

Dying a slow death: Tracing the complexities of language use, loss,
and persistence in the Spanish of South Texas

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Numerous studies have documented Spanish-English generational language shift in various regional contexts in the United States. Taken together, the findings from these studies stand in contrast to the popular belief that Spanish is gaining, rather than losing, speakers and influence in the United States over time. Nevertheless, most studies have focused on either the gradual loss of Spanish over time, or on the generational transformation of a limited set of morphosyntactic features. Few quantitative studies, in contrast, have attended explicitly to the theoretical paradox that the opposing realities of Spanish in the U.S. present: moribundity, on the one hand, and tenacious persistence on the other. The current investigation of “Las Alas,” a longstanding majority Mexican American community in South Texas, extends and nuances the tradition of attrition analysis in variationist sociolinguistics by paying attention to the theoretical complexity of Spanish attrition and by focusing on a new domain of variables.

In order to formally demonstrate these complexities we present an analysis of morphosyntactic simplification and prosodic evolution in the speech of 40 Las Alas residents representing three generations of speakers. These analyses are complemented by the results of a language-use and attitudes survey conducted with 140 middle school children and 80 adults. A traditional sociolinguistic analysis of morphosyntactic variation shows a typical three-generation pattern of Spanish attrition within the community, in addition to providing evidence of English influence on Spanish there. This was demonstrated through: 1. variation in the use of preterite and imperfect verbs; 2. loss of simple present and expansion of present progressive forms; 3. competition between *ser* and *estar* and; 4. the common use of complex calques, borrowings, and neologisms. Gold Varb analyses of the first three variables show a loss in the selection restrictions for both past tense verbs and present tense verbs and for copular adjectives among the youngest speakers. Overall, simplification in syntactic complexity in Spanish, as measured by sentence length and clausal density, is also evident for the younger speakers. Recent work in sociophonetics has shown that some varieties of Latino English tend to be more syllable-timed than non-Latino varieties, possibly indicating a Spanish substrate effect in the domain of prosody, but to date, this analysis has not been extended to the Spanish of Spanish-English bilinguals. Correspondingly, we argue here that attention to suprasegmentals plays a vital role in the overall investigation of attrition and, as a result, we analyze the prosodic rhythm of each speaker using the Pairwise Variability Index, a method that quantifies syllable- and stress-timing by comparing the duration of adjacent syllables while controlling for speaking rate. For this analysis, over 200 syllable-to-syllable measurements were taken for each speaker. Results show an increase in stress-timing in the youngest generation. Despite the clear evidence of language loss overall, however, positive attitudes toward Spanish are evident among speakers of all ages within the community, as reported in the language survey.

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