

How much English is used in your HL community?

Dr. Olenka Bilash

Some call it language shift (Fishman, 1991); others refer to it as language transfer or assimilation. Either way it describes the phenomenon of a person’s or community’s change from using one dominant language to another. Most immigrants and refugees typically arrive in another country with a mother tongue (MT) that is the dominant language of their home country (or perhaps several languages from their home country, one used in the home and the other for business transactions). The MT continues to be the dominant language of interaction in their new homeland until, slowly but surely, they learn the language of their adopted country and begin to use both languages. Sometimes they use their MT in the home and at cultural gatherings and the language of the majority in their adopted country and their work world. The language of the majority in Alberta is usually English; in Quebec it would be French, in Germany German, in Japan Japanese and in Brazil Portuguese. No matter where the immigrant is from or to where s/he immigrates the pattern is the same – the use of the MT of the immigrant decreases as the use of the dominant or majority language increases until the majority language begins to dominate and future generations can no longer communicate in the language.

Code switching

Sometimes use of the language of the home becomes a segregated use of both the MT and English with the MT being used during mealtimes or when talking to relatives and English being the medium when discussing news, watching TV or reading. Eventually the two languages blend together and people begin to use words or phrases from both languages when they talk. This is called code switching. Code switching often begins by unconsciously throwing in English words or phrases that capture

meaning accurately and quickly and that they know everyone will understand.

For the children of immigrants or refugees, code switching may not be a choice of language use, but the only language that they have heard. Hence, we hear that people speak Spanglish, Franglais. . .or Chenglish. The more mixing of the two languages you hear the more you can see evidence of language shift taking place. At first only new words or lexical items enter the flow of communication but from generation to generation one sees and hears that the morphology and syntax of the language are also greatly influenced by the dominant language. And language shift has occurred!

A slow and subtle process

Language shift creeps up on people slowly and unnoticeably, and may even be considered “cute” when, for example, older generations mix a few English words in their MT. But soon a whole community can find itself having shifted language use: the older generation is the only one which confidently uses the language in any setting, orally or in written form. The next generation may be able to understand, speak, read and write but has fallen out of the habit of doing so, except with the older generation. The next generation, possibly born abroad, perhaps in their thirties or forties may be able to understand the language but not able to speak it and the younger school age generation may know only a few words in what has become known as the heritage language (HL). In Canada “(l)anguage loss is an unavoidable fact of life in almost all linguistic groups, especially if there is no replenishment of the linguistic pool by immigration” (Prokop, 2004, p.3). Fishman (1991) has developed a grid to help language communities recognize the state of its language’s health. See Chart 1 below.

Chart 1: Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) can help communities locate the range of language use in their community:

Stage 8	only seniors speak the minority language
Stage 7	the minority language is used by seniors, for rituals and in modest intergenerational visiting; language users are beyond child-bearing age
Stage 6	the minority language is used in interfamily interaction (between generations and between families)
Stage 5	guided literacy development in the home, school and community in the minority language
Stage 4	the minority language is used as the language of instruction in the elementary school (complying with compulsory education laws)
Stage 3	the minority language is used in selective workplaces
Stage 2	the minority language is used in lower governmental services and in the media
Stage 1	the minority language is used in many occupations, in governmental and media efforts and as the language of instruction at the post-secondary level

How much English is used in your HL community? Cont. Dr. Olenka Bilash

Impact of language shift

Language shift or loss is not only inevitable but also has consequences for the social relationships between generations of a family and community. Interaction between the younger and older generations may be minimized because they do not share a common language and along with that a loss of family stories and a shift in identity. Since culture and values are embedded in language a cultural gap develops and sometimes even parents and children find that they are speaking a different language in both literal and metaphoric senses. Worst, if the two generations do not share a language of comparable strength, communication may also break down between them, especially at an emotional level. Given that every teenage generation already strives to mark its presence in the society such as through the creation of their own music, dress and vernacular (e.g. "cool" once meant a temperature between warm and cold but now also means "appealing"; "awesome" once meant something that fills one with awe but now also means "very appealing"), language shift may exacerbate the emotional distance.

