Passing on the ancestral language

by Martin Turcotte

Many immigrants feel that teaching their own mother tongue to their Canadian-born children is of paramount importance. Aside from the cultural value that maintaining a linguistic identity provides, research suggests that learning the ancestral language may afford children with some socio-economic benefits. First, the knowledge of additional languages is increasingly recognized as a significant asset.[1] Second, proficiency in both an official and a non-official language, along with a strong ethnic identity, can in some cases play a role in children's academic success.[2] And, third, in neighbourhoods with a high proportion of immigrants, fluency in an ancestral language can enable participation in ethnic businesses and social life.[3]

Using data from the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS), this article examines the preservation of ancestral languages by looking at the extent to which allophone immigrants (i.e. those whose mother tongue is neither English nor French) have transmitted their mother tongue to their Canadian-born children. Data in this analysis come from interviewing Canadian-born persons aged 15 and over whose parents were allophone immigrants. For simplicity, these individuals are referred to in the article as *respondents*. The analysis focuses on the factors associated with the probability of the ancestral language being the respondent's mother tongue, the respondent's ability to speak the ancestral language, and his or her regular use of this language in the home.

Few children can converse in their grandparents' mother tongue

According to a number of studies in the United States, the knowledge and use of ancestral languages tend to disappear rather quickly among children of immigrants. In general, these studies found that most grandchildren had virtually no understanding of the mother tongue of their immigrant grandparents.[4] Is the transmission of ancestral languages to subsequent generations similar in Canada or does one find an appreciable difference?

According to the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS), 64% of respondents learned their parents' ancestral language first in childhood. A larger proportion, 74%, reported that they were able to carry on a conversation in their parents' mother tongue. This gap may seem surprising until one considers that some individuals acquired their parents' mother tongue after learning another language—mostly English or French—in childhood (16%), while others lost the ability to carry on a conversation in their first language (5%).

Once children grow up and leave their parents' home, their use of the ancestral language shows a marked decline. According to data from the 2002 EDS, only 32% of respondents used their parents' mother tongue regularly in their own home. This proportion further drops (to 20%) when examining only those who had children aged 3 to 17. And even in this last group, not all taught their children the ancestral language: just 11% of respondents reported that their youngest child could carry on a conversation in their grandparents' mother tongue. It is possible that, in some cases, parents speak the ancestral language with each other, but use English or French with their children.

Outside the home, 16% of respondents spoke the ancestral language regularly with their friends, and 12% of those in the labour market used it regularly in the workplace.

Data in this article come from the 2002 Ethnic Diversity Survey (EDS). The survey's target population consisted of persons aged 15 and over living in private households in the 10 provinces. The population did not include persons living in collective dwellings, persons living on Indian reserves, persons of Aboriginal origins living off-reserve, or persons living in Northern and remote areas.

This article focuses on the children of immigrants, that is, Canadian-born persons whose parents were both born in another country. People were only included in the analysis if neither their mother nor their father had an English or French mother tongue.

The total sample for the EDS included about 42,500 respondents aged 15 and over. Of these individuals, almost 6,800 were descendants of immigrants and among this group 4,500 reported that neither of their parents had an English or French mother tongue. This sample of 4,500 respondents, representing about 1,250,000 Canadians, provided the data for this study.

Definitions

Allophone: Individuals whose mother tongue is neither French nor English.

Respondent: Canadian-born persons aged 15 and over whose parents were both born in another country and had a mother tongue other than English or French.

Mother tongue: First language learned at home in childhood. While the vast majority of persons reported learning just one language in early childhood, a small percentage indicated that they had learned two or three languages simultaneously. These responses were retained and considered in the analysis.

Ancestral language: The parents' ancestral language is the first language learned at home by the respondent's parents. In most cases in this analysis (89%), that language was the same for both parents. For convenience, however, the expression "parents' ancestral language" was used even when the parents did not share the same mother tongue.

