

Understanding bilingualism and language change in heritage languages: research and public engagement

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Recent research on bilingualism with heritage languages points to three interesting directions. First, the native language (L1) of first-generation migrant speakers changes in a selective and potentially reversible way, which is not always due to cross-linguistic influence. L1 changes affect structures that require efficient integration of information across (syntactic, pragmatic and contextual) domains and (partly) depend on the interaction of linguistic knowledge and cognitive control; the result is increased selective variation, which can become more widespread in communities through processes of alignment in communication. Second, we see a convergence between L1 changes and L2 acquisition: the aspects of L1 grammar that become variable are the same that remain variable even in highly proficient L2 speakers of the same language. These findings point to a potential ecology of L2 learning and L1 change: L1 change is a natural effect of language contact, in bilingual individuals and in bilingual communities, and may be functional to the attainment of L2 proficiency. Third, language change in first-generation speakers has an impact on intergenerational transmission: child bilingualism in heritage languages necessarily relies on parental/adult input affected by these changes, with both short-term and long-term consequences. Understanding the big picture requires a better understanding of the bilingual experience, and interdisciplinary research on different aspects of bilingualism that combines the insights of linguistic, cognitive and social models. In addition, building bridges between research and society can have reciprocal effects: social decisions on bilingualism can benefit from access to research, and research itself can benefit from public engagement.