Language shift in Alberta

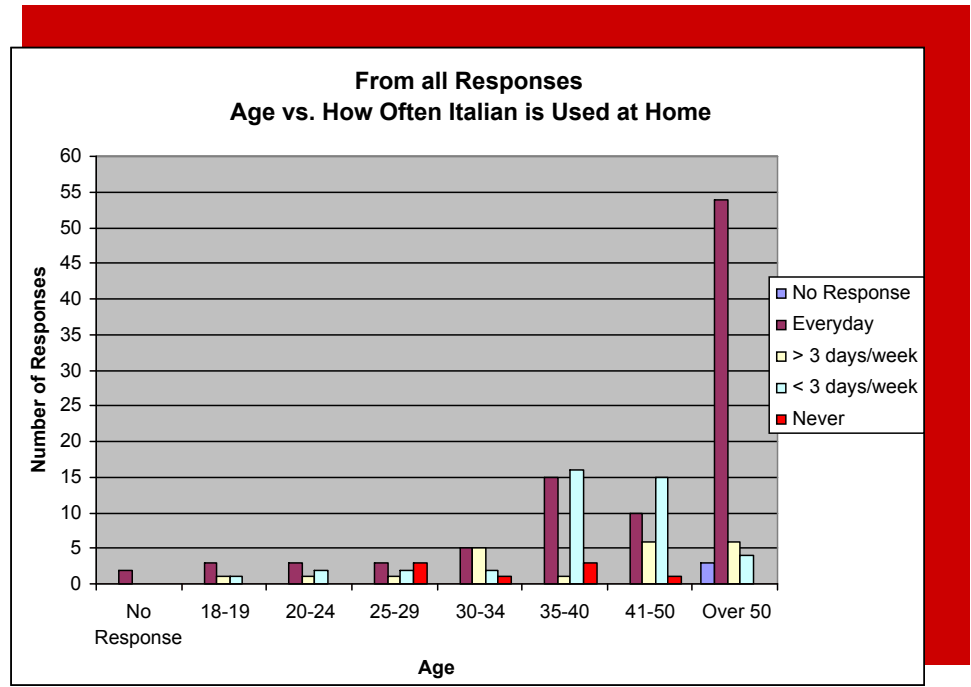
Can you see evidence of code switching or language shift in yourself, your family or your community? I expect so because research of some of my graduate students has confirmed language shift in several HL communities in the Edmonton area, notably the Master's studies of Valeria Palladino, Katerina Chronopolous, and Douglas Mauricio Salegio.

Palladino's study (2005)

Palladino's study explored the attitudes and perceptions of Italian speakers towards the use of the Italian language in their everyday life as well as their sense of identity and belonging to their community. Her study had the support of community leaders, and asked adult members of the Italian community of Edmonton to complete a four-section anonymous written questionnaire that was distributed at community meetings and/or through mail.

In terms of cultural retention, respondents in Palladino's study were unanimously aware of Italian activities, centres and events that are celebrated throughout the year, both on religious and lay occasions in the community although they reported that English was the language mostly used by the great majority of Italian community members during such functions and events. When asked about personal beliefs about the importance of speaking Italian, 92% of all respondents indicated that speaking Italian is important to communicate with family members and friends in Italy; 51% to speak with family and friends in Canada; 77% indicated that speaking the language was important to feel connected with their Italian origins. As Figure 3 reveals, frequency of use of Italian decreases with age (Palladino, 2005, p. 62). Palladino's research also explored the complex use of dialects in the Italian community and concluded that language ability was strongest among those born in Italy; the older they were when they arrived in Canada, the greater their language ability; and the more education they experienced in Italy the stronger was their language ability.

Figure 3



How much English is used in your HL community? Cont.

Dr. Olenka Bilash

All respondents indicated pride in being Italian, with a large majority also indicating pride in possessing Canadian citizenship as well. Written comments about their dual identities repeatedly noted: valuing one's roots, appreciating the possibility of raising one's family in a culture like the Canadian one, which is so openly accepting of other cultures from all over the world. They associated being Italian with the following: family, family values, a sense of sacrifice and being hard-working, people and relationships came first, followed by food, soccer and famous people and cities around the world.

Despite the fact that the Italian language Saturday school of Edmonton continues to hold a strong presence in the community with its weekly courses for adults and children of all ages and the Italian as a second language program in the Catholic school district has a range of courses from Kindergarten to grade 12, the actual everyday use of the Italian language and presence in the community through media and at social gatherings is waning. The statistics and responses suggest that language shift has already occurred in the Italian community; however, the strong sense of identity that respondents expressed toward their heritage, regardless of their place of birth, age or preferred language of use suggests potential for reversing language shift.

Chronopoulos' study (2008)

Chronopoulos' study aimed to learn more about the language habits and values towards the Greek language and culture held by various generations in an Alberta Greek community and involved surveys being completed by students of Greek community or HL schools and their parents and teachers. A synopsis of the results follow.