Sense of cultural or ethnic belonging: In the EDS, respondents were asked the following question: "Some people have a stronger sense of belonging to some things than others. Using a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is not strong at all and 5 is very strong, how strong is your sense of belonging to your ethnic or cultural group(s)?" This question was used to create the sense-of-belonging indicator included in the logistic regression analysis.

Language groups used in this article: Separate language groups were created when the number of respondents was large enough to allow it (more than 20 respondents). For more details on the various language groups, see the definition of "mother tongue" in the 2001 Census Dictionary.

Multivariate analysis

The statistical analysis identifies, using predicted probabilities, various characteristics associated with descendants of allophone immigrants acquiring their parents' ancestral language as their mother tongue, speaking that language, and using it regularly at home. The analysis indicates whether there is a statistically significant correlation between the various characteristics included in the model, when holding the effects of all other variables constant to their mean values. For categorical variables, like highest level of education or province of birth, the mean values represent the percentage of the population of interest falling in each of the categories of the independent variable. For example, after the parents' level of education, the respondent's age and sex, and all the other characteristics included in the statistical model have been taken into account (or held to their mean values), the predicted probability that individuals with Cantonese-speaking immigrant parents inherited Cantonese as their own mother tongue was 87%.

Some groups more likely than others to pass on their mother tongue

Not all language groups are equally likely to pass on their mother tongue to the next generation. Holding constant other variables included in a statistical model – like parents' highest level of education, respondent's age and province of birth – respondents whose parents' mother tongue was Punjabi, Spanish, Cantonese, Korean or Greek were most likely to learn these languages as their mother tongues. Individuals with Dutch, Scandinavian, German, Tagalog, Semitic, Niger-Congo and Creole ancestral languages were least likely to do so. These differences may reflect the interest that specific language communities have in maintaining ancestral languages. Also, levels of the parents' fluency in English or French may vary from one linguistic group to another.

Indeed, in 2001, only a small minority of immigrants whose mother tongue was Dutch, one of the Scandinavian languages, Tagalog or German was unable to

The predicted probability of learning an ancestral language as mother tongue varies with specific languages

	First language learned was ancestral language	Can speak ancestral language
	Predicted probability (%)	
Ancestral language		
Italian	*69*	*84*
Dutch/Flemish	26*	48*
Scandinavian languages	37*	50*
Yiddish	39*	81
German	52*	65*
Portuguese	77	90
Spanish	87*	94*
Romanian	48	55*
Greek	84*	94
Armenian	68	82
Baltic languages	68	68
Russian	54	79
Croatian	84*	95
Slovenian	74	80
Czech	56	52*
Polish	75	77
Ukrainian	83*	90*
Other Slavic languages	73	80
Punjabi	89*	96*
Gujarati	72	85
Hindi	71	91
Urdu	72	83
Other Indo-Iranian languages	69	71
Dravidian languages	55	52*
Japanese	78	84
Korean	86*	84
Austro-Asiatic languages	85*	85
Arabic	63	85
Other Semitic languages	21*	51*
Tagalog	40*	50*
Other Malayo-Polynesian languages	54	57*
Finno-Ugric languages	75	70
Hungarian	63	70*
Mandarin	70	69*
Cantonese	87*	88
Other Chinese languages	80*	83
Niger-Congo languages	17	34*
Creole	10*	90
Other languages	54	55*

Note: The predicted probabilities were computed by fixing the covariables at their average value for the sample used. The results were taken from a logistic regression analysis.
Reference categories shown in *italics*.
*   Statistically significant difference from reference category (p<0.05).
Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

speak either English or French;[5] the proportion ranged from 0.2% for the Scandinavian languages to 2.0% for German. By comparison, members of other language groups were much more likely to be unable to speak either of the official languages: for example, 20% of persons with Cantonese and 15% with Punjabi mother tongue were unable to carry on a conversation in either English or French. This may reflect the varying length of time language groups have spent in Canada, and the fact that historically some have had closer contact than others with English or French. Alternatively, large concentrations of individuals in one area with the same mother tongue may render the learning of another language less essential.

