

**The Evolution of Language Competencies, Preferences and Use
Among Immigrants and their Children in the United States Today**

Rubén G. Rumbaut
University of California, Irvine

Prepared for the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship, Refugees, Border Security, and International Law
Hearing on Comprehensive Immigration Reform and U.S. Immigrant Integration
May 16, 2007

The Evolution of Language Competencies, Preferences and Use Among Immigrants and their Children in the United States Today

Rubén G. Rumbaut
University of California, Irvine

Is the United States becoming a polyglot country? The research literature suggests that multilingualism may not be such a bad idea, at least in terms of the intellectual abilities and skills associated with it, and because of its utility as an asset in a global economy. Yet some object to it on the basis of the need for "national identity" and "cultural homogeneity" in a nation that has absorbed millions of immigrants from all over the world, while others assert that contemporary immigrants are not assimilating linguistically, particularly Spanish-speakers from Latin America in areas of dense ethnic concentration such as Los Angeles, and that the proliferation of immigrant languages generally and of Spanish in particular may threaten the predominance of English in the United States.

Such social and political concerns over language issues date back to the origins of the nation. As early as 1751, Benjamin Franklin had put the matter plainly: "Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us, instead of our Anglifying them?" The point was underscored by Theodore Roosevelt during the peak years of immigration in the early 20th century: "We have room but for one language here, and that is the English language; for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boardinghouse." Most recently the point was stressed by Samuel P. Huntington (2004) in his controversial book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, in which he argued that the arrival of Latin American immigrants in large numbers during the last three decades of the 20th century threaten the core of American identity and culture in the 21st century. He asserts that Latin Americans are much less likely to speak English than earlier generations of European immigrants because they all speak a common language; they are regionally concentrated and residentially segregated within Spanish-speaking enclaves; and they are less interested in linguistic and cultural assimilation. According to Huntington, "there is no Americano dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican-Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English" (2004: 256). Although Huntington's thesis was short on evidence and dismissed by scholars, it nonetheless achieved widespread public diffusion and has been tacitly accepted in many circles.

It is ironic that, while the United States has probably incorporated more bilingual people than any other nation in the world since the time of Franklin, American history is notable for its near mass-extinction of non-English languages. Contrary to what may seem to be true from a purely domestic angle, the use of two languages is not exceptional, but normal, in the experience of a good part of the world's population. Over six billion people speak an estimated six thousand languages in a world of some two hundred autonomous states. Thus, there are about thirty times as many languages as there are states; and the dominance of certain languages (such as Chinese,

Hindi, Russian, Spanish and English)--combined with global communications and transportation technologies, international trade, and immigration--contributes to the proliferation of bilingualism. Yet, though the United States has incorporated more bilingual people than any other country in the world, the American experience is remarkable for its near mass extinction of non-English languages: In no other country, among thirty-five nations compared in a detailed study by Lieberman and his colleagues, did the rate of mother tongue shift toward (English) monolingualism approach the rapidity of that found in the United States. Within the United States, some relatively isolated indigenous groups (such as the Navajo) have changed at a much slower rate; but language minority immigrants shifted to English at a rate far in excess of that obtained in all other countries—hence the reputation of the U.S. as a “graveyard for languages.”

Other studies of the languages of European and older Asian immigrant groups in the United States have documented a rapid process of intergenerational "anglicization" that is effectively completed by the third generation. The general historical pattern seems clear: Those in the first generation learned as much English as they needed to get by but continued to speak their mother tongue at home. The second generation grew up speaking the mother tongue at home but English away from home--perforce in the public schools and then in the wider society, given the institutional pressures for anglicization and the socioeconomic benefits of native fluency in English. The home language of their children, and hence the mother tongue of the third generation, was mostly English. As a classic essay saw it, immigrant families were often transformed “into two linguistic sub-groups segregated along generational lines...ethnic heritage, including the ethnic mother tongue, usually ceases to play any viable role in the life of the third generation... [the grandchildren] become literally outsiders to their ancestral heritage.”

Still, research on immigrant language retention up to the present has been hampered by a lack of data on language use or ability broken down by generation. Surveys focused on the children of immigrants, by definition, enable only a contrast between first and second generations. Moreover, because the U.S. Census Bureau eliminated the question on place of birth of parents after 1970 it is no longer possible to distinguish generations using census data, forcing researchers into crude native-foreign comparisons. It is all the more important to scrutinize the evidence concerning both the extent of bilingualism in the country and its resilience over time.