In parent and teacher questionnaires, participants were asked which language(s) they believe their child hears and from whom. According to parents, the two members who speak the most Greek to their child are grandmothers (63%) and grandfathers (47%), revealing that the older generations, most likely to be direct immigrants from Greece, retain the highest level of Greek language (50% of the parents' mothers were born in Greece, and 50% of parents' fathers were born in Greece). According to questionnaire responses, parents (41%) and teachers (83%) are most likely to always speak Greek to their mothers. Teachers also have similar practices with their fathers (83%). Considering that over 60% of teachers' fathers and 80% of parents' mothers were born in Greece, compared to over 50% of parents' fathers and mothers, teachers are more likely to speak Greek with their parents at home. Students reported that they speak the most Greek with their mother, father, and grandparents. Students are also more likely to speak to grandparents (grandmothers in particular) in Greek all the time. These older generations who

speak the Greek language are a great resource for children trying to learn the Greek language. The grandmother, especially, seems to be the greatest resource for Greek language.

When parents and teachers were asked how much Greek they speak in the home,

0% of parents and 17% of teachers responded "only Greek", over 80% of teachers "mostly" speak Greek at home and about 30% of parents "rarely" speak Greek at home. As in Palladino's study, frequency of language use seems to be correlated with place of birth and perception of language ability: parents and teachers born in Greece (under 20% of the total number of parents and 33% of all teacher respondents) use more Greek in the home than those born in Canada.

Another statistic that revealed the paucity of language use in the community came from responses to questions about use of Greek outside the home: 83% of teachers and 41% of parents report that they rarely speak Greek outside their homes (p. 51). On the question of frequency of use of the Greek language, 58% of secondary-level students reported that they speak Greek a few times a week at home while 35% of elementary-level students self report that they perceive that they speak Greek at home less than three days a week. (p.53)

When asked about their Greek reading habits, parents and teachers identified school newsletters as the main thing they read (the list of options included Greek newspapers, Greek-Canadian newspapers, Greek magazines, Greek books, Greek websites/emails, and newsletters). Sadly school newsletters are mostly written in English since so many parents do not speak Greek. The second highest ranking of materials read by parents fell to church bulletins, newsletters, and prayer books. For teachers, Greek magazines, websites, and emails took the second highest spot. "These low percentages raise a number of pertinent questions: is reading material available to Greek speakers of all ages? At the appropriate and language ability level? Is there enough at-home reading time? Do students read in English or lack the habit of literacy? At the time of the questionnaire distribution, there was no library available to the public (nor was there an active borrowing system implemented at the Greek school) and teachers noted that there is a dearth of reading materials available for their students at the reading level of the learners." (Chronopoulos, 2008, p. 55)



How much English is used in your HL community? Cont.

Dr. Olenka Bilash

Salegio's study (1999)

Salegio's study of Spanish use among parents and children in the local Hispanic community confirms the challenges of HL maintenance and the viral nature of language shift.

Some native Spanish speaking parents expressed surprised that their children, whether born in Latin America or here, could not speak Spanish. Yet, they seemed unable to hear the amount of English spoken in their homes, amongst their children and were unaware that they occasionally respond to their children's English language responses to their Spanish questions, in English!

In a set of interviews with 20 mixed lingual couples he learned that brothers and sisters speak English amongst themselves and that a number of them also speak English with their parents. Children speak to their parents in English while responding to Spanish thoughts and requests. The result is that these children understand basic Spanish in order to communicate with their parents and extended families at home, but are unable to produce the language with other people and in other Spanish settings – an example of what Cummins (1987) called subtractive bi-lingualism. Furthermore, overwhelmed by the urgencies of survival, some parents seem to prefer English in the home so that they can practice it with/through their children. Consciousness of the powerful dominance of English and how the consequences of their language behaviour will limit the language ability of their own children is low.

In addition, some participants argued that to maintain their native language and culture does not make sense, likely unable to see that the denial of their own cultural identity may impact the identity formation of their children. Finally, some parents really tried to keep language and culture within the family. They work hard to overcome difficulties, including the main and gigantic obstacle - the dominance of English.