Parents with same mother tongue most likely to pass language on

Respondents whose parents both had the same mother tongue (about 90% were in this situation) were more likely to learn this language as their own mother tongue (predicted probability of 68%) than persons whose parents had different mother tongues (predicted probability of 49%).[6] This second group was more likely to speak English or French with their parents.

Parents' education also made a difference in passing on an ancestral language. For example, individuals whose mother had a postsecondary education were less likely than those whose mother's highest level of education was elementary school to have learned their parents' mother tongue as their first language: 61% versus 70%. While it is difficult to explain the exact reasons for the relationship between education and transmission of ancestral languages, other studies suggest that individuals with a higher level of education have a greater tendency to shift to the host country's official language, even for home use.[7]

The age of respondents (and, hence, indirectly the period in which they were born) was also associated with their first language learned. For example, the predicted probability that a respondent's first language was the parents' mother tongue was 52% for 15- to 24-year-olds compared with 65% for 25- to 34-year-olds and 75% for those aged 65 or over. It appears that those born earlier in the 20th century were more likely to learn the ancestral language as their mother tongue.

Finally, respondents born in Quebec were more likely to learn their parents' mother tongue as their first language than those in other provinces: 80% versus, for example, 60% in Ontario and 72% in both Saskatchewan and Alberta. In turn, the proportion with an English-only or French-only mother tongue was lower in Quebec than in other provinces. While in Ontario, 40% of respondents reported an English-only mother tongue (virtually none reported a French-only mother tongue), in Quebec, 16% had an English-only and 7% a French-only first language.

Some languages more likely to be learned later in life

In general, the factors associated with the acquisition of an ancestral language as mother tongue (such as parents' first language, parents sharing an ancestral language, parents' highest level of education, age of respondent, province of birth of respondent, etc.) are similar to those related to the ability to speak an ancestral language. Yet there are a few differences.

For example, the predicted probability that respondents whose mother tongue was Dutch/Flemish learned that language first was only 26%, while the probability that these individuals could carry on a conversation in that language later in life was 48%. Clearly, many acquired Dutch/Flemish after learning another language in childhood.

For other languages, the situation was different: they were equally likely to have been learned as mother

CST **Respondents with highly educated mothers were less likely to have an ancestral mother tongue language**

	First language learned was ancestral language	Can speak ancestral language
	Predicted probability (%)	
Respondent characteristics		
Both parents have the same ancestral language		
No	*49*	*68*
Yes	68*	81*
Highest level of education of the mother		
Elementary	*70*	*82*
Secondary	68	79
Some postsecondary	61	70*
Postsecondary degree or diploma	61*	77
Highest level of education of the father		
Elementary	*67*	*79*
Secondary	63	82
Some postsecondary	75	81
Postsecondary degree or diploma	63	81

Note: The predicted probabilities were computed by fixing the covariables at their average value for the sample used. The results were taken from a logistic regression analysis.
Reference categories shown in *italics*.
* Statistically significant difference from reference category (p<0.05).
Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

CST **Compared with other provinces, the predicted probability of learning an ancestral language was highest in Quebec**

	First language learned was ancestral language	Can speak ancestral language
	Predicted probability (%)	
Respondent characteristics		
Age		
15-24	*52*	*79*
25-34	65*	81
35-44	71*	83
45-64	70*	75
65 and over	75*	75
Sex		
Men	62*	78
Women	*69*	*80*
Province of birth		
Atlantic	74	91
Quebec	80*	90*
Ontario	*60*	*76*
Manitoba	68	80
Saskatchewan	72*	78
Alberta	72*	82*
British Columbia	61	73

Note: The predicted probabilities were computed by fixing the covariables at their average value for the sample used. The results were taken from a logistic regression analysis.
Reference categories shown in *italics*.
* Statistically significant difference from reference category (p<0.05).
Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

