share words due to historical interactions, Hungarian has adhered to strict language purism, resulting in limited lexical similarity. From the perspective of Czech speakers, comprehending Hungarian can be challenging, often requiring reading several pages of a Hungarian text before encountering any familiar words (Nekvapil et al. 2007, 60).

### 1.7.4  The Ukrainian Language

The Ukrainian language presence in the Czech Republic is multifaceted, reflecting a complex history and diverse immigrant population. This community, now exceeding 300,000 people, has its roots in both historical ties, labour migration and more recent migration due to war. While it is the second-largest minority in the country, it remains linguistically and culturally diverse, with distinctions among Ukrainian, Russian, Rusyn, and Orthodox affiliations. The Czech majority's understanding of these differences can be limited, sometimes conflating Ukrainian with Russian. This linguistic and cultural diversity, combined with the absence of official minority status, poses unique challenges and opportunities for the Ukrainian community in the Czech Republic. Despite its abundance, the community's cultural activities and recognition remain relatively limited, making its future trajectory within Czech society a subject of ongoing dynamics and perceptions (Hnízdo 2011, 9-10).

## 1.8  Social Factors which can Influence Heritage Language Acquisition

The acquisition and maintenance of heritage languages represent a dynamic process influenced by a multitude of social factors. Heritage languages, often passed down through generations, hold a vital place in the cultural and linguistic tapestry of individuals and communities. However, the preservation and fluency of these languages can be significantly affected by various social forces, including family dynamics, community support, peer interactions, educational opportunities, and broader societal attitudes. Understanding these social factors is pivotal in explaining the challenges and opportunities faced by heritage language learners and in

formulating effective strategies for language revitalization and preservation. This section explores these social factors.

## 1.8.1 Family Environment

The family environment plays an essential role in heritage language acquisition, serving as the primary source of linguistic and cultural transmission for many individuals. Within the familial setting, the heritage language often serves as the means of communication between parents, grandparents, and siblings. The attitudes and practices of family members towards the heritage language can significantly impact an individual's language development. Families that prioritize the use of the heritage language within the household, through daily conversations, storytelling, and cultural practices, create an immersive linguistic environment that fosters language proficiency. Conversely, when family members predominantly communicate in the dominant language of the host country or exhibit a lack of enthusiasm for the heritage language, heritage language acquisition may be compromised. Thus, the family environment not only serves as the primary context for language exposure but also as a critical determinant of the individual's motivation and identity regarding their heritage language (Polinsky 2014, 5).

## 1.8.2 Community Support, Peer Influence and Educational Opportunities

Community support, peer influence, and educational opportunities collectively shape the landscape of heritage language acquisition. Communities and cultural organizations that actively promote and celebrate the heritage language create a nurturing environment for language learners. These communal spaces offer opportunities for individuals to engage with native speakers, participate in cultural events, and access resources in the heritage language. Additionally, peer influence is

a potent force in heritage language acquisition, as it can motivate individuals to embrace and use the language, particularly when they share a common cultural background with their peers. Interactions with friends and peers who speak the heritage language can serve as a catalyst for language use and maintenance. Furthermore, educational opportunities, whether in the form of heritage language classes or culturally enriched programs, provide structured learning experiences and formal instruction that contribute to language development. These opportunities not only impart language skills but also instil a deeper appreciation of the heritage culture.

### 1.8.3  Language Policy and Attitudes

Language policy and attitudes hold a significant sway over heritage language acquisition and maintenance. Government policies, societal attitudes, and language discrimination can have a profound impact on the vitality of heritage languages. Supportive language policies, which promote the use and preservation of heritage languages, can create an enabling environment for language learners. Conversely, when official policies marginalize or restrict the use of heritage languages, it can lead to language erosion and diminished proficiency. Societal attitudes towards heritage languages, often reflective of broader cultural perceptions, can either encourage or discourage individuals from using and valuing their heritage language. Positive attitudes that affirm the importance of linguistic diversity and cultural identity can bolster heritage language acquisition, whereas negative or dismissive attitudes may deter individuals from embracing their heritage language (Sun 2019, 1020).

### 1.8.4  Personal Language Attitudes and Motivation

Personal language attitude and motivation are integral components of heritage language acquisition, exerting a profound influence on an individual's language

proficiency and commitment to maintaining their heritage language. Attitudes toward the heritage language, both personal and societal, play a significant role in shaping one's language practices. Positive attitudes, such as a strong sense of cultural identity, pride in heritage, and a belief in the intrinsic value of the language, often translate into a more robust commitment to language preservation and a greater willingness to engage with the language. Conversely, negative or indifferent attitudes can undermine motivation and hinder language use. Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, serves as the driving force behind heritage language acquisition. Personal motivations, such as a desire to connect with one's cultural roots, communicate with family members, or access heritage literature, can fuel an individual's commitment to the language. Likewise, external factors, like the recognition and validation of the heritage language by the wider society or educational institutions, can act as motivators (Sun 2019, 1019-1020).

## 1.8.5  Language Mixing

Language mixing, also known as code-switching, is a common and natural linguistic phenomenon that frequently occurs in heritage language acquisition. This practice involves the alternation or blending of two or more languages within a single conversation, sentence, or even within a single utterance. Language mixing can result from various factors, including an individual's bilingual or multilingual proficiency, the context of the conversation, and the presence of specific cultural or conceptual terms that are better expressed in one language over another. While some may view language mixing as a potential challenge to heritage language purity, it is often a manifestation of the rich linguistic and cultural tapestry of individuals with multicultural backgrounds. Rather than being seen as a detriment, language mixing

can be an indicator of language vitality, adaptability, and the dynamic nature of

heritage languages (Sun 2019, 1021).

# 2 Methodology

The primary objective of the practical segment within this bachelor's thesis is to investigate the social factors, like family support, prestige of the heritage language amd educational resources, influencing the acquisition of an individual's heritage language while residing in the Czech Republic, where the dominant language spoken is Czech. This investigation seeks to explore aspects such as the role of family support, stigmatization, and the prestige associated with the heritage language within the Czech Republic.

To execute this research, a questionnaire was formulated and hosted from 16. 11. 2023 to 29. 11. 2023 on the internet-based platform Survio (https://www.survio.com/en/), primarily comprising closed-ended questions both in Czech and English to ensure that everybody filling it in would be able to understand. Respondents were presented with multiple-choice options, and the questionnaire was disseminated across various social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Additionally, efforts were made to involve friends and family members to maximize the participation of respondents. Despite attracting fifty-eight visits to the questionnaire, only twenty-four individuals completed it. Subsequently, after filtering out respondents who did not meet the predefined criteria of a heritage speaker, a total of twenty-one valid responses remained for analysis.

The questionnaire encompasses a total of nineteen item, the collected data were subjected to analysis through the utilization of graphical representations and tables, complemented by descriptive commentary to elucidate patterns, trends, and correlations discerned from the findings. Due to the relatively limited number of

respondents, absolute numerical values will be employed rather than percentages to depict the findings.

The respondents in this study represent a diverse group of young individuals residing in the Czech Republic. They encompass a range of ages, predominantly comprising teenagers and young adults, with ages spanning from 15 to 26 years old. The ethnic backgrounds of the respondents are notably varied, reflecting a mixture of nationalities and ethnicities. Among them, there are individuals with mixed heritage, including Czech combined with English, Palestinian, Ukrainian, Syrian, and others. Additionally, some respondents identify solely with a particular nationality, such as American, Ukrainian, Vietnamese, and more. These respondents have varying lengths of residence in the Czech Republic, with some having spent their entire lives in the country and others having moved here more recently.

