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Cross-Cultural Approaches: Comparing Heritage Languages in Toronto

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Abstract

Comparable documentation across language varieties can contribute to linguistic knowledge, e.g., what types of structures and patterns are cross-linguistically possible? common? Such analyses also provide a proving ground on which to test which theoretical principles of sociolinguistics are universal. To begin to tackle the complex issue of how we might develop a framework for cross-cultural sociolinguistics, I share some insights from comparative analysis of several languages that are spoken in one city but that have not been subjected to much sociolinguistic analysis. The languages in question (Cantonese, Faetar, Korean, Italian, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian and Hungarian) are heritage languages spoken in Toronto for 50-100+ years and subjected to variationist scrutiny since 2009. Comparative analyses of homeland and heritage patterns across several heritage languages are compared to better understand the processes of language variation and change in this set of lesser-studied varieties. I highlight trends observed in seven years of ongoing study of Toronto's heritage languages that may help us understand contact-induced change in this context at the community, generation, and individual level. Comparisons reveal surprising discrepancies between reports of linguistic attitudes and language use and evidence of ongoing change. The most surprising trend is the lack of correlation between usage patterns and attitudes to linguistic innovation. Such issues must be understood if we are to develop a framework for cross-cultural comparisons.

Cross-Cultural Approaches: Comparing Heritage Languages in Toronto

Naomi Nagy*

1 Introduction

Comparable documentation across many language varieties can contribute to broadening our linguistic knowledge, e.g., helping us understand not only what types of structures and patterns are cross-linguistically possible but which are more common and how they change and vary over time and space. Such analyses provide a proving ground on which to test the universality of theoretical principles of sociolinguistics. Many complex issues arise as we develop a framework for cross-cultural and cross-linguistic sociolinguistics, the topic of recent workshops at NWAV45 and at Universität zu Köln, Germany. I will share some insights from comparative analysis of several languages that are spoken in one city but that have not been subjected to much sociolinguistic analysis.

Smakman and Heinrichs (2015), a showcase of sociolinguistic research on languages less frequently examined by sociolinguists, includes reports of several common sociolinguistic concepts that “don’t work” once exploration extends beyond the few major languages that have been well documented sociolinguistically (i.e., English, French and Spanish). Such concepts include ethnolinguistic vitality, code-switching models, style-shifting, standard language and standardization, prestige, marker, indicator, stereotype, politeness theory, diglossia and the very idea of individual languages. These are discussed further in Nagy (2016a). Why don’t these concepts apply? At least in part, it must be due to the prevalence of bilingualism (by which I also mean multilingualism) among speakers of smaller and/or non-dominant languages.

For the multilingual speaker, language choice is not only an effective means of communication but also an act of identity (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985). Every time we say something in one language when we might just as easily have said it in another, we are reconnecting with people, situations, and power configurations from our history of past interactions and imprinting on that history our attitudes towards the people and languages concerned (Wei 2008:13).

This motivates a need for careful empirical analysis of several generally-accepted relationships between patterns of linguistic variation and social factors. Some that are specifically linked to contact situations are illustrated in Figure 1, but effects of gender, class, style, etc., must also be considered in the broader multilingual context (*cf.* Stanford & Preston 2007, noting that social factors may behave differently in minority languages). Each numbered relationship (indicated by a solid line in Figure 1) will be explored in subsequent sections of this paper. I use the word “explored” advisedly – this is very much work in progress while the corpora are incomplete. Unnumbered relationships, indicated by dotted arrows are also important but are left for future work.

In this paper, I examine the speech produced in several of Toronto’s heritage languages, comparing the relationship between identity-related factors and linguistic variation at three levels, with the following predictions:

- 1) **Community level:** minority languages which have greater ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles, Bourhis and Taylor 1977) will be more resistant to contact-induced influence from the dominant language than those with weaker ethnolinguistic vitality
- 2) **Generation level:** successive generations of speakers, with increasing contact with the

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dominant language and less contact with the heritage language, will show greater effects of contact with the dominant language

- 3) **Individual level:** within a generation, speakers with greater affinity for and/or more frequent use of the dominant language will show earlier effects of contact with the dominant language