In this statement I examine the evolution of English and foreign language competencies, preferences and use among immigrants and their children in the United States. I first draw on the latest data from the U.S. census to sketch a language portrait of Immigrant America today, synthesize the findings of the principal contemporary studies measuring intergenerational language change, and focus attention on two new surveys which permit both a longitudinal and a cross-generational analysis of key policy questions: the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), and the Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA) survey. CILS followed a sample of 1.5- and second-generation youth in Southern California and South Florida for more than a decade from mid adolescence in 1992 to their mid twenties in 2001-03. The baseline sample of more than 5,000 was representative of 77 nationalities, including all of the principal immigrant nationalities in the U.S. today. The CILS data set permits both comparative and longitudinal analyses of language fluencies across the largest immigrant groups from widely different national, cultural and class origins, in distinct generational cohorts, and in different sites of incorporation where immigrants are densely

concentrated (San Diego on the Mexican border, and Miami, the city with the highest proportion of foreign-born in the country). The analysis will be extended with newly available data from the IIMMLA survey, which collected equivalent cross-sectional data on language from a multigenerational sample of nearly 5,000 respondents in their 20s and 30s, primarily from the 1.5- and second-generations but with sizable subsamples of third- and fourth-and-later generations, concentrated in the nation's premier immigrant metropolis, Los Angeles, which permit a hard test of Huntington's hypothesis. Before turning to those results, however, I begin by sketching a national profile of foreign and English language patterns over the past three censuses, and considering recent data on generational patterns of language loyalty and change.

A National Profile

What is the evidence concerning both the extent of bilingualism in the United States and its resilience over time? The 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses asked people aged 5 or older if they spoke a language other than English at home. In 2000, 47 million people or 18 percent of the 262.4 million aged five years or older answered in the affirmative. Those figures were up from 14 percent in 1990 (32 million) and 11 percent in 1980 (23 million). Because the question did not ask whether this was the "usual" language spoken at home or how frequently or well it was used relative to English, it probably elicited an over-estimate. Still, the data point to the presence of a substantial and growing minority of those who are not English monolinguals.

Moreover, despite recent dispersals to "new destinations," they were concentrated in areas of primary immigrant settlement—particularly along the Mexican border from Texas to California, and in large cities such as Chicago, Miami and New York. Among all the 3,141 counties in the United States, the median percentage of the population who spoke a language other than English at home was a mere 4.6 percent. That is, in half of all counties—a vast swath of the United States—more than 95 percent of the residents were English monolinguals. In some areas, however, bilingualism was prevalent—as was the case in Hialeah and Miami in South Florida; Santa Ana and East Los Angeles in Southern California; Laredo, McAllen, Brownsville and El Paso along the Texas-Mexico border; and Elizabeth, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from New York City, where two-thirds or more of the residents speak languages other than English (while also speaking English).

In 2000, of the 47 million who spoke a foreign language at home, more than 28 million spoke one language: Spanish. The other 18 million spoke scores of different languages, chiefly reflecting both past and present immigrant flows. These languages included Chinese (2 million); French, German, Italian, Tagalog, and Vietnamese (over 1 million each); and Korean, Russian, Polish, Arabic and Portuguese (over 500,000 each). Among all immigrants aged five years or older who came to the United States between 1990 and 2000, 88 percent spoke a language other than English at home. The figure declines to 74 percent among pre-1980 immigrants and to less than 9 percent among the native born. The vast majority of the total population, over 215 million, spoke *only* English – including over 17 percent of the immigrant population itself.

What does the census tell us about linguistic variability within national groups and about the evolution of bilingualism over time? [Table 1](#) presents data on home language use and related characteristics for the largest non-English immigrant cohorts; the total pre-1980, 1980-1989 and post-1990 foreign-born populations; and the native born.

Table 1.
Language Spoken at Home and Related Characteristics
for Selected U.S. Immigrant Groups and the Native-Born, 2000
 (ranked by the proportion of the foreign-born from
 non-English-speaking countries who spoke English only)

Country of Birth	Persons 5 or older (N)	Speaks English only at home (%)	Length of residence in U.S. (years)	College graduate ¹ (%)	High status profession ² (%)
Germany	698,651	40	34	27	50
Nigeria	134,041	22	11	58	52
Italy	475,109	21	38	14	36
Japan	339,948	17	17	43	56
Korea	856,488	15	15	43	48
Poland	471,336	13	23	22	31
Philippines	1,367,592	12	17	46	42
Russia	329,907	11	13	52	53
India	1,012,016	9	12	69	68
Arab Middle East	516,370	9	15	39	50
Iran	284,329	8	17	51	59
Colombia	508,482	6	14	22	29
Taiwan	324,228	6	15	67	69
Peru	273,096	6	14	23	29
Cuba	866,649	6	23	19	34
Haiti	418,834	6	15	14	22
Dominican Republic	680,511	6	15	9	19
Mexico	8,996,368	6	14	4	10
Cambodia	136,020	6	16	10	24
Nicaragua	222,690	5	15	14	23
Guatemala	471,744	5	12	6	12
El Salvador	807,555	5	13	5	12
China	976,090	5	14	42	50
Vietnam	984,327	5	14	19	30
Laos	204,414	5	16	8	18
Foreign-born: ³					
arrived 1990-2000	13,240,060	12	5	28	27
arrived 1980-1989	8,776,740	14	15	21	29
arrived before 1980	10,290,944	26	34	22	39
U.S.-born:	230,067,997	91	NA	25	40