Arabic, Ukrainian and Greek were the ancestral languages with the highest predicted probability of being regularly used at home

Ancestral language	Regularly used ancestral language at home	Ancestral language	Regularly used ancestral language at home
	Predicted probability (%)		Predicted probability (%)
Italian	*35*	Hindi	31
Dutch/Flemish	19	Urdu	36
Scandinavian languages	0*	Other Indo-Iranian languages	36
Yiddish	13	Dravidian languages	14
German	22*	Japanese	43
Portuguese	37	Korean	52
Spanish	36	Austro-Asiatic languages	61
Romanian	7	Arabic	58*
Greek	52*	Other Semitic languages	9
Armenian	23	Tagalog	14*
Baltic languages	53	Other Malayo-Polynesian languages	47
Russian	55	Finno-Ugric languages	55
Croatian	42	Hungarian	44
Slovenian	16	Mandarin	40
Czech	60	Cantonese	44
Polish	40	Other Chinese languages	26
Ukrainian	57*	Niger-Congo languages	36
Other Slavic languages	57	Creole	17
Punjabi	45	Other languages	17
Gujarati	16		

Note: The predicted probabilities were computed by fixing the covariables at their average value for the sample used. The results were taken from a logistic regression analysis. Reference group shown in *italics*.

* Statistically significant difference from reference group (p<0.05)

Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

tongue and still spoken at the time of the survey. For example, the predicted probability that respondents whose parents' mother tongue was Mandarin learned that language first in childhood was 70%, virtually identical to the probability that they could still speak that language (69%).

In contrast to the findings with respect to mother tongue, no significant correlation appeared between age and the probability of carrying on a conversation in the parents' ancestral language. The youngest individuals had just as high a probability as the oldest of being able to carry on a conversation in their parents' first language.

Regular use key to maintaining ancestral language

The real key to preserving ancestral languages between generations is using them in everyday life. Speaking these languages at home is particularly important, since passing them on to children depends, in most case, on home use.[8] Although nearly three-quarters of respondents spoke their parents' mother tongue well enough to carry on a conversation, not all of them used that language regularly in their own home.

Not surprisingly, respondents whose mother tongue was the ancestral language were more likely than others to continue to use that language: 39% used it in their home, compared with 19% of those whose mother tongue was different from that of their parents. In addition, individuals who, up to age 15, most often spoke the ancestral language with their parents were more likely to speak that language in their own home (predicted probability of 42%,

compared with 20% for those who had not spoken with their parents).

One of the most important factors associated with speaking the ancestral language in the home is the presence of at least one immigrant parent. Respondents who lived in the same household as their parents were much more likely to use the ancestral language regularly at home than those who did not live with their parents (predicted probabilities of 65% and 20% respectively). In other words, only one in five of those who had left the family nest used the ancestral language regularly in their own home.

The presence of a spouse who speaks the ancestral language is also strongly associated with the use of that language. The predicted probability that respondents would regularly speak the ancestral language

Respondents living with their parents had the highest predicted probability of speaking an ancestral language regularly at home

Respondent characteristics	Regularly used ancestral language at home	Respondent characteristics	Regularly used ancestral language at home
	%		%
Mother tongue is ancestral language		**Household income**	
No	19	Up to $19,999	51
Yes	39*	$20,000-$39,999	50
Spoke the ancestral language most of the time with parents before age 15		$40,000-$59,999	32*
		$60,000-$99,999	30*
No	20	$100,000 and over	27*
Yes	42*	**Highest level of education completed**	
Both parents had same ancestral language		Elementary	31
No	28	Secondary	30
Yes	34	College	40
Age		University	35
15-24	48	**Have a child under age 18**	
25-34	39	No	34
35-44	36	Yes	34
45-64	21*	**Spouse speaks the ancestral language**	
65 and over	14*	No	18
Sex		Yes	58*
Men	32	No spouse	37*
Women	35	**Lives with parents**	
Province of birth		No	20
Atlantic	8*	Yes	65*
Quebec	52*	**Level of ethnic/cultural belonging**	
Ontario	31	Not strong at all	8
Manitoba	35	Score of 2	19*
Saskatchewan	32	Score of 3	31*
Alberta	28	Score of 4	41*
British Columbia	29	Very strong	44*