# 3  The Questions and their Analysis

This section will present the results and analysis of the nineteen questions from the questionnaire. The analysis of the questionnaire aims to delve into the relationship between heritage language acquisition, social factors, and individual experiences of language maintenance among respondents living in the Czech Republic. This exploration endeavors to unravel the interplay between the dominant community language, Czech, and the preservation of heritage languages within this sociolinguistic context. Through the collected data, this analysis seeks to decipher the impact of various social elements, such as family support, prestige of the heritage language in the host country, discrimination and available resources, on the acquisition, maintenance and proficiency levels of heritage languages. By exploring these factors, the analysis aims to shed light on the multiple dynamics that influence the status and retention of heritage languages among individuals with diverse ethnic backgrounds residing in the Czech Republic.
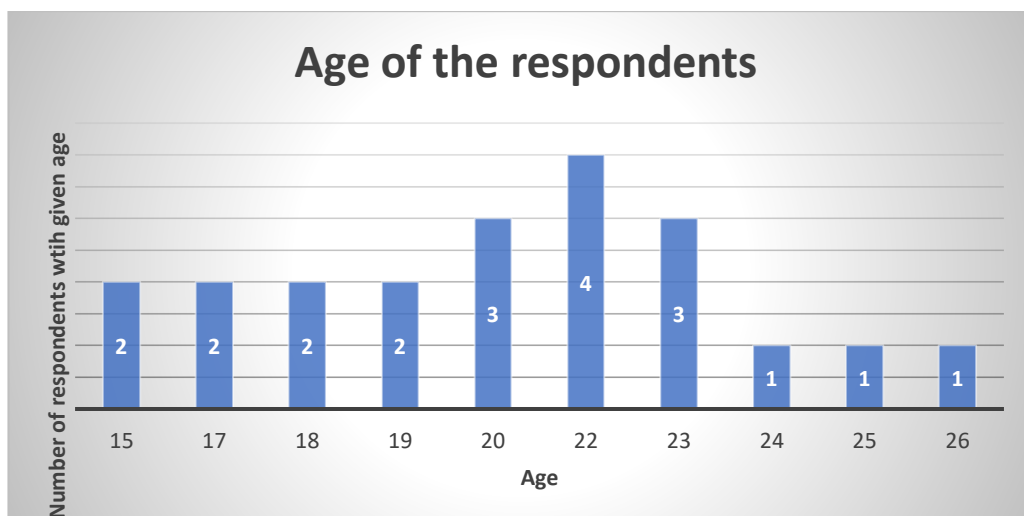
- Question 1: How old are you?



Figure 1: Age of the respondents

The first question in the questionnaire aimed to ascertain the age distribution among the respondents. The data depicted in the graphical representation reveals that the youngest participants are fifteen years old, while the eldest is twenty-six years old. Consequently, the entirety of the respondent pool comprises individuals categorized as teenagers or young adults. The absence of older individuals might be attributed to the historical context wherein interracial/mixed marriages were less prevalent in earlier periods compared to contemporary times, potentially influencing the accessibility and representation of older generations within the survey population.

- Question 2: What is your ethnic background?

| Ethnicity | Total number of respondents |
|---|---|
| Czech and English | 3 |
| Czech and Palestinian | 3 |
| Czech and Syrian | 2 |
| American | 2 |
| Syrian | 1 |
| Czech and German | 1 |
| Czech and Vietnamese | 1 |
| Vietnamese | 1 |
| Czech and Polish | 1 |
| Czech and Dutch | 1 |
| Czech and Montenegrin | 1 |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Czech and Ukrainian** | 1 |
| **Ukrainian** | 1 |
| **Czech and Italian** | 1 |
| **Czech and American** | 1 |

Table 1: Ethnic background of the respondents

Determining the ethnic backgrounds of the respondents constituted a pivotal aspect of the questionnaire. Despite the relatively limited sample size, the collected data revealed a diverse array of ethnicities represented within the respondent pool. Among the nineteen participants, five individuals identified themselves as fully foreign nationals residing in the Czech Republic, while the remaining respondents indicated mixed ethnic backgrounds.

The tabulated data organized the ethnic compositions in descending order of prevalence. Specifically, the most frequently reported ethnicities were those combining Czech and English, as well as Czech and Palestinian, with three respondents each. Following closely, the combination of Czech and Syrian and American ethnicities was reported by two respondents each. Subsequently, the remaining ethnic compositions were each represented by a single respondent in the dataset.

A notable observation within the table lies in the identification of participants with mixed ethnic backgrounds contrasted against those who solely identify with a specific nationality. For instance, the presence of the individual who is half Czech and half Ukrainian in contrast to the one who solely identifies as Ukrainian offers an intriguing opportunity for comparative analysis regarding their acquisition and proficiency in their respective heritage language. The distinct responses provided by

these respondents could potentially elucidate differences in the language acquisition process based on their varying ethnic compositions.

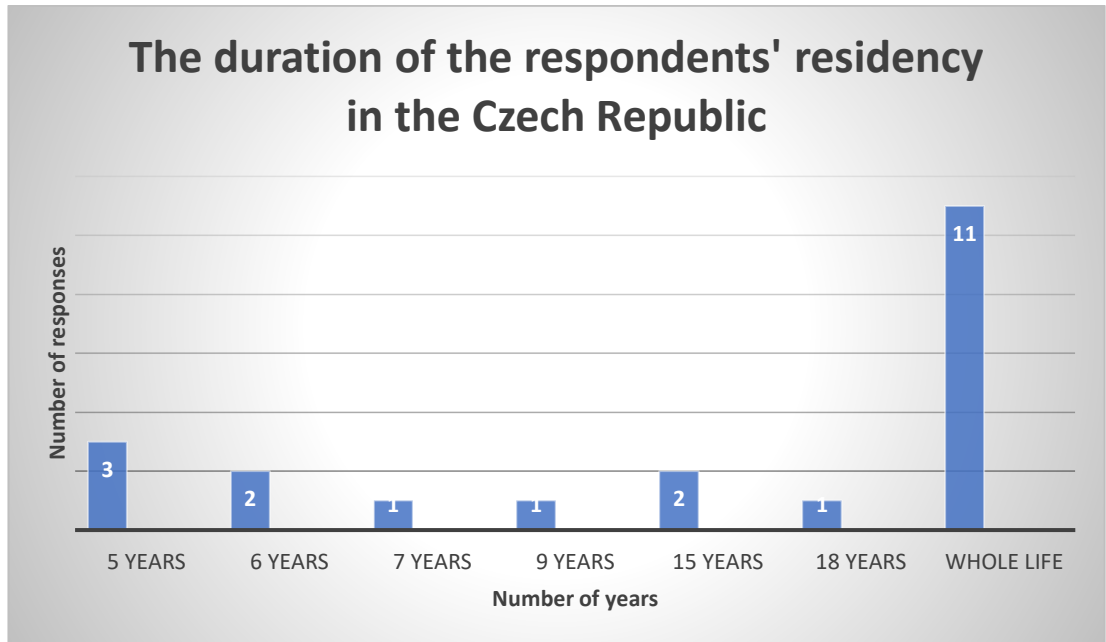- Question 3: How long have you been living in the Czech Republic?



Figure 2: The duration of the respondents' residency in the Czech Republic

This question aimed to discover the duration of residency of the respondents in the Czech Republic. A noteworthy observation obtained from the collected data reveals that a substantial majority of participants have been permanent residents throughout their lives. This extended period of residence within the Czech Republic might potentially have a considerable impact on their acquisition and proficiency of their heritage language. Conversely, individuals who have resided in the Czech Republic for shorter durations may present an interesting contrast. These individuals might demonstrate lower dominance in the Czech language and potentially display heightened proficiency in their heritage language. The accuracy of this hypothesis will be subject to further exploration through subsequent inquiries in the study.

- Question 4: What is your heritage language?

| Language | Number of responses |
|---|---|
| Arabic | 6 |
| English | 6 |
| Ukrainian | 2 |
| Vietnamese | 2 |
| Montenegrin | 1 |
| Italian | 1 |
| German | 1 |
| Dutch | 1 |
| Polish | 1 |

Table 2: Heritage Languages of the respondents

Within the surveyed participants, the most prevalent heritage languages identified were Arabic, comprising six respondents, as well as English, which was also reported by six individuals. Ukrainian and Vietnamese were each mentioned by two respondents, while the remaining languages were cited by one participant each. This distribution highlights the diverse spectrum of heritage languages represented among the respondents, signifying a range of linguistic backgrounds.

- Question 5: What language(s) do you speak with your family members? Please include the following members of your family. (Example: Mother, siblings: Czech. Father: Arabic).

