Demographics of Adult Heritage Language Speakers in the United States: Different Social Environments by Region and Language
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Abstract
Although heritage language (HL) speakers have received scholarly attention in recent years as an interdisciplinary research theme among language educators, linguists, and policy makers, we know very little about their demographic makeup and trends of their demographic change. In this study, I have analyzed regional and chronological changes of HL speakers between 1980 and 2010, using U.S. census data. The results show sharp differences in HL speakers' demographics by language and region.

Method
- **Data source**: U.S. Census/ACS data from 1980 to 2010 (via Integrated Public User Microdata Series [IPUMS; Ruggles & Sobek, 1997])
- **Data analysis**: IPUMS's individual-level records were analyzed with R scripts
- **Definition of adult HL speakers** (based on the census items)
  - those who are age 18 or above at the point of data collection
  - those who speak a language other than English at home
  - those who are bilingual (i.e., not selecting “Do not speak English” in the question regarding English proficiency), and
  - those who have immigrated to the U.S. before 18 years old if they are foreign born
- **Microdata Series (IPUMS; Ruggles & Sobek, 1997))
- **Is the United States rapidly becoming a monolingual country with strong assimilation force into an English-speaking population?**
  - **No, because** ...
    - The number of HL speakers grew at a considerably faster rate (26.98% per decade during 1980–2010) than the average growth of the U.S. population (10.88% per decade during 1980–2010).
  - **Yes, because** ...
    - Languages such as French, German, Italian, Greek, Yiddish, and Dutch are experiencing rapid declines (linguistic graveyard within three generations) (Rambaut, 2009) [see Table 1]
    - The growth rates of HL speakers radically differ from state to state. In some states, there was even a decline in the number of adult HL speakers. [see Table 2]

Question 1
Is the United States rapidly becoming a monolingual country with strong assimilation force into an English-speaking population?

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  - The growth rates of HL speakers radically differ from state to state. In some states, there was even a decline in the number of adult HL speakers. [see Table 2]

Table 1: The Number of HL Speakers in 2010 by Language and the Increase per Decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Native</th>
<th>Prop.</th>
<th>Native</th>
<th>Prop.</th>
<th>Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>8,480,425</td>
<td>4.34%</td>
<td>10,980,896</td>
<td>5.08%</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>3,820,760</td>
<td>3.60%</td>
<td>5,831,912</td>
<td>5.40%</td>
<td>52.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>1,140,476</td>
<td>1.04%</td>
<td>1,370,823</td>
<td>1.23%</td>
<td>18.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>1,903,143</td>
<td>1.82%</td>
<td>2,690,220</td>
<td>2.47%</td>
<td>40.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>2,357,657</td>
<td>1.14%</td>
<td>3,714,796</td>
<td>1.70%</td>
<td>42.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>2,526,169</td>
<td>1.73%</td>
<td>8,570,307</td>
<td>6.01%</td>
<td>266.01%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>37,785</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
<td>328,239</td>
<td>0.23%</td>
<td>769.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>149,367</td>
<td>0.10%</td>
<td>728,487</td>
<td>0.50%</td>
<td>496.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>1,125,873</td>
<td>1.07%</td>
<td>1,563,555</td>
<td>1.32%</td>
<td>37.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>2,591,997</td>
<td>2.30%</td>
<td>3,363,091</td>
<td>2.70%</td>
<td>30.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thai</td>
<td>343,203</td>
<td>0.31%</td>
<td>3,060,186</td>
<td>2.50%</td>
<td>842.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>1,977,808</td>
<td>1.76%</td>
<td>4,310,721</td>
<td>3.51%</td>
<td>115.16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Question 2
Are Spanish HL speakers by far the largest HL community in the United States?

- **Yes, because** ...
  - Spanish and Chinese remain the two most common groups of HLs in the United States, and their prevalence has grown rapidly over the last 30 years (4.6 million Spanish HL speakers in 1980 to 17.0 million in 2010 [38.42% growth per decade])

Question 3
Are efforts for HL maintenance (e.g., bilingual education) necessary primarily in the major immigration hubs such as California, Florida, Illinois, and New York?

- **Yes, because** ...
  - States that are typically considered immigration hubs have large numbers of HL speakers (e.g., California 6.2 million, Texas 4.2M, New York 2.6M, Florida 2.2M, and Illinois 1.2M)

Question 4
Do recent HL speakers (i.e., recent immigrant families) often settle first in urban, metropolitan areas?

- **No, because** ...
  - Gini index, a statistics for (in)equality, shows that Spanish HL speakers are now settling in much wider range of counties than 30 years ago (Gini 0.828 in 1980 to 0.764 in 2010).
- **Yes, because** ...
  - The Spanish HL speakers are the only HL group that exhibited such a pattern (the average Gini index actually increased by 0.026 between 1980–2010). The other HL groups such as Chinese, Filipino/Tagalog, Korean, Vietnamese, Russian, Amharic/Ethiopian, and Tibetan, exhibited substantial growth (e.g., Dravidian 26,900 in 1980 to 423,649 or 152% growth per decade).

Conclusions
This study finds a wide range of differences in HL speakers' demographics by region and language.
- The findings naturally lead to a question about generalizability of HL studies, which tend to take place with one specific language community in a specific region/state. This study suggests needs of multi-language and multi-region research design to improve generalizability of HL studies.
- This study has been published in *The Modern Language Journal* Vol. 99 (4). Please e-mail me if you are interested in the original census data and the analysis scripts.