1 Persons 25 and older.

2 Employed persons 16 and older.

3 Totals include immigrants from English-speaking countries.

Source: 2000 U.S. Census, 5% PUMS.

Two main conclusions can be derived from these results. First, recently arrived immigrants tend to remain loyal to their native language, regardless of age and education. Although there is some evidence that nationalities with high proportions of college graduates and professionals shift toward English more rapidly, the vast majority of recent arrivals retains its own language at home. Second, time has a strong eroding effect on native language retention: As seen in the bottom rows of the table, only one-eighth of recently arrived immigrants use English only at home, but more than one-fourth of immigrants with longer U.S. residence do so.

Even more impressive is the rapidity with which English fluency is acquired by immigrant children, underscoring the importance of *age at arrival*. As shown in [Table 2](#), among immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as children under 13 years of age and who speak another language at home, 87 percent could speak English "very well" or "well," compared to 63 percent of those who immigrated between the ages of 13 and 35 (in adolescence or early adulthood), and to only 42 percent of those who were 35 or older when they immigrated. *In general, age at arrival, in conjunction with time in the United States and level of education, are the most significant predictors of the acquisition of English fluency among immigrants of non-English origin.*

Table 2.
Correlates of English Speaking Ability of Immigrants from Non-English-Speaking Countries, 2000

Characteristics	Speaks English only at home (%)	If speaks non-English language: How well speaks English? ²	
		Very well or well (%)	Not well or at all (%)
Total: ¹	10	64	36
Age at U.S. arrival:			
35 years or older	7	42	58
13 to 34 years old	8	63	37
Under 13 years old	17	87	13
Year of U.S. arrival:			
1990-2000	7	56	44
1980-1989	7	67	33
Before 1980	16	75	25
Education: ³			
Not high school graduate	7	39	61
High school graduate	11	74	26
College graduate or more	12	89	11

¹ Persons 5 years or older from non-English-speaking countries only.

² Based on response to census question on English speaking ability asked of persons who spoke a language other than English at home.

³ Persons 25 years or older.

Source: 2000 U.S. Census, 5% PUMS.