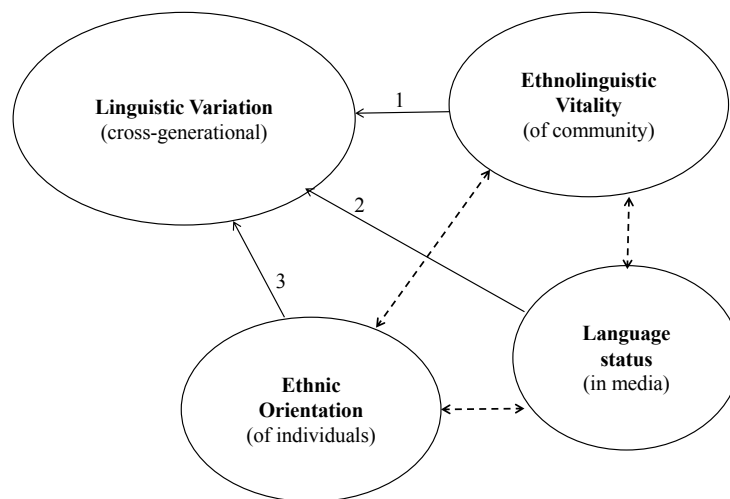


Figure 1: Connections to consider between linguistic variation and social factors related to ‘prestige’ and network membership.

I first summarize the methods used to collect, analyze and compare data in the Heritage Language Variation and Change Project (HLVC), an ongoing research endeavor which examines data from a range of heritage languages spoken in Toronto and thus in contact with the city’s dominant language, English.

2 Methods of the HLVC Project

The HLVC project is in the process of building corpora of a variety of heritage languages and simultaneously testing methods for analyzing and interpreting the data, in order to assure ourselves that we will have usable, interpretable data when the corpora are complete. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first project to systematically collect data from a range of language pairs in contact within one city using identical methods at all steps. The heritage languages being investigated are Russian, Polish, Korean, Ukrainian, Cantonese, Italian, Hungarian and Faetar. Each language is to be represented by a sample of 40 speakers, ranging across three generations, four age groups, and two sexes. Speakers provided samples of their linguistic patterns by participating in a standard sociolinguistic interview (Labov 1984) conducted in the heritage language and guided by a fellow heritage language speaker. They also responded orally to an ethnic orientation questionnaire which includes questions regarding ethnic identity (e.g., ‘I am Canadian’ vs. ‘I am Korean’ vs. ‘I am Korean-Canadian’), relative frequency of use of the heritage language vs. English, preference for the heritage language vs. English, frequency of participation in the cultural environment related to the heritage language, heritage culture vs. ‘mainstream Canadian’ preferences, and experience of heritage language-based discrimination. Further details of this methods are in Nagy et al. (2014) and Nagy (2015). As noted above, data collection is still in progress, and the amount of data available for each analysis below varies. This work is conducted collaboratively by a team of researchers that includes (an ever-changing set of) undergraduate and graduate students who speak each heritage language and linguistic professors with research interests in, and usually also native-speaker status for, each of the languages. They are listed at

http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/ngn/HLVC/3_1_investigators.php, http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/ngn/HLVC/3_2_active_ra.php, and http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/ngn/HLVC/3_3_former_ra.php. This pooling of expertise enables investigation of a set of languages that exceeds the knowledge of any one trained sociolinguist. It also builds connections between the university and the communities, developing conduits for sharing knowledge and skills. Details on this approach are in Nagy (2017).

3 Results: Ethnolinguistic Vitality

We will first consider the community-level connections between linguistic variation patterns (that might be contact-induced) and ingroup/outgroup orientation at the community level. This approach adapts Brenziger et al.'s (2003) quantification of Giles, Bourhis and Taylor's (1977) model of Ethnolinguistic Vitality to allow comparability across communities. The original model included three pillars, demographics, language status and institutional support. Brenziger et al.'s approach introduced quantifiable factors representing each. This quantification allows placement of language varieties along a scale from 0 to 5, where higher numbers indicate better likelihood of survival.

I illustrate this approach with just one of the HLVC languages, Faetar, for which ethnolinguistic vitality scores have been calculated. Faetar is an endangered Francoprovençal variety spoken in two Apulian villages in southern Italy, due to immigration some 700 years ago from the French Alps, some 1200 km to the northwest. It is also spoken by very small numbers of speakers scattered across (eastern) North America. By many measures, Faetar enjoys considerably higher ethnolinguistic vitality in Italy than in North America (see Zulato *et al. forthcoming*).