**Languages spoken with family members**

| CZECH WITH MOTHER | CZECH WITH FATHER | HL WITH ALL | CZECH WITH SIBLINGS |
|---|---|---|---|
| 12 | 2 | 5 | 12 |

Number of responses
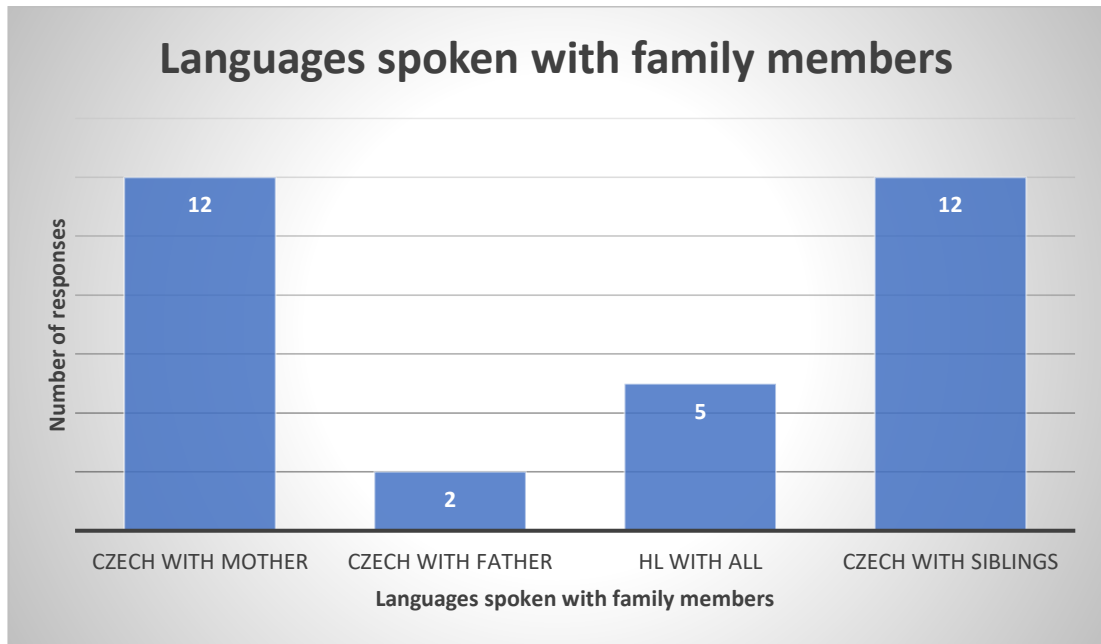
Languages spoken with family members

Figure 3: Languages spoken with family members

The chart analysis indicates a prevalent pattern where the mothers within the family structure are predominantly Czech, while the fathers originate from foreign backgrounds. A noteworthy detail is that respondents commonly reported communicating solely in Czech with their mothers, extending this linguistic choice to interactions with their siblings. This could potentially be influenced by the siblings' residence in the Czech Republic, facilitating their communication in the prevalent language. It is also plausible that some respondents did not mention their siblings due to the absence of siblings in their family structure. Moreover, only two respondents from the surveyed group revealed having Czech fathers and foreign mothers.

An intriguing observation emerges from families where both parents are of foreign origins, wherein respondents often communicate in their heritage language with all or most members of their family. This phenomenon suggests a conscious

effort by these parents to preserve their children's heritage languages or could signify a preference for using their native language instead of the dominant language of the country for family interactions.

- Question 6: How proficient is your foreign parent (parent 1) in their native language/your heritage language on a scale of 1 to 4?
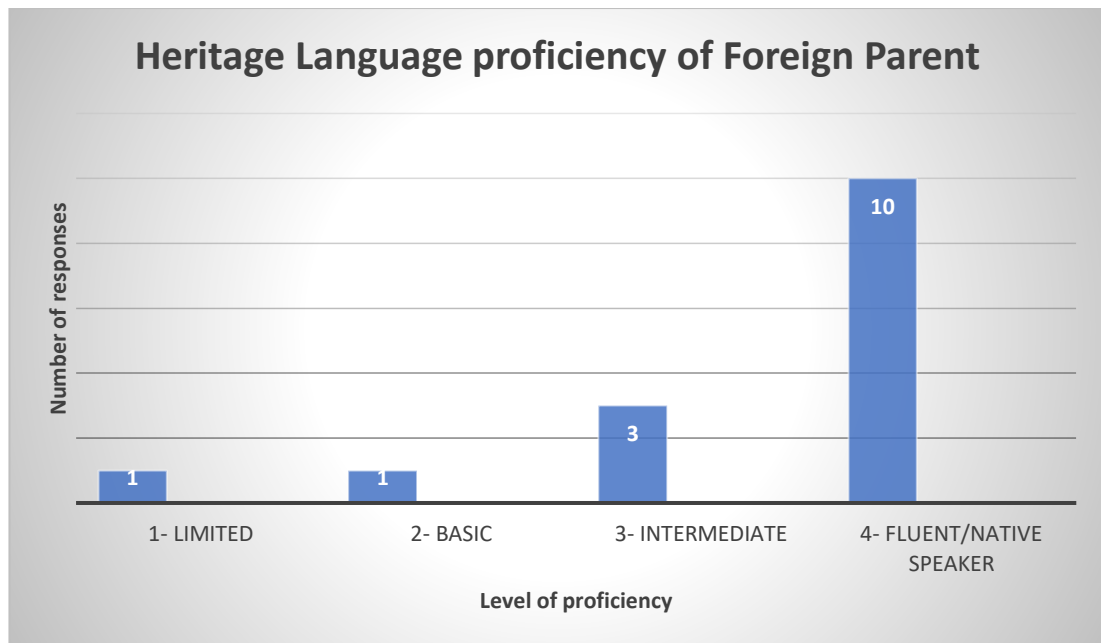


Figure 4: Native language proficiency of foreign parent

In this question, participants were prompted to assess the native language proficiency of their foreign parents. The graphical representation depicts the ratings provided solely by respondents of mixed ethnicity. The subsequent question will encompass respondents whose parental background consists entirely of foreign origins. The evaluation was conducted using a predefined scale that offered descriptions corresponding to varying levels of proficiency. The scale served as a guide, presenting distinct levels of language proficiency as per the following descriptions:

1- Limited (cannot hold conversations at all, knows basic phrases only.)

2- Basic (can hold simple conversations, read and write basic texts.)

3- Intermediate (has good command on the language, makes occasional errors, can read and write standard texts.)

4- Fluent/native speaker (grew up speaking the language, has excellent vocabulary, grammar and cultural nuances.)

The graphical data distinctly illustrates that a majority of foreign parents possess a high level of proficiency in their native languages, having grown up speaking these languages fluently. In cases where the proficiency of the parents appears lower, it may be indicative of potential language attrition, or in some instances, the parents may have been born in the host country, similarly to their children. Despite being raised in the host country, these parents might have retained some degree of their heritage language proficiency, albeit to a lesser extent.