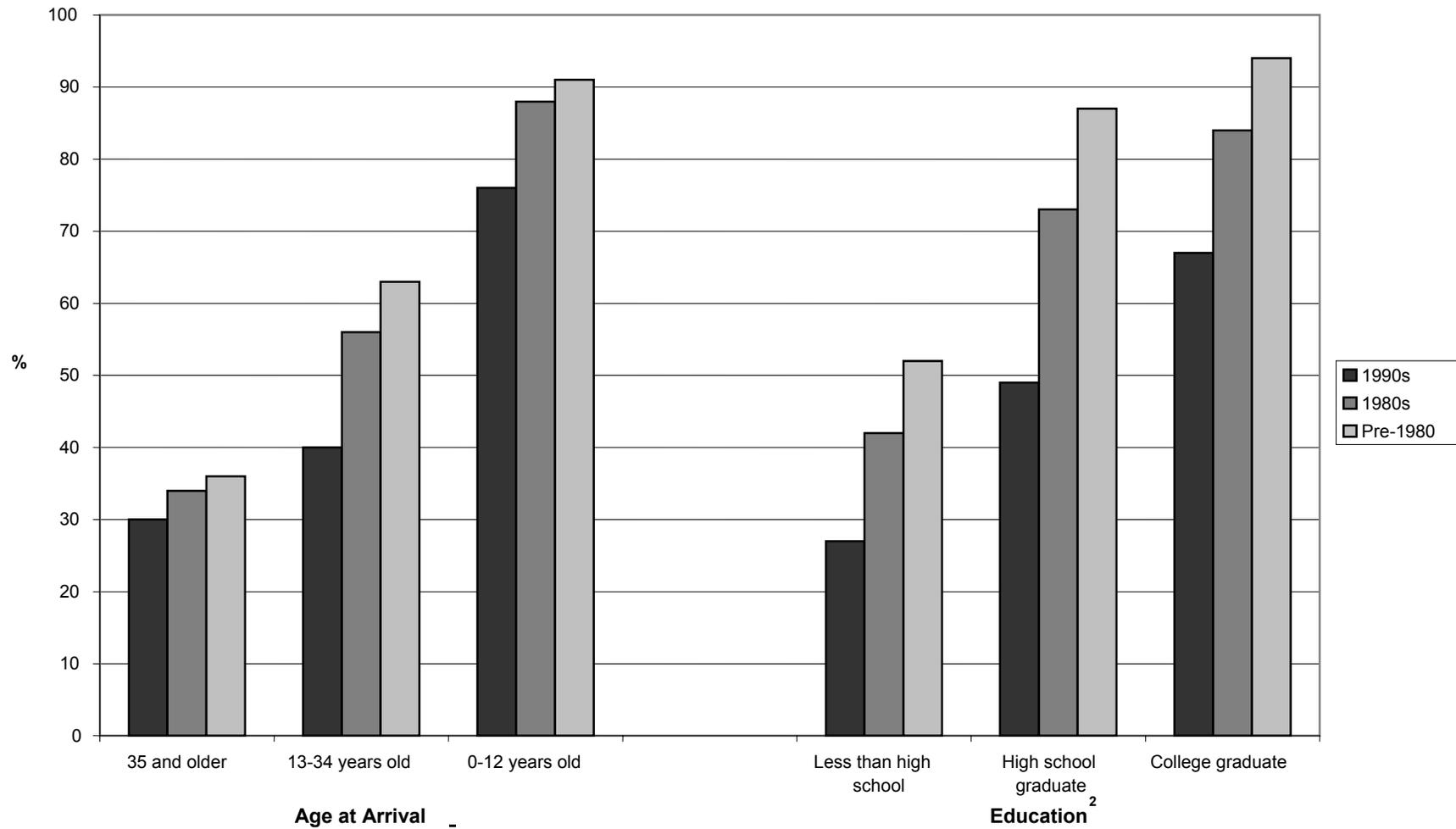
The effect of each of these three factors is specified in [Table 3](#) for the largest immigrant nationalities – and vividly graphed in [Chart 1](#) for Spanish speakers, the largest language minority population by far and presumptively the most mother-tongue retentive.

Table 3.
Ability to Speak English "Very Well" among Selected Immigrant Groups
who Speak a Language Other than English at Home,
by Age and Decade of U.S. Arrival, and by Educational Attainment

Country of Birth	Percent who speak English "very well" by:								
	Age at U.S. arrival			Decade of U.S. arrival			Education completed		
	0-12	13-34	35 and older	Before 1980	1980s	1990s	Less than high school	High school graduate	College graduate
Nigeria	80	88	77	92	89	82	48	81	94
Germany	84	82	65	82	86	73	64	83	88
India	81	75	45	78	71	67	20	53	83
Philippines	76	70	45	70	66	58	25	59	79
Arab Middle East	76	61	29	68	65	47	23	56	75
Iran	84	67	22	73	54	37	11	44	73
Italy	82	44	21	48	57	53	30	63	77
Haiti	68	45	20	52	47	37	23	49	69
Taiwan	77	39	13	55	46	30	12	22	48
Poland	80	43	17	47	44	36	22	36	59
Russia	75	50	16	54	47	38	18	27	40
Nicaragua	75	32	15	52	43	27	16	41	54
Peru	76	40	15	52	45	32	15	35	55
Japan	52	37	23	42	47	30	24	33	43
Cuba	83	31	9	46	31	20	12	47	56
Colombia	71	32	11	46	38	26	13	32	49
Korea	70	29	10	41	32	24	14	27	44
Laos	61	19	8	38	30	20	10	36	63
Dominican Republic	63	22	8	34	31	26	12	32	46
Cambodia	63	22	8	37	29	27	9	34	61
China	58	34	10	31	28	28	6	16	48
Vietnam	58	23	7	43	30	17	7	24	56
El Salvador	62	20	8	33	30	19	13	38	48
Guatemala	62	20	11	38	30	19	12	36	52
Mexico	53	15	9	33	27	18	13	37	49
Total ¹	65	35	20	49	40	31	16	43	64

¹ Excluding immigrants from English-speaking countries.
Source: 2000 U.S. Census, 5% PUMS.