We would predict that speakers in Italy, then, would be less prone to contact-induced influence than speakers in North American outposts. In Faeto, Faetar-speakers constitute nearly 100% of the community (and English-speakers constitute ~ 0%), while, in any North American city, Faetar-speakers constitute << 1% of the population. Thus, there is reason to anticipate more English influence in the North American varieties. However, this expectation is unfounded. Nagy, Iannozzi and Heap (*forthcoming*) show little difference in rates of use and patterns of conditioning effects on null-subjects, a feature that starkly distinguishes English from Faetar. Of the differences that do exist, we argue that none can be logically attributed to English contact.

Refocusing the lens a bit, I next consider the role of contact with Italian. In Faeto, Italian is sometimes used with ingroup members and necessarily with outgroup members. Both in and around Faeto, virtually everyone knows (and sometimes speaks) Italian. However, day-to-day communication continues to be predominantly in Faetar (at least as of my last fieldtrip, 2005, which postdates the data from Faeto that I discuss). In Toronto, in contrast, Italian spoken by <3% of the city's population (Statistics Canada 2011). By the same reasoning presented above for English, we might expect Heritage Faetar to show less influence from Italian than Homeland Faetar (and perhaps again we would expect more influence from English). Comparison of patterns of production from a picture-description task, designed to elicit comparable common vocabulary items from many speakers, shows no significant difference in rate of vocabulary change between speakers in Faeto and speakers in Toronto (Nagy 2011). Neither Italian-source nor English-source forms appear more frequently in the sample from one community or the other.

We have also compared other variables in other languages (listed in Table 1 below) but we don't yet have comparable ethnolinguistic vitality measures. However, we can assume that there would be a similar magnitude of difference (between homeland and heritage varieties), based on the difference in proportion of speakers to total population and (concomitant?) decreases in inter-generational transmission. While this last set of data is speculative due to the lack of vitality scores, the two examples from Faetar indicate that it is at least possible for there to be no relationship between the strength of ties to the outgroup and linguistic patterns that are, at least conceivably, contact-influenced.

4 Results: The Status of the Language in the Media

Another way to consider community level effects is to look at the status of the language in more

detail, rather than reducing it to merely one of nine factors that contribute to the ethnolinguistic vitality of a language. In this section, I summarize from Nagy (2016b). While few would disagree with the existence of Canadian and American varieties of English, distinct from British varieties, there is not consensus on whether heritage languages should (yet?) be considered as distinct varieties from their homeland counterparts. Such status depends on how the language is viewed by speakers and community members as well as by the media and scholars. The heritage languages examined in this project differ markedly in terms of their status, summarized in the top half of Table 1.

	FAE	KOR	CAN	RUS	ITA	UKR
Status of recognition						
Named varieties			√		√	√
Social or demographic attributes ascribed to the variety						√
Linguistic features of variety described				√	√	√
Analysis of linguistic variation						√
Heritage – Homeland comparison of linguistic features (S=same; D=different; D!= difference interpreted as contact-influenced)						
Basic vocabulary (Nagy 2011)	S					
Classifiers (Lo and Nagy 2016)			D			
Voice Onset Time (Kang and Nagy 2016, Nagy and Tan 2017, Nagy and Kochetov 2013)		S		D!	S	(D)
Null vs. pronoun subjects (Nagy 2015, Nagy, Iannozzi and Heap fc.)	D			D	S	

Table 1: Status of heritage languages as independent varieties, compared to patterns of linguistic differentiation (adapted from Nagy 2016) (FAE = Faetar, KOR = Korean, CAN = Cantonese, RUS = Russian, ITA = Italian, UKR = Ukrainian).

Rows 1-4 provide measures of successively increasing recognition of the variety. In the first row, languages for which a distinct language label, e.g. “Italese” or “Canadian Cantonese,” has been found are marked by “√.” In the second row, only Ukrainian is marked. It is the only language for which specific social or demographic attributes have been ascribed to the variety (in a Wikipedia entry, Wikipedia Contributors 2017). The third row indicates the languages for which studies, outside the HLVC project, have ascribed distinct linguistic features to the heritage (vs. homeland) variety, and the fourth row marks the one language, again Ukrainian, for which others have documented patterns of linguistic difference between heritage and homeland varieties (Hudyma 2011). For ease of interpretation, the languages are ranked from left to right in increasing order of recognition. We would expect, then, that the languages on the right side of the table (with more recognition as distinct varieties), particularly Ukrainian, would exhibit more linguistic distinctions (from their homeland variety) than those on the left.

