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What Causes Intergenerational Language Shift in America?

American society has a complex and often hostile relationship with languages other than English, and in particular, the Spanish language. Despite the Hispanic population growing at a much faster pace than the non-Hispanic population in the U.S., English is generally still prized above all other languages, even though it has no official status as a national language (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Juan Perea, a legal scholar, once wrote that "the mere sound of Spanish offends and frightens many English-only speakers, who sense in the language a loss of control over what they regard as "their" country. Spanish also frightens many Latinos, for it proclaims their identity as Latinos for all to hear. The Latino fear is rational" (Perea, 1995, pg. 365–366). The American demand for English places an extreme pressure on Spanish-speaking families to conform linguistically, which is evident by the stark contrast between first-generation Hispanic Americans – who maintain fluency in Spanish — and the language loss seen in the third generation. Nearly all Hispanic Americans (95%) say that it's important that future generations speak Spanish (Pew Research Center 2012). Despite this, by the third generation, English use is dominant, and according to the Pew Hispanic Survey:

> Among immigrant Hispanics, two-thirds (65%) say they use Spanish when they think, 15% say they use English, and 18% say they use both English and Spanish. By the second generation, use of English rises to 63% and use of Spanish falls to 18%. By the third generation, eight-in-ten (80%) Latinos say they think in English, 13% say they think in Spanish, and 7% say they think in both languages equally" (Pew Research Center 2012)

The Hispanic-American intergenerational language shift is due to three main social and cultural factors: the English-dominant education system, societal influence, and economic pressures. However, despite these challenges, certain community conditions and family strategies allow

Spanish to be actively maintained and passed down across generations, demonstrating resilience even in an English-dominant country.

By enforcing English as the sole language of the classroom, American schools devalue the Spanish language and greatly affect third generation Hispanic Americans' ability to maintain their heritage language. This is part of a broader generational pattern of language decline, as families often feel that achieving educational success requires prioritizing English over Spanish (Hudson et al., 1995; pg.7). Research shows that second-generation speakers are much less confident in their Spanish fluency compared to first-generation speakers, further reflecting the effects of linguistic pressures to conform to English (Tseng, 2021, pg. 124). This is further emphasized by census data, which reveals a widespread language shift across the United States. In every state, Spanish language maintenance has decreased significantly compared to just a generation ago (Jenkins 2024; pg. 1). Without systemic bilingual support, bilingual Hispanic students are forced to navigate their education by using only half of their linguistic abilities, and there is pressure to conform to English-only as soon as children enter the school system, sometimes as early as age 4. Many parents, who've established Spanish as their home language, discover that their children develop a strong preference for English after entering the school system (Lutz 2007; pg. 45). This is because American education tends to view bilingualism as two separate "monolingualisms," and treats bilingual students as non-standard (Vallejo 2014; pg. 89). When Hispanic-American children enter schools where English is the sole language of instruction, they are encouraged to believe that their heritage language has little academic value. This monolingual-English centered system fails to support bilingual learners and even frames them as a barrier to achieving educational goals that prioritize English-only instruction. This devaluation of Spanish, reinforced by required, high-stakes English-only standardized testing, leads many students to view English as the exclusive language of success in education, while their family's language becomes relegated to in-home use, if it's maintained at all. America's English-only based school system not only restricts individual agency and undermines Spanish use in schools, but it also mirrors broader societal pressures that also greatly impact Spanish language maintenance.

Beyond the educational system, societal influences also cause Spanish language loss among Hispanic Americans. American society prioritizes English, and many white monolingual speakers view Spanish unfavorably, often perceiving it as undesirable due to underlying

prejudice against Latino communities. This bias can create conflicted or negative attitudes toward Spanish within families (Tseng, 2021, pg. 114). Mr. Sanchez, a Mexican-born father with three daughters who were born in the United States, illustrates this: “We basically spoke in Spanish, but because of peer pressure, [my daughters] felt that they need to speak more English. So, amongst themselves they spoke in English. My middle daughter basically refused to speak the language and throughout her junior [high], I guess, 7th, 8th, 9th grade, she, again because of peer pressure, she wouldn't” (Lutz 2007; pg. 47). Specific social pressures that discourage Spanish language maintenance include media consumption, peer pressure, and day-to-day interactions. Younger generations are much more immersed in the English digital world of social media, movies, music, and online content than previous generations of Hispanic Americans; consuming all of these different mediums in English-only can all make their heritage language seem irrelevant or unimportant, and unfortunately, Spanish-use can lead to bullying, racism, or even violence. Additionally, societal attitudes that make English monolingualism seen as "more American" create pressure to abandon heritage languages in favor of English, especially for immigrant families seeking acceptance in their new communities. Many parents begin teaching English in their homes’, while trying to use little Spanish, which leads to English completely replacing their native language within just a few generations. Many families that ideally would like their children to be bilingual find that their children’s desire to speak English well, along with societal influences that prioritize "accentless English", leads them to deprioritize their heritage language (Lutz 2007; pg. 39). This pattern accentuates how social pressures and how the American language hierarchy gradually undermines efforts to maintain the Spanish language, and reshapes families’ linguistic choices over time. Overall, the intergenerational shift to English monolingualism reflects the immense societal and systemic pressures on later-generations of Hispanic families to speak English-only.