In spite of the attitude taken, there frequently comes a point when some parents become concerned that their children have lost their ability to speak their language. In most cases, the language was lost well before it was noticed. Children need other children with whom to communicate in the HL and many parents do not realize how much effort, emotional energy and time it takes to parent in a language that is not widely spoken or heard in a metropolitan centre. Salegio recommends being what Bilash (1999) calls an informed parent. She extends the notion of second language teachers using an "informed eclectic approach" or one that is grounded in second language theory and research to the domain of parents. For Salegio becoming an informed parent meant:

1. Learning how language is learned in early childhood through reading, courses and discussion.
2. Learning how to stand up to and remain faithful to bilingual parenting in the face of the omnipresence of English.
3. Learning how to "act" on what was learned.

Reversing Language Shift (RLS)

These studies were conducted as surveys with a broad multigenerational audience in order to observe and assess changes in language use across generations. They all reveal that the three communities in question – Italian, Greek and Spanish - could benefit from strategies of revitalizing its use in local communities through events and technology.

Because the language used by a child's mother at the start of his/her life "best predicts (his/her) future language use" (Lyon, 1996 p. 110), and because most females, in traditional or modern family units, are considered the primary culture transmitters, the HL proficiency of females is considered more important than that of males. Overall, the HL proficiency of youth, especially in their child bearing years, holds the future of a HL community. Put another way, young people who have strong language abilities, cultural knowledge and identify positively with the community are its insurance policy!



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Dr. Olenka Bilash

Obligatory and optional language use as belonging to a community

Assessing language shift is not an easy process as language use is knitted into one's identity. David Crystal (2000) describes this relationship of language and identity as obligatory and optional. Community members who feel that they cannot belong to the community without speaking the language feel obliged to learn and use it. One who does not speak the language, however, does not feel the same sense of belonging.

The concept of language as an optional dimension of identity and community belonging likely applies to many younger members of HL communities. If an individual does not speak the language, there still remain other elements to support an identity in an ethnic or language community. In terms of language revitalization, a balance between the two concepts remains ideal: "If a community adopts the obligatory view, it will expect revitalization to be focused on matters directly to do with language – language teaching resources and training...If it adopts the optional view, it will expect revitalization to be focused on matters to do with the culture – providing social welfare, for example or introducing measures to boost the economy" (Crystal, 2000, p. 124).

Motivation and Attitudes

RLS is an individual and community choice. At an individual level motivation and attitude are paramount. Motivation can be seen as integrative and instrumental (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Learners with integrative motivation learn a language specifically for the purpose of integrating into a language community; families who have experienced language loss or individuals entering the community through marriage will seek opportunities to learn the HL in order to belong and contribute to the community. Learners with instrumental motivation learn the language to provide greater career opportunities and possibly higher salaries. Studies show that many families send their children to French immersion programs in order to increase their future employment opportunities. Of course, things are not always so clearly delineated. For example, some students at higher grade levels may be motivated to attend a HL school in order to obtain high grades and high school credits (instrumental motivation), and not think about learning, developing or maintaining the language for its more intrinsic value (integrative motivation). Integrative motivation is necessary for forward momentum. The celebrations and festivals cannot take place if one is not ready and willing to foster the development of a language, which requires both personal

involvement and a responsibility to both the language and wider communities.

A positive attitude is also extremely necessary for successful RLS. "Within a community, attitudes will be mixed: some members will be in favour of preservation, others will be against it. There will be pride, apathy, guilt, denial, regret, and many other emotions. Moreover, the reasons for support and opposition will be mixed (Crystal, 2000, p. 103). In some situations, families may not feel the HL has helped them to gain anything in the economic sense, or as Salegio's study suggests, may not see the threatened language holding any sort of value. Attitude, Crystal (2000) states, is what counts: "If speakers take pride in their language, enjoy listening to others using it well, use it themselves whenever they can and as creatively as they can, and provide occasions when the language can be heard, the conditions are favourable for maintenance" (Crystal, 2000, p. 81).

There are two different approaches to language revitalization. The first form involves larger language groups, in which government politics and wide-reaching language programs allow for viable RLS. If the language is applied on a nation-scale with a great deal of funding and government support, language revitalization can occur and be strengthened by daily practices. The second form applies to smaller language groups whose languages will never be able to serve as a language of wider communication outside of the small community of speakers. For these groups, "much inventiveness, energy, and dedication are needed to manage RLS. It is a superhuman task, but one to which an increasing number of people are passionately dedicated" (Hinton & Hale, 2001, p. 4).