Chart 1.
English Fluency of Foreign-born Hispanics in the United States, 2000

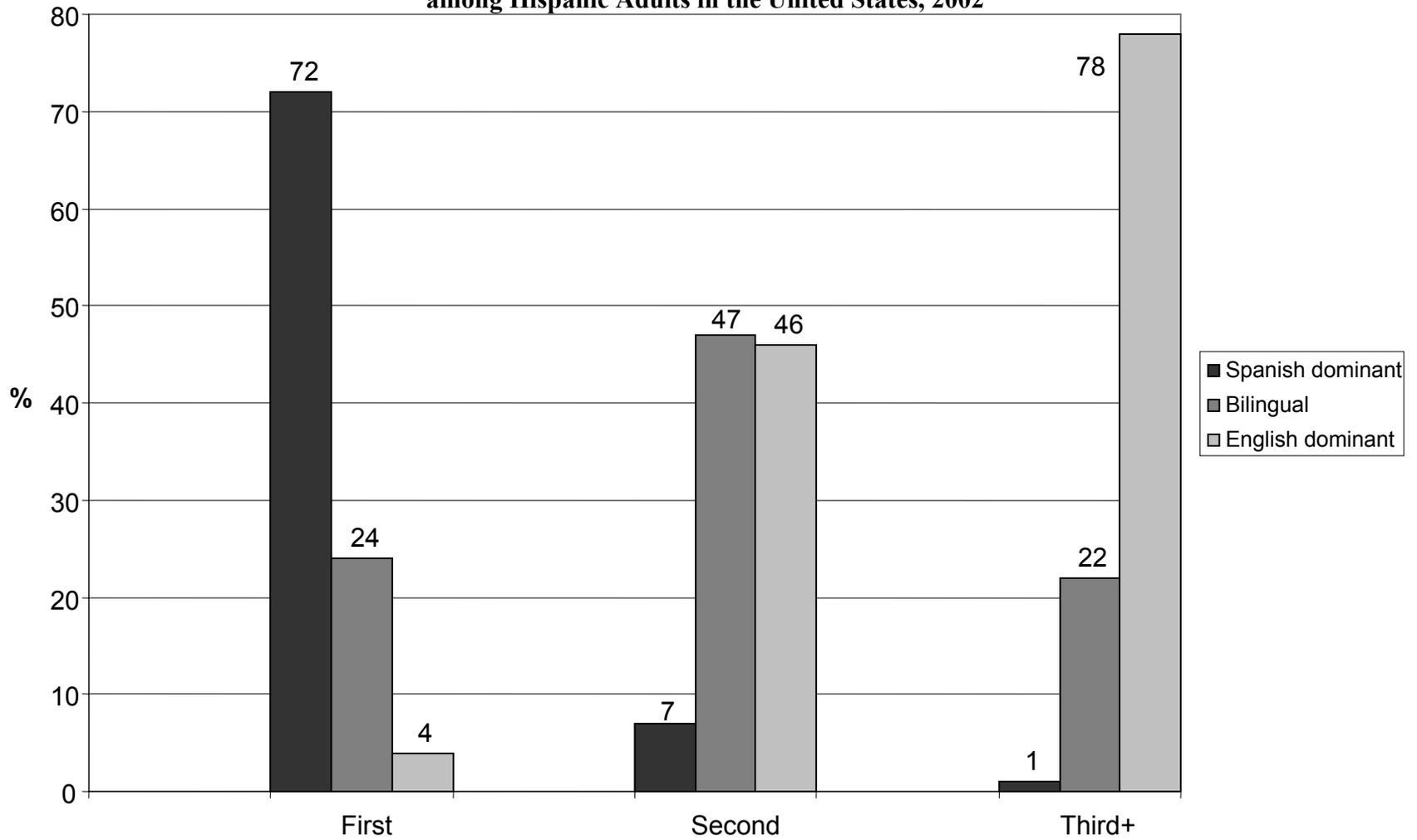


¹ English Fluency = Persons 5 years or older who speak English only, or well or very well.

² Highest level of education completed for persons 25 years or older.

Source: 2000 U.S. Census, 5% PUMS.

Chart 2.
Language Shift (Spanish to English) from the First to the Third+ Generations
among Hispanic Adults in the United States, 2002



Source: Pew Hispanic Center (2004).

Generational Patterns: Cross Sectional Studies

The power of assimilative forces is nowhere clearer than in the linguistic shift across generations over time. Until recently, however, there were scarcely any systematic three-generation analyses of language maintenance and shift in the research literature. A 1973 study by David López (1978) involved a survey of a representative sample of 1,129 Mexican-origin couples in Los Angeles. His findings document a pattern of rapid language transition across the three generations that contradicts the assumption of unshakable Spanish language loyalty among Mexican-Americans. Among first-generation women, for example, he found that 84 percent used Spanish only at home, 14 percent used both languages, and only 2 percent used English solely. By the third generation, there was almost a complete reversal, with only 4 percent speaking Spanish at home, 12 percent using both, and 84 percent shifting to English only.