Economic pressures could be considered the most pragmatic driver of intergenerational language shift; Hispanic families often have to make decisions about linguistic priorities based on their financial realities and perceptions. Spanish speakers face a double standard in American workplaces, where their Spanish is often viewed with distrust and prejudice; yet paradoxically, many businesses actively seek out bilingual workers to serve Spanish-speaking customers, creating conflicting pressures around Spanish use in professional settings (Lutz 2007; pg. 56). While the use of Spanish can subject a person to significant disadvantages in the United States –

such as job termination, lack of promotions, and social exclusion (Valdes 253) – it can also be a major benefit since many employers actively seek bilingual workers to serve diverse customer bases and expand their market reach in an increasingly globalized economy. While bilingualism is praised rhetorically, in reality, the realities of the job market encourage Latino parents to believe that English proficiency should be their primary concern. They think this because the American job market tends to reward strong English communication skills above all else—often offering better employment opportunities and higher wages to those deemed fluent, which are often accentless speakers. Consequently, many parents prioritize English language acquisition and use less Spanish as a result, as they view English as essential for their children's professional success and upward mobility in an English-dominant job market. This unfortunately means many families decide to make the difficult choice to emphasize English, viewing heritage language maintenance as a luxury they cannot afford in their pursuit of financial stability, overall leading to intergenerational language loss.

Spanish speakers are more likely to face linguistic discrimination and language loss in public spaces dominated by white Americans, and vice versa. This means that in regions where Hispanic heritage and culture is prevalent, research shows that the preservation of the Spanish language can and does extend well beyond the third generation. White public space is when racial authority is constructed through “intense monitoring of the speech of racialized populations… for signs of linguistic disorder” and the “invisibility of almost identical signs in the speech of Whites” (Hill 198l; pg. 680). Certain states such as Texas and New Mexico have higher percentages of Hispanic populations and comparatively fewer non-Hispanic white residents than many other parts of the United States; the demographic composition in these regions, and hence the imbalance of white public space, significantly influences language retention. These demographics create a unique environment in America where Spanish is not only spoken at home but also prevalent in public spaces; here, Spanish proficiency can be seen as a communal asset and a marker of belonging. The widespread use of Spanish in daily interactions, businesses, media, and community events reduces the pressure to conform to the dominant English language, therefore leading to an increase in language maintenance. Studies by Anderson-Mejías (2005) and Villa & Rivera-Mills (2009) highlight this specific phenomenon. Anderson-Mejias found that Spanish was maintained into the 5th generation in Texas, and Villa & Rivera Mills found Spanish maintenance into the 7th generation in New Mexico. Their

findings accentuate that cultural activities, traditions, and community solidarity can significantly slow down the process of language loss. Where Hispanic heritage is not only widespread but actively celebrated, Spanish remains a vital part of daily life; this sustained cultural environment provides frequent and meaningful opportunities for language use, reinforcing its value to younger generations, leading to language maintenance.

Additionally, family dynamics and the language spoken at home is decisive for maintaining the Spanish language because the home is where a person's early socialization occurs and it plays a crucial role in developing ones' linguistic abilities. The home environment, and the language modeled there, directly influences whether a child's native language is maintained or gradually replaced by English-only. In Felipe Valerio's dissertation, he describes and analyzes his efforts to teach Spanish to [his] child, Jose (1980; pg. vii). He states that language learning and concept development are "gradual, active processes" and "children are creative, active learners" who's linguistic development is completely dependent on which language(s) they engage in on a day-to-day basis. While these family-based efforts to maintain heritage languages face numerous challenges in an English-dominant society, they have proven resilient and effective over time. Overall, the individual efforts of Hispanic families in America to maintain their heritage language, whether it is for social, cultural, economic, or educational reasons, have greatly contributed to the persistence of the Spanish language.

Despite the significant educational, societal, and economic pressures that encourage English monolingualism, research also suggests that bilingualism among Hispanic Americans remains strong, and that some of these pressures are becoming less prevalent in today's America. A study by Daniel Erker and Ricardo Otheguy (2021), which examined the language use of 331 Spanish speakers, 269 immigrants to the United States and 62 native-born individuals, through questionnaires and sociolinguistic interviews, found that even though bilingual speakers have different linguistic variations from monolinguals, these differences do not necessarily signify language limitation; differences observed in the language use of bilinguals compared to monolinguals don't necessarily indicate language erosion. Overall, they identified three key grammatical features of Spanish that are consistently maintained across generations, that they describe as reflecting the flawless continuity and considerable strength of both individual and community bilingualism (230). Their research also revealed that the linguistic differences between immigrant generations are much smaller than generally believed. Essentially, this means

that concerns about Spanish language loss can sometimes be overstated, and even under pressure to speak English-only, Hispanic communities are keeping important parts of Spanish grammar alive across generations. Instead of considering these changes a loss of language, this presents a perspective that this generational shift instead represents how bilingualism remains strong and flexible in the face of adversity.

However, while Erker and Otheguy's research highlights the resilience of bilingualism within certain contexts, the factors discussed earlier in this paper — English-dominated education systems, social pressures to assimilate, and economic incentives to prioritize English — continue to impact language maintenance among many Hispanic Americans. It is important to accentuate that the findings of this paper do not represent the experiences of all Hispanic American individuals in the United States, nor does it assume that every child born to Spanish-speaking parents will be influenced by the particular factors discussed. Rather, it serves as a comprehensive lens through which we can more fully understand three factors that contribute to language loss within Hispanic families, as well as two key factors that help support the maintenance of the Spanish language.The persistence of bilingualism among Hispanic Americans reflects the strength of individual and familial efforts to maintain Spanish in a country that has historically prioritized English monolingualism and often views heritage language maintenance with skepticism or outright hostility. In no way does this resilience negate the significant challenges posed by systemic, societal, and economic pressures, which still lead to language loss for many. A nuanced understanding of the Hispanic American intergenerational language shift recognizes the barriers to language maintenance, and the enduring strength of language continuity, and the importance of protecting one's heritage language. Overall, a multifaceted understanding of the challenges that Hispanic Americans face is crucial for developing policies, laws, and educational practices that will truly support linguistic diversity while also addressing the obstacles that persist in America.

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