Bilash's *The rocky road to RLS in a Cree community in Canada* (2004) reveals how a Cree Bilingual program was able to eventually move a small isolated Cree community from GIDS Stages Six-Seven to Stages Four-Five. Through concerted efforts of school board officials, school administration, teachers, elder language assistants, teacher materials developers, an external expert consultant, parents and learners over five years positive outcomes were noted and direction for future initiatives identified. Although the RLS initiative produced evidence of increased self esteem of learners, "(l)iving a process of RLS is fraught with questions of sustainability." (Bilash, 2004) The project team had to consistently seek external funding, develop resources with no models to refer to, "conscientize (Freire, 1970) the community to issues of language loss and possibilities of RLS" (Bilash, 2004), and develop habits of literacy in the community.

So if language shift has already began, can it be reversed?

How much English is used in your HL community? Cont.

Dr. Olenka Bilash

What would it take? Work at three levels is required: that of the community, the family and the individual.

At all three levels consciousness raising is the most important strategy. People only change habits if they have to (external pressures) or want to (internal desire). External rules or laws can make people change language use, even though not happily, as we saw in Quebec when Bill 63 was passed in 1969 as an attempt to address a number of issues, including a school board in the Montreal Italian immigrant suburb of St-Leonard that had decided that all children whose mother tongue was not English would have to go to French schools. Naturally, external pressure angers people so it is more desirable to present logical arguments that will convince people of the value of change and provide them with some support during the challenging time of change.

In reversing language shift the challenge is great because most people are not aware that they are codeswitching, or that their children are answering them in English. . . Once people are convinced of the implications of using more English and committed to the need for a change, the process becomes easier, but it is never quick!

What can you do?

The approaching holiday season offers an opportunity to reflect on the policies and practices of language use in your home, between families and generations, in your schools and community. Could everyone use a bit more of the HL? Or has the shift to English already taken place? As your school breaks for the vacation you may wish to offer tips to parents about their responsibility in increasing use of the HL in their homes.

1. When your child uses an English phrase amongst a conversation in the HL 'echo' the same phrase back to him/her in the HL. Such a 'recast' models accurate language use.
2. When your child uses English and you know that s/he can express that idea in the HL remind them to speak the HL. Such a 'directive' can be annoying to the parent and the child, but will pay off in the long run. My adult children now greatly appreciate those reminders and acknowledge how important they were to their HL development.
3. In a season of gift giving can you include HL books, magazines, comics or music? Many ethnic stores in the Edmonton area will carry such products.

4. When you are having guests over can you softly play some HL music in the background? It will be a conversation piece for guests whether they speak the HL or not.
5. Take some time on your computer and find interesting and language level appropriate HL websites that you can show your students or children. Sit with them and talk about the photos or symbols on the website.
6. If you can afford to travel back to your homeland, and if it is safe to do so, then take your children for as long as possible when they are as young as possible. As long as the children are exposed to the language they will learn it rapidly. Many parents want to wait until they think that children are old enough to 'remember' a trip. Of course, such a trip is indeed a wonderful family event, but language development and the habit of use begins at the youngest possible age.

Longer term projects may also be worth mentioning to parents or community leaders:

1. When my children were young I started a pre-school play-school on Saturday mornings. A group of families rented a community centre and parents came with their children to 'play' together in the HL. Yes, not only children playing with children, but parents playing with one another's children. We had access to toys, blocks, books, puppets and imagination.
2. Heritage language schools are also an important ingredient in this scenario. Teachers pass on their love of language and culture and act as important role models for the next generation.
3. Many communities have or could have the equivalents of boy scouts or girl guides in their HL. Contact with the organization in their home country can provide many resources to help launch this engaging youth activity.
4. Play dates with children who speak the HL is another way of insuring that in addition to playing with neighbourhood friends, your children also play with HL speakers. Don't doubt the value of traveling across the city to enable your child to meet up with other HL speakers!



How much English is used in your HL community? Cont. Dr. Olenka Bilash

5. Community events can be established as multigenerational gatherings that are HL only events. Friday evening family dinners at community halls with music playing in the background can also be a good fundraiser. Language use is the goal of the event; self discipline is the challenge!
6. Once you have the event and venue you must be sure that there are more HL speakers present than not and insure that all who are there are willing to follow the policy or directive of only using the HL.

In closing let me wish you all a very happy holiday season and best wishes for the New Year. Remember that the best gift you can give your children is YOU – your time, knowledge, stories, traditions and language.

If you or your school or community is interested in conducting a study about language use or shift please feel free to contact me at olenka.bilash@ualberta.ca OR the IHLA office.

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