- Question 7: How proficient is parent 2 in your heritage language on a scale of 1 to 4? Answer this question only if both your parents are NOT Czech!
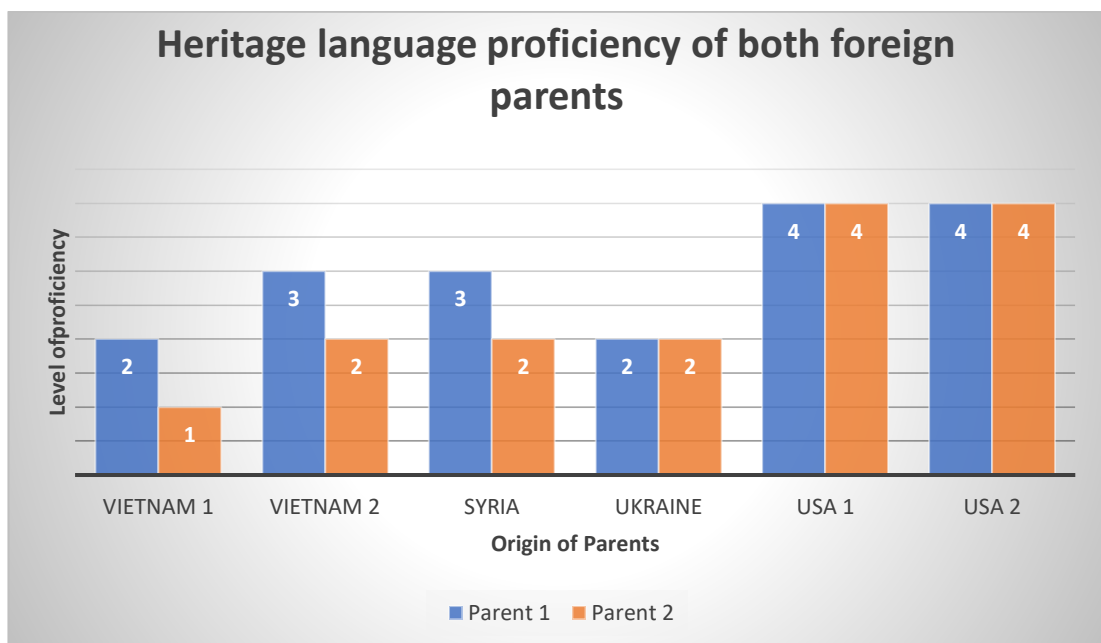


Figure 5: Heritage language proficiency of both foreign parents

As stated in the analysis of question six, the analysis of this question focuses on the parents of the respondents who are both foreigners. Some respondents who had one Czech parent mistakenly answered the question despite it being explicitly stated not to do so. This might have caused confusion in the collected data. The same description, mentioned in question six, of the scale of language proficiency was used in this question:

1- Limited (cannot hold conversations at all, knows basic phrases only.)

2- Basic (can hold simple conversations, read and write basic texts.)

3- Intermediate (has good command on the language, makes occasional errors, can read and write standard texts.)

4- Fluent/native speaker (grew up speaking the language, has excellent vocabulary, grammar and cultural nuances.)

The unexpected findings regarding the proficiency of both foreign parents raise interesting considerations. There was an anticipation of higher proficiency in their heritage languages among this subgroup. However, the observed proficiency levels may imply language attrition, especially in cases where individuals have resided in the Czech Republic for an extended duration. Such prolonged exposure to the dominant language might have adversely impacted the transmission of heritage languages to subsequent generations. Among the respondents, only two individuals indicated that both parents possessed complete fluency in their heritage language, which, in this case, was English.

- Question 8: How proficient are your siblings in your heritage language on a scale of 1 to 4?
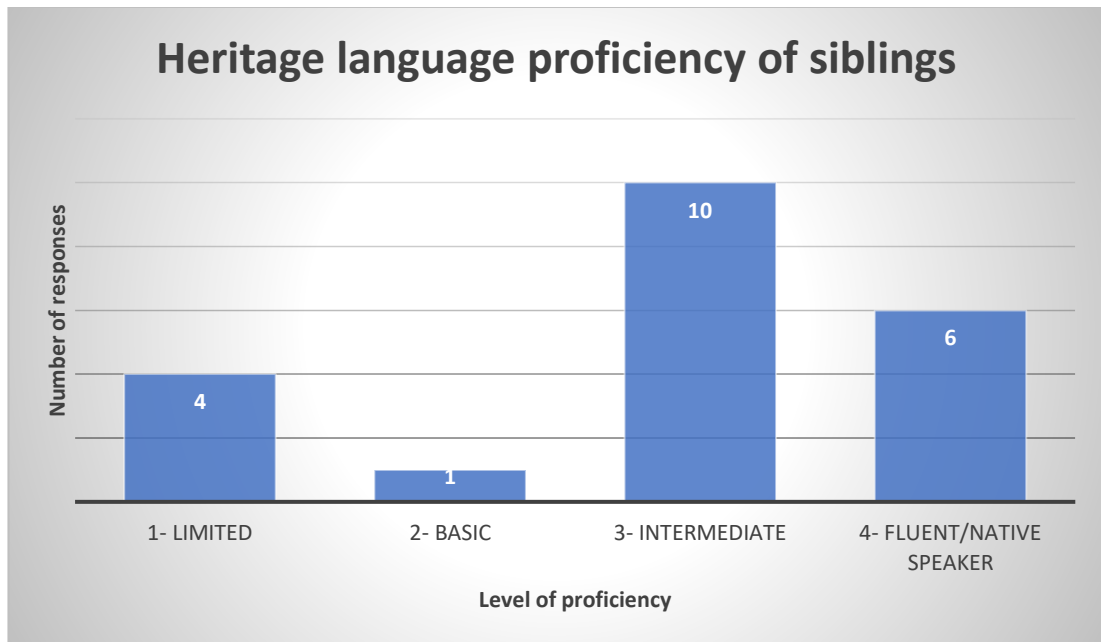


Figure 6: Heritage language proficiency of siblings

This question shifted focus towards evaluating the proficiency of respondents' siblings in their heritage language, again based on the same scale mentioned in questions six and seven:

1- Limited (cannot hold conversations at all, knows basic phrases only.)

2- Basic (can hold simple conversations, read and write basic texts.)

3- Intermediate (has good command on the language, makes occasional errors, can read and write standard texts.)

4- Fluent/native speaker (grew up speaking the language, has excellent vocabulary, grammar and cultural nuances.)

The majority of siblings demonstrated a considerable level of proficiency, with ten respondents indicating intermediate proficiency. This was followed by four

responses for limited proficiency, six for fluent proficiency, and only one response indicating basic proficiency.

The findings of this inquiry were somewhat surprising, suggesting that siblings managed to attain a significant level of proficiency in their heritage language. This outcome suggests potential factors contributing to their proficiency, possibly involving active parental involvement or self-motivated efforts by the siblings themselves.

- Question 9: Have your family members actively encouraged the use and acquisition of the heritage language? Choose one or more answers.

| Choice description | Total number of responses |
|---|---|
| **Yes, they taught me the language at home but only by speaking to me (not with the help of educational materials).** | 12 |
| **Yes, they taught me the language by themselves at home with the help of educational materials.** | 4 |
| **They enrolled me in a language course to learn my heritage language.** | 3 |
| **No, they never put effort into teaching me the language.** | 2 |
| **No, I learned my heritage language in my own interest.** | 2 |
| **Other** | 1 |

Table 3: Family members' efforts to ensure their children learn their heritage language

The predominant approach reported by respondents was parental teaching through verbal communication without the aid of educational materials, a widely recognized method globally for transmitting languages within families. This approach is often considered one of the most effective ways to educate children during their formative years due to their heightened capacity to absorb extensive amounts of information.

Subsequently, the second most prevalent approach involved parental teaching aided by educational materials, representing a feasible alternative when language courses tailored to the specific heritage language are unavailable or when parents possess the resources and time for such supplementary teaching.

Interestingly, three respondents disclosed enrolment in a language course in order to learn their heritage language. These responses came from respondents whose heritage languages are English and Arabic. While English language instruction is expected due to its universality, the presence of Arabic language courses in the Czech Republic was less anticipated, considering its comparatively lesser availability in educational contexts.

Moreover, a minor fraction of respondents indicated the absence of parental efforts to impart their heritage language, while one respondent demonstrated independent initiative in acquiring their heritage language. Finally, one respondent stated an alternative answer, "We speak it at home together." In this case, the respondent is a heritage speaker of English.

- Question 10: Have there been any challenges or obstacles in maintaining your heritage language? Choose one or more answers.

| Choice description | Total number of responses |
| --- | --- |
| **Yes, I feel as though I do not care to speak or know my heritage language. I prefer speaking the dominant language of the country I live in.** | 1 |
| **Yes, I have very limited exposure to my heritage language.** | 5 |
| **Yes, I feel somewhat embarrassed to learn and speak my heritage language because of societal stigma.** | 4 |
| **No, I have not faced any obstacles in maintaining my heritage language.** | 12 |

Table 4: Challenges and obstacles maintaining heritage language

The majority of respondents reported minimal challenges in maintaining their heritage languages, which aligns with contemporary societal attitudes that generally value multilingualism. The second prevalent choice highlighted limited accessibility to their heritage languages, a common issue not confined solely to the Czech Republic but often experienced by heritage speakers globally. Primarily, heritage speakers are exposed to their heritage languages within the family context.