To see whether this expectation is supported, previously published analyses of variation were compared. These are multivariate analyses that compare both the rates of null subjects (and the average for Voice Onset Time or VOT) and the relative effects of conditioning factors (see references in table) in order to determine whether there were significant differences between the heritage and homeland varieties of these languages, for these dependent variables. This is used as a (preliminary) diagnostic of contact-induced change. The second step, then, is to see whether there are cross-generational differences among heritage language speakers, indicating ongoing change. Of the comparisons conducted so far, only four of nine (marked with “D”) reveal differences be-

tween the homeland and heritage variety. Of these, the inter-generational differences are a mixed bag: we find significant differences (of rate and/or conditioning linguistic factors) for a pattern of overgeneralization of Cantonese classifiers and for Cantonese VOT, but not for Russian VOT nor Russian or Cantonese null-subject variation. Crucially, we do not find more inter-generational differences for the languages on the right side of Table 1 than on the left.

As comparison of the top and bottom of Table 1 illustrates, there is no clear correlation between differences in linguistic structures and differences in degree of recognition of an independent status of the variety in Toronto. The status of a linguistic variety, in terms of its recognition as an independent variety, does not appear to relate to the degree of difference. We are, of course, in the very early days of examining this correspondence and look forward to having more data points available. In the Ukrainian column, where we expect the most evidence, we have not yet located or conducted the necessary analyses of Homeland Ukrainian.

Furthermore, of the few cases where there *is* a difference between heritage and homeland varieties, only one, the pattern for Russian VOT (marked by “D!”) can be straightforwardly interpreted as an effect of contact with English -- later generations of speakers approach Canadian English norms. (The Ukrainian data might turn out to be in the same boat, but we have no homeland comparison available yet to confirm how VOT functions there – we are working on the assumption that it’s like Russian – as indicated by the parenthesized “D” for that language.) For the other variables considered so far, either differences between homeland and heritage varieties do not emerge or such differences cannot be attributed to English contact. And where we find see distinctions between homeland and heritage, we have yet to document an innovation that is expanding in each successive generation of heritage speakers (Nagy *forthcoming*).

In the cases of both VOT for Korean and null subjects for Faetar and for Russian, there is an additional important discovery from this work: while a change in progress was noted via apparent time comparison (Bailey et al. 1991) of speakers of different ages in the heritage variety, which might be interpreted as due to increasing contact with English, the same ongoing change was also found to exist in the homeland variety, where English does not play a role. Comparison with homeland (non-contact) varieties is essential, as noted by Thomason (2001) in research on potential effects of contact, in order to avoid drawing unwarranted conclusions of contact effects that are actually internal changes in the language. Of course, multiple causes are possible and it has been proposed that contact might accelerate pre-existing internal changes (cf. Clyne 2003, Fernández-Ordóñez 2012, Maandi 1989, Schmidt 1985, Silva-Corvalán 2004). To determine systematically if this might be the case, one approach would be to consider individual variation, comparing speakers with more contact with the dominant language to speakers with less. Evidence supporting a contact-induced effect, rather than internal change, would be in the form of significant differences in adoption of innovative forms by speakers with significantly different degrees of contact with the dominant language. This is the method we turn to next.

5 Results: The Effects of Ethnic Orientation on Linguistic Variation

Finally, we consider the relationship between patterns of linguistic variation and ethnic orientation scores, summarizing over cases where the possibility of contact effects of English on heritage languages were explored. Ethnic orientation scores reflect speakers’ use of and preference for linguistic and cultural practices representative of their heritage language (methods of calculation described in Section 2).

In a nutshell, Nagy et al. (2014) find no correlation between either of two linguistic variables (null subject) and (VOT) and ethnic orientation scores for individuals, nor any subset of the scores (e.g., just the scores relating to questions about language use) for any generation, nor for each language group as a whole. The languages investigated were Cantonese, Italian and Ukrainian. More recent data, involving Cantonese classifier use (Lo and Nagy 2016) and case-marking paradigms in Polish, Russian and Ukrainian (Lyskawa, Mordvinova and Nagy 2016), also exhibit this non-effect.

