**MOTHER LANGUAGE**

**Q &A**

**Q: What is a Mother Language?**

🡪A Mother Language is the language that a person learns first, in the family.

It is sometimes called a “native” language. For linguists, it is called “L1”.

**Q: Is a person’s Mother Language always their “best” language?**

*🡪Not necessarily.*

A person may develop stronger skills in languages learned later in life, especially if they are dominant languages in the schools, workplace and society where a person lives.

Often, people with multilingual backgrounds have differentiated skills in their languages. One language may be their “best” for casual conversation or storytelling; another may be their “best” for academic writing.

**Q: What is the difference between “Mother Language” and “Heritage Language”?**

🡪While the original definition of “Mother Language” related to “first” language learned in the home, it also has a culturally symbolic definition.

People can thus talk about “not speaking their Mother Tongue,” referring to a language of cultural/community identity.

**Q: What kinds of Heritage Languages are there?**

**🡪Heritage languages can be**

* **Minority** languages
  + Breton/Corsican in France
  + Wales in the U.K.
* Languages of **Immigration**
  + Turkish in Germany
  + Spanish in the U.S.
* **Indigenous** languages
  + Navajo/Hawaiian/Chumash in the U.S.
  + Sami in Finland
  + Nahuatl in Mexico
* **Creole** languages
  + Krio in Sierra Leone
  + Hawaii Creole English/Louisiana Creole (U.S.)
  + Haitian Creole in Haiti
* **Sign** Languages
  + American Sign Language
  + Swedish Sign Language

**Q: What other kinds of Heritage or Mother Languages are there?**

🡪People may also have a **variety of a language** as their Heritage or Mother Language. People may talk about these varieties as “dialects,” “accents” or even “slang.”

* Some of these varieties have high status. Others are stigmatized.
* Linguists view all these varieties as equally legitimate.

**Some of the heritage language varieties people may have include:**

* Chicano English
* Puerto Rican Spanish
* California English
* Bavarian German
* Shanghainese Chinese
* Algerian Arabic
* Cajun French
* African American English
* Scots English
* Brazilian Portuguese

Not to forget **codeswitching**—a shared, community, heritage language practice where people alternate between two or more languages.