Four respondents conveyed feelings of embarrassment associated with learning and speaking their heritage languages, citing societal stigmas. Specifically, individuals with Italian, Polish, and Vietnamese heritage languages expressed this

sentiment. Moreover, a singular respondent, a heritage speaker of Montenegrin, expressed a lack of interest in learning or utilizing their heritage language, preferring to communicate solely in the dominant language, Czech.

- Question 11: How do you perceive the value and importance of maintaining and acquiring your heritage language in your personal and social life?

| Level of importance | Number of responses |
|---|---|
| **Very high importance - I see my heritage language as an important part of my culture and identity. I use it actively in my day-to-day life.** | 15 |
| **High importance - My heritage language is important to me but I do not use it daily.** | 4 |
| **Moderate importance - My heritage language is quite important to me; however, I am not fluent in it and rarely speak it.** | 2 |
| **Low importance - My heritage language is not a top priority in my life I only know the basics of the language.** | 0 |
| **Very low/no importance - I do not know how to speak my heritage language therefore I do not use it and do not find it important.** | 0 |

Table 5: The significance of preserving heritage languages among participants

The inquiry about the significance of respondents' heritage languages revealed that the around half—fifteen out of twenty-one—considered their heritage language

as an integral component of their cultural and identity facets, utilizing it actively in their daily lives. This response is congruent with the tendency for individuals of mixed ethnicities to embrace and integrate both cultural backgrounds or for those of foreign descent to maintain their roots.

Conversely, four participants acknowledged the high importance of their heritage language, yet admitted infrequent usage in their day-to-day activities, probably due to the prevalent use of the dominant language, Czech, in their households or in society in general. Two other respondents indicated a moderate level of importance, noting that their heritage language held significance but acknowledged limited usage and fluency. Remarkably, none of the respondents considered their heritage language to be of low or no importance, underscoring the varied yet meaningful ways in which heritage speakers value and engage with their linguistic heritage.

- Question 12: On a scale of 1 to 4 how do you perceive the prestige of your heritage language in the Czech Republic?
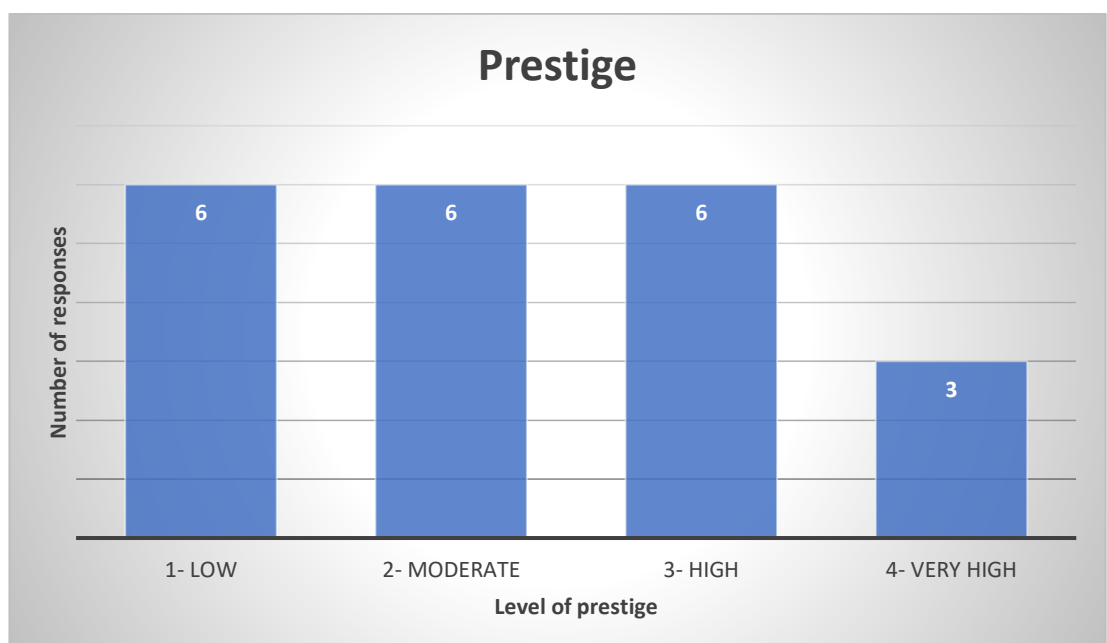


Figure 7: Prestige of the heritage languages among participants

The responses reflecting the perceived prestige of respondents' heritage languages exhibit a diverse range of perspectives. Further analysis involves a categorization of each language according to the perceived levels of prestige as indicated by the respondents, allowing for comparisons across languages based on these categorizations.

- Low prestige: Arabic (x2), Dutch, Montenegrin, Polish, Vietnamese
- Moderate prestige: Arabic (x2), English (x2), Ukrainian (x2)
- High prestige: Arabic (x2), English (x2), German, Vietnamese
- Very high prestige: English (x2), Italian

Arabic presented an interesting distribution across low, moderate, and high prestige levels, with an equal count of two votes in each category. Each respondent seemingly held distinct views on the prestige associated with their heritage language, likely influenced by their personal encounters and societal responses associated with the language.

English also received a varied attribution of prestige levels among respondents. Notably, none of the respondents perceived English as having low prestige, a view consistent with the broader acknowledgment of English's importance in contemporary Czech society.

Responses regarding the Vietnamese language were intriguing, as they portrayed contrasting perceptions of its prestige level, with one respondent indicating low prestige while another attributed high prestige. Such discrepancies may, again, stem from the respondents' unique encounters or cultural associations from Czech society.

Official minority languages in the Czech Republic such as Ukrainian, Polish, and German, revealed diverse perspectives on their prestige levels as well. Respondents

conveying heritage ties to Ukrainian agreed on its moderate prestige. Polish, on the other hand, was associated with low prestige by the respondent. In contrast, German was described as having high prestige. This view might be common mostly in areas in the Czech Republic where the proximity of German borders is close.

Languages like Dutch and Montenegrin were regarded as having low prestige, while Italian was attributed with high prestige by its respondent. These variations in perceptions highlight the interplay of cultural, societal, and personal factors that shape individuals' assessments of the prestige associated with their heritage languages.

- Question 13: Do you use your heritage language or the dominant language more in your daily life?
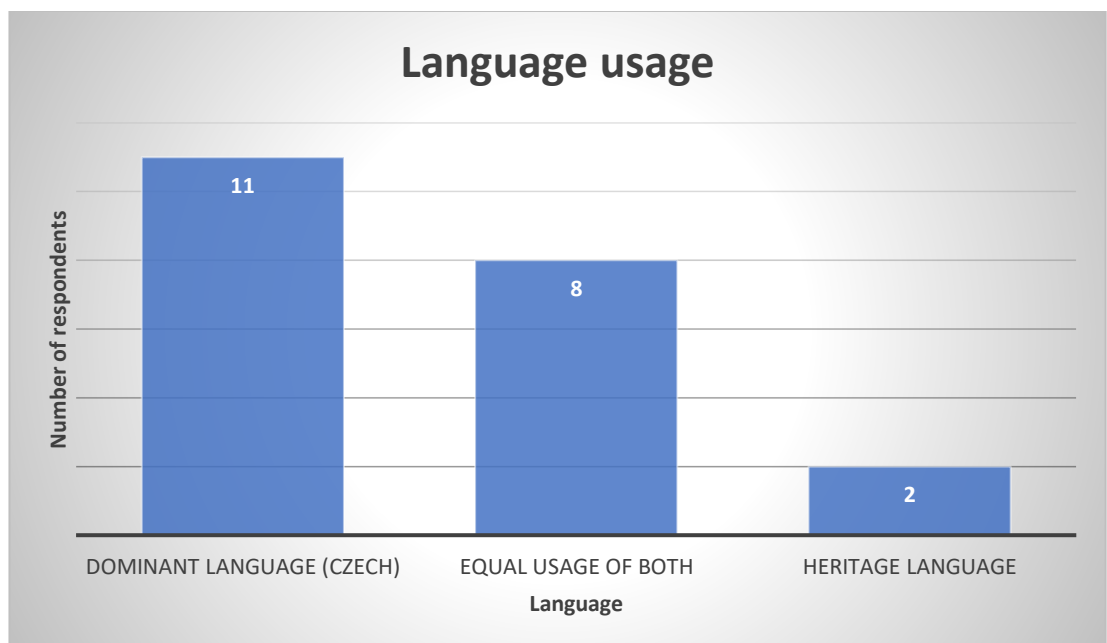


**Language usage**

Figure 8: Language usage among participants

Indeed, the prevalent use of the dominant language, Czech, in the daily lives of respondents was an anticipated outcome. This inclination could be attributed to the necessity of Czech language proficiency for individuals residing in the Czech

Republic. Given that all respondents in this study are aged twenty-six or younger, it is plausible that they are predominantly students or young professionals, necessitating regular interaction with the dominant language in various societal domains.