Figures for men were similar, except that the first to second-generation shift to English was still more marked. The study also attempted to examine the determinants and consequences of language transition. It found that generation had the strongest causal effect, exceeding by far those of age, rural origin, and other predictors. Spanish maintenance appears to have some positive occupational advantages--controlling for education and other factors--among the immigrant generation, but none for subsequent ones. Among the latter, residual Spanish monolingualism was associated with poor schooling and low socioeconomic status. López concluded that the appearance of high language loyalty among Mexican-Americans is due largely to the effect of continuing high immigration from the country of origin.

Three recent studies of intergenerational language shift provide convergent and compelling contemporary evidence of the three-generation model of mother-tongue erosion from the adult immigrant generation to that of their grandchildren. The first is an innovative analysis of the 2000 census by Richard Alba and his colleagues (2002) focusing on children 6 to 15. The second is a national survey of Hispanic adults conducted in 2002 by the Pew Hispanic Center (2004). And the third is a new study of immigration and intergenerational mobility in metropolitan Los Angeles [the IIMMLA study] (Rumbaut *et al.*, 2003, 2005).

The first of these studies analyzed the home languages of school-age children (ages 6 to 15) in newcomer families, as reported in the 2000 Census, linking children to their parents in the same household to permit distinguishing between the second generation (US-born children with at least one foreign-born parent) and the third (or a later) generation (US-born children whose parents are also US-born). Despite group differences in the degree of language shift, for every nationality without exception the following patterns held: The vast majority of first-generation immigrants who come to the U.S. as children speak English well; bilingualism is most common among second-generation children, who grow up in immigrant households and speak a foreign language at home, but are almost all proficient in English; English-only is the predominant pattern by the third generation; and what third-generation bilingualism exists is found especially in border communities such as Brownsville and El Paso, Texas, where the maintenance of Spanish has deep historical roots and is affected by proximity to Mexico, or in areas of high ethnic densities, such as found among Dominicans in New York and Cubans in Miami. Away from the border, Mexican-American children of the third generation are unlikely to be bilingual.

The second study entailed a national telephone survey of a representative sample of adults 18 and older in the 48 contiguous states, of whom 2,929 self-reported as Hispanic or Latino (with oversamples of Salvadorans, Dominicans, Colombians and Cubans). Unlike the

census (which asks only about spoken proficiency in English), the respondents were asked about their ability to speak and read in both English and Spanish. On the basis of their answers they were classified as Spanish dominant, bilingual, or English dominant. The breakdown of the results by generation—which parallel uncannily those of Lopez’s Los Angeles survey taken three decades earlier—are shown graphically in [Chart 2](#). First-generation adults were overwhelmingly Spanish dominant (72 percent), with a fourth classified as bilingual and only 4 percent as English dominant. That pattern was reversed by the third generation, with 78 percent being English dominant and 22 percent still classified as bilingual, but less than 1 percent could be deemed Spanish dominant. Among the second generation, Spanish dominance plummeted to only 7 percent. However, nearly half (47 percent) were classified as bilinguals and nearly as many as English dominant (46 percent) by the second generation.

Table 4.
Non-English Language Use, Proficiency, and Preference,
by Generational Cohort, Greater Los Angeles, 2004
 (IIMMLA survey, N=4,780)

Detailed Generational Cohorts		Growing up spoke a non- English language at home (%)	Speaks non-English language very well (%)	Prefers to speak English only at home (%)	N
1.0 generation	Foreign-born, arrived 13 or older	97.4	86.9	17.7	256
1.5 generation	Foreign-born, arrived 0-12 years old	92.9	46.6	60.7	1,491
2.0 generation	U.S.-born, 2 foreign-born parents	83.5	36.1	73.4	1,390
2.5 generation	U.S.-born, 1 foreign-born parent	46.5	17.3	92.5	428
3.0 generation	3-4 foreign-born grandparents	34.3	11.9	97.0	67
3.5 generation	1-2 foreign-born grandparents	18.7	3.1	98.3	289
4th+ generations	All 4 grandparents U.S.-born	10.4	2.0	99.0	859
Total sample		65.8	31.5	70.8	4,780

Source: Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA) Survey, Rumbaut et. al., 2005, 2006.