Note: The predicted probabilities were computed by fixing the covariables at their average value for the sample used. The results were taken from a logistic regression analysis. Reference group shown in *italics*.

* Statistically significant difference from reference group (p<0.05)

Source: Statistics Canada, Ethnic Diversity Survey, 2002.

at home was 58% when their spouse also spoke that language but only 18% when their spouse did not. In most cases, when a spouse does not speak the ancestral language, the couple switches to English or French.

Income level and sense of belonging to one's cultural or ethnic group are also strongly correlated with the regular use of the parents' mother tongue at home. First, respondents with higher incomes had a lower probability of using their parents' ancestral language at home

than those with lower incomes: 51% of individuals with household incomes of $20,000 or less used the ancestral language, compared with 27% of those with household incomes above $100,000. Second, the greater the sense of belonging to one's cultural or ethnic group, the higher was the probability of using the ancestral language at home. Not surprisingly, since language is likely one dimension of a sense of belonging, this correlation was one of the strongest found in this analysis. Respondents who

reported a "very strong" sense of belonging were much more likely to use their ancestral language at home (predicted probability of 44%) than those whose sense of attachment was "not strong at all" (8%). It is, however, not possible to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the two phenomena, since using an ancestral language may, in turn, strengthen one's sense of belonging.

Summary

Preserving an ancestral language is a challenge for many linguistic minority communities. This study focused on Canadian-born individuals whose parents were both born in another country and had a language other than English or French as their mother tongue.

Just under one-third of respondents used their parents' mother tongue at home on a regular basis. The percentage of those who used the ancestral language with friends was even smaller. A multivariate analysis showed that for those who no longer lived with their parents, the probability of speaking the ancestral language regularly at home was only 20%. This situation seems to suggest that, in most cases, the ancestral language will not be transmitted to the next generation.

Respondents with the highest probability of regularly using their parents' ancestral language at home are the ones who acquired the language as their mother tongue and who, up to the age of 15, spoke it with their parents most of the time; those with a lower income; those born in Quebec; those married to or living with someone who also knows the ancestral language; those living with their parents; and those with a strong sense of ethnic or cultural belonging.

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1. Portes, A. and L. Hao. 1998. "E pluribus unum: Bilingualism and loss of language in the second generation" Sociology of Education 71: 269-294.

2. Mouw, T. and Y. Xie. 1999. "Bilingualism and academic achievement of Asian immigrants: Accommodation with or without assimilation?" American Sociological Review 50: 840-850.

3. Alba, R., J. Logan, A. Lutz and B. Stults. 2002. "Only English by the third generation? Loss and preservation of the mother tongue among the grandchildren of contemporary immigrants." Demography 39, 3: 467-484.

4. Alba et al.; Stevens, G. 1992. "The social and demographic context of language use in the United States." American Sociological Review 57: 171-185.

5. Only single responses are considered. A small percentage of individuals reported having learned two languages at the same time at home in childhood. They are not included in the figures presented here.

6. This result is consistent with the findings of several previous studies. See, for example, G. Stevens. 1985. "Nativity, intermarriage, and mother-tongue shift." American Sociological Review 50: 74-83; Harrison, B. Autumn 2000. "Passing on the language: Heritage language diversity in Canada." Canadian Social Trends.

7. Chiswick, B. and P.W. Miller. 2001. "A model of destination-language acquisition: application to male immigrants in Canada" Demography 38: 391-409.

8. Alba et al, 2002.