However, a considerable subset of respondents indicated an equal daily usage of both their heritage language and Czech. This parity in language usage might stem from a bilingual environment at home where the heritage language predominates, while activities outside the home necessitate the use of the dominant language.

Interestingly, two respondents, heritage speakers of Italian and English, asserted a greater daily usage of their heritage language over the dominant language. Such a scenario might signify unique circumstances in which these individuals are consistently engaged in settings or activities where their heritage language is primarily utilized, possibly within familial, cultural or work spheres.

- Question 14: Are there specific social settings where you feel more comfortable using your heritage language? Choose one or more answers.

| Social settings | Number of responses |
| --- | --- |
| **Yes, around my family.** | 17 |
| **Yes, at cultural gatherings or events.** | 4 |
| **Yes, in online communication.** | 3 |
| **No, I always prefer speaking the dominant language.** | 1 |
| **Other** | 1 |

Table 6: Comfort using heritage language in different social settings

In exploring the settings where heritage speakers feel most at ease communicating in their heritage languages, familial contexts emerged as the primary comfort zone for the majority of respondents, a trend that aligns with the customary use of heritage languages within family environments. This inclination is unsurprising, given that family interactions often serve as the primary domain for the transmission and preservation of heritage languages.

Additionally, respondents expressed comfort in using their heritage languages in cultural gatherings and online communication with a total of seven votes for both options. Only one respondent stated that there are no specific social settings where they feel comfortable speaking their heritage language and rather prefers using the dominant language to communicate.

Additionally, another respondent added a comment in the section "other" stating, "I feel more confident speaking my heritage language almost under all

circumstances." The respondent in question, a heritage speaker of Arabic, has been residing in the Czech Republic for six years. Unfortunately, the individual did not specify their previous place of residence, which potentially holds relevance in understanding their comfort levels with the heritage language across diverse situations. If the individual's previous residency indeed encompassed a Middle Eastern region where Arabic prevails as a dominant language, this context could significantly explain their confidence in speaking Arabic across varied social settings.

- Question 15: Have you ever faced challenges or discrimination due to your heritage language or bilingualism?

| Choice description | Number of responses |
|---|---|
| **Discrimination is a common occurrence in various aspects of my life due to my background.** | 1 |
| **Discrimination happens occasionally, but it is not a pervasive issue in my experiences.** | 4 |
| **Discrimination related to my heritage language or bilingualism is not a common occurrence in my life.** | 6 |
| **Discrimination related to my language background has not been a part of my experiences.** | 10 |

Table 7: Discrimination regarding the respondents' heritage background

Approximately half of the respondents indicated that they have not encountered instances of discrimination stemming from their ethnic backgrounds. Such an answer might reflect a societal shift in the Czech Republic, moving away from more conservative ideologies, where past occurrences of discrimination might have been more prevalent.

Six respondents explicitly stated that discrimination is not a frequent phenomenon in their lives, while four others acknowledged occasionally

experiencing discrimination. Some of these respondents included heritage speakers of Arabic, German and Vietnamese. Notably, only one respondent, a heritage speaker of English, acknowledged discrimination as a commonplace experience across various facets of their life due to their ethnic background. This perspective is intriguing as speakers of English typically hold a favourable image among others and commonly experience less discrimination compared to speakers of other languages.

- Question 16: Are there community resources available, such as heritage language classes, cultural events, or media, to support the acquisition and maintenance of your heritage language?

| Choice description | Number of responses |
|---|---|
| **Yes, there are and I attend them regularly.** | 2 |
| **Yes, there are, but I attend them only sometimes.** | 3 |
| **Yes, there are, but I never attend any.** | 12 |
| **No there are not, but I wish there were.** | 4 |
| **No there are not and if there were I would not attend them.** | 0 |

Table 8: The availability of heritage language resources

The majority of respondents noted the presence of resources such as language courses and cultural events that are accessible for reinforcing their heritage languages, despite their non-participation. This observation aligns with the notion that these individuals might face constraints in terms of time commitment or possibly lack interest in actively engaging in such activities. Merely two respondents

consistently attend these resources while three respondents participate occasionally, suggesting a sporadic involvement. Contrarily, a small fraction mentioned the absence of such resources while expressing a desire for their availability, specifically four respondents who are heritage speakers of Arabic, Polish, and Italian.

These resources, such as language courses and cultural events supporting heritage languages, could potentially be more readily available in urban centres with larger concentrations of specific ethnic communities. Urban locales often host a more diverse array of cultural institutions and community centres, thus providing a richer landscape for such resources. Consequently, individuals residing in these urban settings might have increased accessibility to programs aimed at fostering their heritage languages compared to those in smaller or less diverse communities.

- Question 17: How do you perceive the impact of community support and resources, or the lack thereof, on your heritage language acquisition and maintenance?

| Choice description | Number of responses |
|---|---|
| **I think that the resources provided have tremendously helped me to acquire and maintain my heritage language.** | 4 |
| **The resources provided have helped me but not the extent where I could see great progress.** | 8 |
| **There are no such resources but I think they would have helped me with my heritage language progress.** | 7 |

| | |
|---|---|
| **There are no such resources and even if there were, I do not think they would have helped with my heritage language progress** | 0 |
| **Other** | 2 |

Table 9: Progress gained from heritage language resources

This question was intended as a follow-up to the previous inquiry (question sixteen). Eight out of the twenty-one respondents noted that available resources had somewhat aided in their heritage language acquisition, albeit without substantial progress. Conversely, seven respondents claimed an absence of such resources, contradicting the earlier indication where only four respondents cited their non-existence. This discrepancy might stem from potential confusion among respondents or a misunderstanding of the question's intent. In a positive light, four participants expressed that the provided resources significantly supported their progress in acquiring their heritage language.

Additionally, two respondents opted for the "other" option: one stating, "The resources exist, but I have never used them," while the second respondent mentioned, "According to the answer in the previous question, I do not attend these events and therefore do not have sufficient information to answer this question." These responses possibly signal an oversight in the question structure, lacking an appropriate option that aligns with these respondents' perspectives.