In an interesting contrast, Nagy et al. (2014) report the presence of correlation between linguistic patterns and ethnic orientation of exactly this type in the *English* spoken by a sample of different speakers from the same Cantonese and Italian communities. The project examining English in Toronto’s “ethnic enclaves” is described in Hoffman and Walker (2010). This highlights an

important consideration as we move toward investigation of smaller languages, which are considerably more likely to be in contact situations: social factors may well play different roles in subordinate and dominant languages, as noted by Stanford (2016:528).

6 Summary

It has been established in the literature (cf. Poplack, Zentz and Dion 2012, Thomason 2001) that just because language contact and linguistic change co-occur does not mean that an observed change is due to the contact. One way to strengthen an argument that a linguistic change is actually due to contact is to show that people with different patterns of use of each language in question and/or different attitudes toward the use of particular features (or varieties) produce quantitatively different linguistic patterns. Exploring such relationships from multiple perspectives, this paper has shown that, for a set of data collected via carefully controlled methods across a range of heritage languages spoken in Toronto, several of the expected relationships between patterns of linguistic variation and social factors relating to attitude and prestige are not upheld. Returning to the types of comparisons listed in (1-3), we have seen:

1. **Community level:** There is no relationship between the strength of ties to the outgroup and linguistic patterns in the heritage language that are, at least conceivably, contact-influenced.
2. **Generation level:** The status of a heritage language variety, in terms of its recognition as an independent variety, does not relate to the degree of (documented) difference between it and its homeland or source variety, nor between generations of heritage speakers.
3. **Individual level:** For four sociolinguistic variables (null subject, classifiers, case-marking and VOT), there is no correlation between individuals' rate of use of the more English-like forms and their ethnic orientation scores.

Milroy (1992:156) claims that the “‘in-group’ variant can be held to affirm group identity” and, as speakers develop more relatively weak ties in a multilingual heritage environment (vs. the homeland), “the in-group alternants would cease to have solidarity-affirming function for [them] and so could be abandoned” (Milroy 1992:157). That is, (some) in-group distinctions should fade with distance from the large (homeland) community. In other words, existing social-factor correlations to linguistic features should weaken with successive generations of heritage speakers.

Similarly, heritage language speakers should be expected to gradually adopt (new) internal changes to affirm their separate identity. These could be, but need not be, features due to contact with English.

In both of these cases, we might expect to see patterns both at the generational level and at the individual level (tied to individuals' ethnic orientation). We might also expect that this will happen differently in different communities, depending on how much contact is maintained with the homeland and how much each heritage community integrates into the city's fabric. The findings reported here are thus disappointing in terms of their inability to support Milroy's claims as we move beyond English.

There are other ways that the findings from this project diverge from the expected. I take this opportunity to note that, in the patterns of variation we have examined so far in these heritage languages, we find no support for claims of simplification of the minority language when in contact with a majority language. This contradicts, for example, this passage from Fernández-Ordóñez (2012:73-4):

The loss of previously existing distinctions seems to occur more easily in social situations where speakers of different languages or dialects colonize new territories, bringing their varieties into contact...Simply put, dialect contact usually implies altered replication, since the structural constraints are not wholly acquired in contact between adults.

Similarly, data discussed here contradict these types of comments in descriptions of heritage varieties (not based on quantitative comparison of linguistic patterns):

È evidente la semplificazione non solo del sistema verbale, ma più in generale la semplificazione delle strutture linguistiche, [...] la perdita di alcuni tratti (soprattutto a livello morfologico) (Palumbo 2014:31).

Simplification is evident in the verbal system and more generally in linguistic structure, losing certain features, especially at the morphological level.

L'italiano di emigrazione si presenta come [...] una varietà molto simile all'italiano popolare, [...] soggetta all'influenza della lingua di adstrato (Palumbo 2014:23).

The Italian of immigration is very similar to *Italiano Popolare*, subject to adstrate influence.

Stanford (2016:531), for example, points out that

multilingualism is the norm in many societies, and so a full understanding of language variation and change will need to include an emphasis on linguistically complex societies.

As we examine less dominant languages, we inevitably are more involved in issues of language contact. We must design our studies, and our interpretations, to benefit from the richness of these complex contexts. I hope that the observations collected here will inspire further work toward better understanding contact-induced language change, particularly relevant in the context of recent calls for expansion of variationist work beyond the most frequently studied languages.

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