

Language Attitudes and Use Among Hungarians in North Carolina

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The connection between the attitudes held by a bilingual toward each of his or her languages and his or her use of those languages has been studied for many years, often in connection with the framework of ethnolinguistic vitality (EV) first set forth by Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor (1977). These types of studies generally focus more on immigrant bilingual communities outside the United States than on those within it, and even less so on non-Hispanic communities in the United States.

This study focuses on language attitude and use surveys completed by a relatively small immigrant community comprising members of the Hungarian Clubs of the Raleigh-Durham area and Elkin, NC. The surveys included forty Likert-type statements concerning participants' attitudes toward Hungarian and American cultures and languages, as well as thirty-eight categories of usage within different domains and with different interlocutors for which participants responded regarding use of Hungarian, English, and mixed codes. Several statement clusters were formed regarding identification with each culture and language as well as regarding their use in order to examine patterns. Seventy-five surveys were collected over the course of a year from first- and second-generation participants ages 8 to 82, from all levels of education, who have lived in the United States between one and 52 years. Chi-square tests were performed in order to examine potential patterns across sociolinguistic factor groups with regard to participants' responses.

Patterns emerged within the data that seem to contradict what some researchers have found regarding the interplay of attitudes and use in immigrant communities. Although objective EV factors such as institutional support and group numbers are low for this group, there is a high level of maintenance of Hungarian identity within the attitude responses. In fact, the attitudes of the participants show almost no statistically significant differences across sociolinguistic factors such as age, length of residence, level of education, and occupation. Low levels of heritage cultural maintenance have generally been shown to correspond to a quick transition to the societal language, while high levels have been seen to slow or even stop this process (Bentahila 1983; Karahan 2004), a pattern that does not occur in this population. Though Hungarian identity maintenance is high among all groups, language use appears to be experiencing a shift to English between the first and second generations as well as in all domains.

This study finds that a minority cultural group can maintain its heritage cultural identity in the face of stiff opposition from many objective ethnolinguistic vitality factors that promote language shift, but also that, in the case of this group, maintenance of that identity may not be enough to prevent or even slow the progress toward a generational language shift. This suggests that cultural clubs in the United States may aid in the preservation of heritage identities but may be unsuccessful in preserving the heritage languages of immigrant populations, though more studies of these types of populations must be done in order to determine whether this is truly a meta-pattern for the United States.

References

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