- Question 18: How would you describe your level of proficiency in your heritage language?
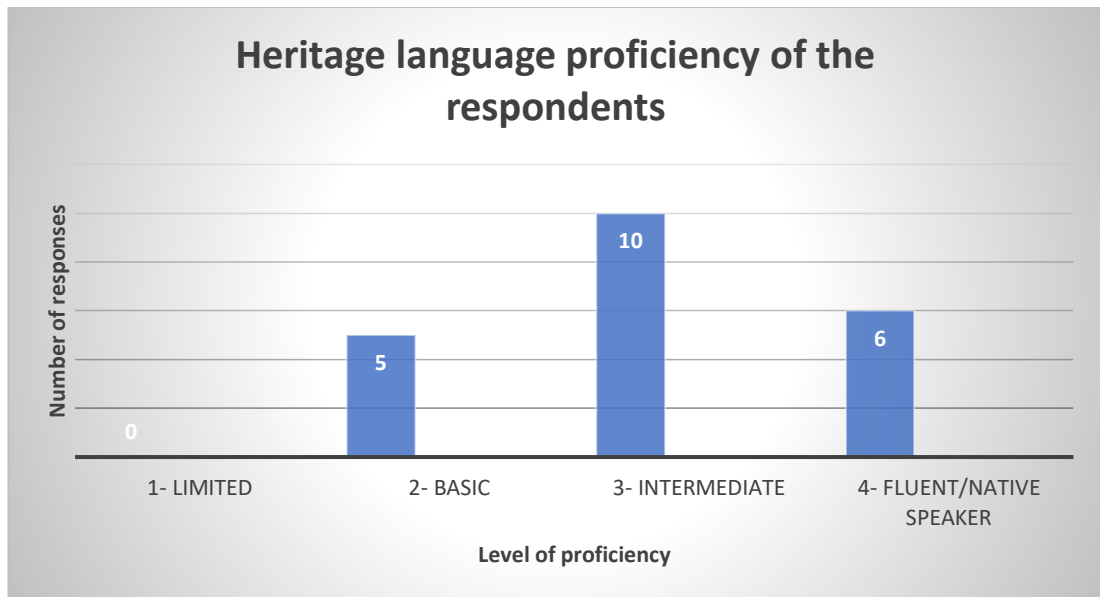


Figure 9: Heritage language proficiency of the respondents

This question has been asked previously but in regards to the respondents' parents and siblings. The same scale description was used:

1- Limited (I cannot hold conversations at all, I know basic phrases only.)

2- Basic (I can hold simple conversations, and read and write basic texts.)

3- Intermediate (I have a good command of the language, make occasional errors, can read and write standard texts.)

4- Fluent/native speaker (I grew up speaking the language, have excellent vocabulary, grammar and cultural nuances.)

Approximately half of the respondents showcased an intermediate proficiency level in their respective heritage languages, signifying a commendable achievement in maintaining linguistic abilities despite residing in a host country where another dominant language is spoken. Such sustained proficiency amid the challenges of language preservation within a foreign environment is noteworthy.

The remaining participants were divided into two distinct groups: five respondents claimed a basic proficiency in their heritage languages, while six asserted fluency. This division prompts further inquiry, especially regarding the subset of respondents who deem themselves fluent. An exploration of their duration of residency in the Czech Republic may shed light on factors influencing their heritage language proficiency.

Three of the respondents who self-identified as fluent in their heritage languages had spent part of their lives residing abroad, likely in the home country of their foreign parent. This experience of living abroad could reasonably account for their heightened proficiency in their respective heritage languages, as prolonged exposure to the language environment contributes significantly to language competence.

Conversely, the remaining three respondents declaring fluency have lived their entire lives in the Czech Republic. Their proclaimed fluency in their heritage languages, German, Vietnamese, and English, presents intriguing scenarios.

The perceived fluency among the English and German heritage speakers could plausibly be supported by the educational system in the Czech Republic, where English is often taught as a second language and German as a third language in schools. This scholastic exposure to their respective heritage languages might have substantiated the linguistic foundation these individuals already possessed, potentially facilitating and enhancing their language acquisition and proficiency. Such formal instruction, particularly if built upon existing language skills, could significantly contribute to their perceived fluency in these heritage languages despite residing in the Czech Republic for their entire lives.

However, the situation of the Vietnamese heritage speaker, achieving fluency despite lifelong residence in the Czech Republic, could suggest either sustained exposure to their ethnic community or dedicated efforts to achieve a high level of proficiency in their heritage language.

- Question 19: Do you think you are more fluent in your heritage or dominant community language? Why do you think so?
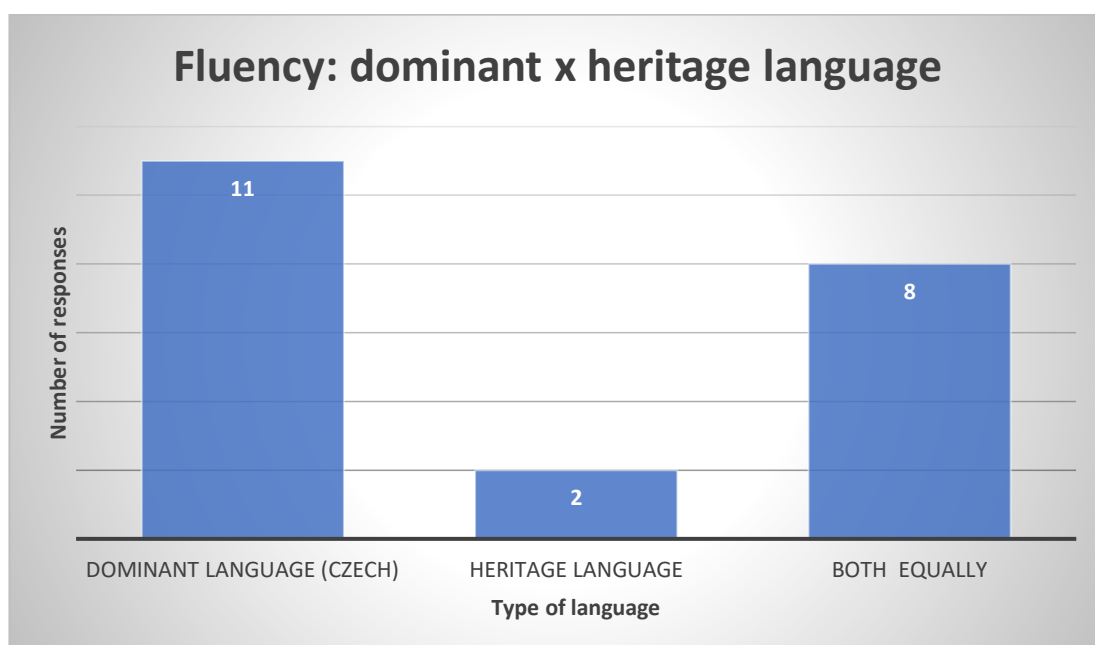


Figure 10: Fluency of the respondents: dominant x heritage language

In the concluding inquiry of the questionnaire, participants reflected on their perceived fluency in both the dominant language, Czech, and their respective heritage languages. Predominantly, respondents acknowledged higher proficiency in Czech, an expected outcome given their upbringing and residence in the Czech Republic, where Czech language proficiency is pivotal for daily life.

Eight individuals indicated an equal level of fluency in both Czech and their heritage languages. This balance in fluency suggests a deliberate effort to uphold their heritage languages despite residing in a Czech-speaking environment. It likely

indicates sustained exposure to their heritage languages, possibly within familial or cultural settings, signifying their commitment to preserving these languages. Contrarily, only two respondents asserted greater fluency in their heritage languages.

Regrettably, responses to the second part of this question, pertaining to the reasons behind the perceived differing fluency levels in languages, were provided only by six individuals. These are their responses:

- A heritage speaker of Arabic who chose the option "fluent in both languages equally" residing in the Czech Republic for six years: "My parents have always tried to make sure we are fluent in both of our languages."

- A heritage speaker of Arabic who chose the option "more fluent in the heritage language" residing in the Czech Republic for six years: "I studied it for a longer time and was exposed to it more than the dominant language."

- A heritage speaker of Ukrainian who chose the option "more fluent in the dominant language" residing in the Czech Republic their whole life: "It is the language I have been speaking since birth, it is easier for me to communicate in it."

- A heritage speaker of English who chose the option "more fluent in the dominant language" residing in the Czech Republic their whole life: "I do not have such a developed vocabulary in English."

- A heritage speaker of English who chose the option "fluent in both languages equally" residing in the Czech Republic their whole life: "I am lagging behind in both languages due to loss of vocabulary. I often use "code-switching"."

- A heritage speaker of English who chose the option "more fluent in the heritage language" residing in the Czech Republic for nine years: "My

dominant language is English because I grew up in America until I was 11

and did not speak any Czech before that and we still speak English at home."

# 4  Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate the influence of the dominant language, Czech, on the acquisition of heritage languages among individuals in the Czech Republic. The theoretical segment defined essential terms, discussed the significance of minority languages in the Czech Republic, and examined social factors that potentially affect heritage language acquisition.