The third study entailed a comprehensive survey of 4,780 adults 20 to 40 years old in metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA). The sample is representative of “1.5-” (immigrants who came as children) and second-generation (U.S.-born with at least one foreign-born parent) Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Filipinos, Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and other groups of immigrant origin who have settled in the five-county area, as well as third and fourth (and later) generation whites, African Americans, and Mexican Americans. All were asked if they spoke a language other than English at home growing up, about their speaking, reading and writing proficiency in the non-English language, and their current language preferences and use. The results, broken down by detailed generational cohorts from the first to the fourth+ generations (those with no foreign-born grandparents), are summarized in [Table 4](#). They show clearly the generational progression in each of the language measures. For example, while over 90 percent of the foreign-born cohorts and over 80 percent of the U.S.-born with two foreign-born parents grew up speaking a non-English language at home, those proportions dropped to less than half among the U.S.-born with only one foreign-born parent, to between a fifth and a third among the third generation (depending on the number of foreign-born grandparents), and to only a tenth by the fourth generation. However, their preferences for English increased rapidly

by the 1.5 and second generations, exceeding 90 percent among the U.S.-born with only one foreign-born parent and becoming virtually universally preferred by the third generation. Those preferences in turn reflect the rapid atrophy of speaking, reading and writing skills in the foreign language from one generation to the next. These data again provide confirmatory evidence that assimilation forces in American society are strongest in the linguistic area and that they operate most visibly across rather than within generations. We will return to the IIMMLA data below.

A limitation of these recent studies is that they are cross-sectional—that is, they are snapshots taken at one point in time, but do not follow specific individuals over time to ascertain the dynamics of acculturation and of bilingualism as they take place *within* a generation. I turn now to such a *longitudinal* study (the CILS study).

The Evolution of Language Competencies, Preferences, and Use: A Longitudinal Study

The CILS Survey. As mentioned earlier, the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study followed for more than a decade the progress of a large panel of youths representing several dozen nationalities in two main areas of immigrant settlement in the United States: Southern California (San Diego) and South Florida (the Miami and Fort Lauderdale metropolitan areas). The baseline survey, conducted in Spring 1992, interviewed eligible students enrolled in the 8th and 9th grades of all the schools of the San Diego Unified School District (N=2,420). A parallel sample was drawn from the Dade and Broward County Unified School Districts in South Florida, and from two private schools in the Miami area (N=2,842). The sample was drawn in the junior high grades, when dropping out of school is rare, to avoid the potential bias of differential dropout rates between ethnic groups at the senior high school level. Students were eligible to enter the sample if they were U.S.-born but had at least one immigrant (foreign-born) parent, or if they themselves were foreign-born and had come to the U.S. at an early age (before age twelve). The resulting sample was evenly balanced between males and females, and between foreign-born and U.S.-born children of immigrants. Reflecting the geographical clustering of recent immigration, the principal nationalities represented in the San Diego sample are Mexican, Filipino, Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, Chinese, and smaller groups of other children of immigrants from Asia (mostly Korean, Japanese, and Indian) and Latin America (most of the Spanish-speaking countries of Central and South America and the Caribbean). Miami receives mainly immigrants from the Caribbean—especially Cubans, Dominicans, Nicaraguans, Colombians and other Latin Americans, Haitians, Jamaicans and other English-speaking West Indians. The merged CILS sample from these two sites of incorporation encompass virtually all of the principal immigrant groups in the United States today, and well as the principal types of migration flows: professionals and entrepreneurs, labor migrants, and refugees.

Three years later (in 1995), a second survey of the same panel of children of immigrants was conducted. By this time the youths, who were originally interviewed when most were 14 or 15 years old, were now 17 to 18 years old and had reached the final year of high school (or had dropped out of school). And then during 2001-03, a decade after the original survey, a final follow-up was conducted. The respondents now ranged from 23 to 27 years of age, and most had to be contacted individually in their places of work or residence. In total, over a period of more than 24 months of fieldwork, CILS-III retrieved complete or partial information on 3,613 respondents. Table 5 presents the breakdown of the CILS-III sample by age, sex, nationality, and current residence. (For details on the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the longitudinal sample, see Portes and Rumbaut 2005.)