The questionnaire encompassed a wide array of aspects related to heritage language acquisition, social perceptions and personal experiences among respondents. It began with demographic details, revealing that the majority were teenagers or young adults with mixed ethnic backgrounds, predominantly including Czech and other heritages like English, American, Arab, Ukrainian, Vietnamese, among others.

Regarding language proficiency, heritage speakers largely reported intermediate proficiency in their heritage languages, with some claiming basic fluency while others considered themselves fluent. Proficiency in heritage languages like English and German might have potentially been influenced by exposure in school settings where these languages are taught.

Family dynamics emerged as a crucial factor influencing language acquisition. Respondents predominantly used Czech with their mothers and siblings. However, individuals with both foreign parents tended to utilize their heritage language with their entire family, emphasizing the importance of preserving their linguistic heritage.

The importance of heritage languages was underscored as crucial to cultural identity, yet their use in daily life varied, with Czech dominating most public settings. An expected outcome as all of the respondents reside in the Czech Republic.

The examination of heritage language prestige within the respondents unveiled diverse perspectives. Each language's perceived prestige seemed intricately linked to individual experiences, societal attitudes, and cultural contexts, contributing to a varied views of linguistic prestige among heritage speakers in the Czech Republic.

While familial settings were the most comfortable spaces for speaking their heritage languages, some respondents expressed less confidence in specific social situations. Instances of discrimination based on ethnic backgrounds were uncommon but reported by a few.

Regarding available resources to support heritage language acquisition, although present, respondents rarely engaged with language courses or cultural events. Nonetheless, those who did participate noted moderate assistance in their language progress.

Finally, respondents generally felt more fluent in Czech than in their heritage languages which is quite expected considering they reside in the Czech Republic. However, most perceived themselves as equally fluent in both, indicating deliberate efforts to maintain proficiency in their heritage languages while navigating the predominantly Czech-speaking environment.

Several intriguing revelations emerged from the questionnaire that defied initial expectations. Some of these unexpected findings included the high degree of fluency reported by heritage speakers who had lived their entire lives in the Czech Republic. Notably, respondents fluent in their heritage languages, particularly

English and German, highlighted their proficiency despite a lifetime spent predominantly in a Czech-speaking environment. Additionally, the responses indicating the difference in perceived prestige of various heritage languages among respondents were surprising, diverging from assumptions about language perceptions within the Czech Republic. Moreover, the prevalence of familial support in maintaining heritage languages was quite remarkable, showing that despite external societal pressures, family influence played a crucial role in heritage language retention, contradicting some preconceived notions about the dominance of external societal factors in language maintenance.

In conclusion, the study underscores the complexities and multifaceted nature of heritage language maintenance among respondents in the Czech Republic. It accentuates the significant role of familial influence, societal attitudes, and available resources in shaping heritage language retention. This research contributes insights into the challenges and successes faced by heritage language speakers, emphasizing the significance of cultural preservation and identity in a society where only one dominant language is present.

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# 6  Appendix: questionnaire

1  How old are you?

2  What is your ethnic background?

3  How long have you been living in the Czech Republic?

4  What is/are your heritage language(s)?

5  What language(s) do you speak with your family members? Please include the following members of your family. (Example: Mother, siblings: Czech. Father: Arabic).

6  How proficient is your foreign parent (parent 1) in their native language/your heritage language on a scale of 1 to 4?

   1-  Limited (cannot hold conversations at all, knows basic phrases only.)

   2-  Basic (can hold simple conversations, read and write basic texts.)

   3-  Intermediate (has good command on the language, makes occasional errors, can read and write standard texts.)

   4-  Fluent/native speaker (grew up speaking the language, has excellent vocabulary, grammar and cultural nuances.)

7  How proficient is parent 2 in your heritage language on a scale of 1 to 4? Answer this question only if both your parents are NOT Czech!

   1-  Limited (cannot hold conversations at all, knows basic phrases only.)

   2-  Basic (can hold simple conversations, read and write basic texts.)

   3-  Intermediate (has good command on the language, makes occasional errors, can read and write standard texts.)

   4-  Fluent/native speaker (grew up speaking the language, has excellent vocabulary, grammar and cultural nuances.)

8  How proficient are your siblings in your heritage language on a scale of 1 to 4?

1- Limited (cannot hold conversations at all, knows basic phrases only.)

2- Basic (can hold simple conversations, read and write basic texts.)

3- Intermediate (has good command on the language, makes occasional errors, can read and write standard texts.)

4- Fluent/native speaker (grew up speaking the language, has excellent vocabulary, grammar and cultural nuances.)

9   Have your family members actively encouraged the use and acquisition of the heritage language? Choose one or more answers.

o   Yes, they taught me the language at home but only by speaking to me (not with the help of educational materials).

o   Yes, they taught me the language by themselves at home with the help of educational materials.

o   They enrolled me in a language course to learn my heritage language.

o   No, they never put effort into teaching me the language.

o   No, I learned my heritage language in my own interest.

o   Other

10   Have there been any challenges or obstacles in maintaining your heritage languages? Choose one or more answers.

o   Yes, I feel as though I do not care to speak or know my heritage language. I prefer speaking the dominant language of the country I live in.

o   Yes, I have very limited exposure to my heritage language.

o   Yes, I feel somewhat embarrassed to learn and speak my heritage language because of societal stigma.

o   No, I have not faced any obstacles maintaining my heritage language.

o   Other

11  How do you perceive the value and importance of maintaining and acquiring your heritage language in your personal and social life?

- o  Very high importance - I see my heritage language as an important part of my culture and identity. I use it actively in my day-to-day life.

- o  High importance - My heritage language is important to me but I do not use it on a daily basis.

- o  Moderate importance - My heritage language is quite important to me, however, I am not fluent in it and rarely speak it.

- o  Low importance - My heritage language is not a top priority in my life I only know the basics of the language.

- o  Very low/no importance - I do not know how to speak my heritage language therefore I do not use it and do not find it important.

12  On a scale of 1 to 4 how do you perceive the prestige of your heritage language in the Czech Republic?

- o  Low prestige

- o  Moderate prestige

- o  High prestige

- o  Very high prestige.

13 Do you use your heritage language or the dominant language more in your daily life?

- o I mainly use the dominant language and very rarely/never use my heritage language.
- o I use both equally.
- o I use my heritage language more than the dominant community language.

14 Are there specific social settings where you feel more comfortable using your heritage language? Choose one or more answers.

- o Yes, around my family.
- o Yes, at cultural gatherings or events.
- o Yes, in online communication.
- o No, I always prefer speaking the dominant language.
- o Other

15 Have you ever faced challenges or discrimination due to your heritage language or bilingualism?

- o Discrimination is a common occurrence in various aspects of my life due to my background.
- o Discrimination happens occasionally, but it is not a pervasive issue in my experiences.
- o Discrimination related to my heritage language or bilingualism is not a common occurrence in my life.
- o Discrimination related to my language background has not been a part of my experiences.
- o Other

16 Are there community resources available, such as heritage language classes, cultural events, or media, to support the acquisition and maintenance of your heritage language?

- o Yes, there are and I attend them regularly.
- o Yes, there are, but I attend them only sometimes.
- o Yes, there are, but I never attend any.
- o No there are not, but I wish there were.
- o No there are not and if there were I would not attend them.
- o Other

17 How do you perceive the impact of community support and resources, or the lack thereof, on your heritage language acquisition and maintenance?

- o I think that the resources provided have tremendously helped me to acquire and maintain my heritage language.
- o The resources provided have helped me but not the extent where I could see great progress.
- o There are no such resources but I think they would have helped me with my heritage language progress.
- o There are no such resources and even if there were, I do not think they would have helped with my heritage language progress
- o Other

18 How would you describe your level of proficiency in your heritage language?

1- Limited (I cannot hold conversations at all, know basic phrases only.)

2- Basic (I can hold simple conversations, read and write basic texts.)

3- Intermediate (I have good command on the language, make occasional errors, can read and write standard texts.)

4- Fluent/native speaker (I grew up speaking the language, have excellent vocabulary, grammar and cultural nuances.)

19 Do you think you are more fluent in your heritage or dominant community language? Why do you think so?

- o Heritage language.

- o Dominant community language.

- o I am equally fluent in both.