Table 5.
Basic Characteristics of CILS-III Sample, 2001-2003

<i>Variable</i>	<i>South Florida</i>		<i>Southern California</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	
<u>Sex:</u>			<u>Sex:</u>		
Male	958	49.7	Male	803	47.3
Female	971	50.3	Female	861	52.7
<u>National Origin:</u>			<u>National Origin:</u>		
Cuban	862	44.7	Mexican	470	27.9
Nicaraguan	232	12.0	Filipino	627	37.2
Colombian	159	8.2	Vietnamese	232	13.8
Haitian	121	6.3	Laotian, Cambodian	208	12.4
West Indian	170	8.8	Chinese	38	2.3
Other Latin American	267	13.8	Other Latin American	57	3.4
Other	118	6.2	Other Asian	52	3.1
<u>Age:</u>			<u>Age:</u>		
23	375	19.4	23	385	22.9
24	883	45.8	24	731	43.4
25	532	27.6	25	434	25.8
26 or more	139	7.2	26 or more	134	7.9
<u>Current residence:</u>			<u>Current residence:</u>		
Miami/Ft. Lauderdale	1,530	79.3	San Diego	1,201	73.5
Other Florida	111	5.8	Other California	315	19.3
Other US	192	10.0	Other US	111	6.8
Overseas	6	0.4	Overseas	7	0.4
Residence Unknown	<u>90</u>	<u>4.5</u>	Residence Unknown	<u>0</u>	<u>0.0</u>
Totals:	1,929	100.0		1,684	100.0

Source: Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study, 3rd survey wave; Portes and Rumbaut 2005.

For our purposes here, we focus on the 3,071 respondents who came (or whose parents came) from *non-English* speaking countries, and for whom we have complete survey data on English and foreign language competencies, preferences, and use over the span of a decade. Excluded from this analysis are children of immigrants from English-speaking countries whose parents spoke only or predominantly English (from Jamaica and the Anglophone Caribbean, Canada and Great Britain).

Findings. In Tables 6 and 7, selected longitudinal findings are presented for the full CILS sample. I focus here on a range of linguistic outcomes of interest—English vs. foreign language

proficiency, preference, and use with significant others—across the decade from 1992 to about 2002 (2001-2003). While the decennial census collects data on English proficiency for persons who speak another language at home, no data are collected on their degree of proficiency in the foreign language or on their preferences and patterns of language use. Table 6 presents overall longitudinal results for language proficiency, preference and use broken down by four generational cohorts, based on the age at arrival for the *foreign-born*, and the nativity of parents for the *US-born*: 1.5 (ages 6-12 at arrival), 1.75 (ages 0-5 at arrival), 2.0 (US-born with 2 foreign-born parents), and 2.5 (US-born with only 1 foreign-born parent), as well as by language (Spanish vs. Asian languages) and location (Southern California vs. South Florida). Table 7 then presents the same linguistic outcomes for the principal nationalities in the sample—including five Spanish-speaking groups of interest (Mexicans in Southern California, Cubans and other Hispanics in South Florida), Haitians in South Florida, and key Asian groups (Filipinos, Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian and Cambodian).

As Table 6 shows, there are very clear and strong differences among the four generational cohorts of children of immigrants (demonstrating the strong effect of age at arrival and parental nativity on language acquisition), even though at the baseline survey in 1992 the non-English language was spoken in the homes of over 95 percent of all of these teenage respondents (except for the 2.5ers, those with one US-born parent, in which case the proportion of households where a non-English language was spoken fell to 77 percent):

* The 1.5 generation (those who arrived between ages 6 and 12, of primary school age but before puberty) showed the lowest level of linguistic assimilation among the four cohorts, although the force of Anglicization clearly prevails over time: while only 42 percent spoke English *very well* in 1992, 77 percent did so in 2002; by contrast, their spoken and especially reading and writing proficiency in their mother tongue was well below their proficiency in English. As a result, while just over half said they preferred English in 1992, a decade later English was an almost universal choice (96 percent), and already used principally with spouses, close friends and co-workers.

* The 1.75ers (those who came to the U.S. as pre-school-age children under 6) follow in their patterns of linguistic acculturation: 79 percent spoke English very well in 1992, and 89 percent did so by 2002; their abilities in the parental foreign language were much poorer than their English skills; their preference for English accordingly increased from 72 to 88 to 97 percent across the three survey periods; yet their patterns of language use with their parents, spouse, and children also show a significant distance from the patterns exhibited by their U.S.-born co-ethnics (indeed, 3 out of 5 still speak with their parents in the mother tongue rather than English).

* The 2.0 generation (born in the U.S. of parents who are both foreign-born) come next in these rankings: about 90 percent reported speaking English very well at all three survey periods, but their preference for English increased from 81 percent in 1992, to 93 percent in 1995, and 98 percent by 2002, and their patterns of English use consistently fell behind the level reported by the 2.5ers, most notably with their parents (a third now speak with them in English only and another third in both English and the parental language, even though in 1992 a foreign language was the principal language spoken in their homes in 96 percent of the cases).

* Over 90 percent of the 2.5ers (born in the U.S., with one U.S.-born parent and one foreign-born parent) reported speaking English very well throughout the decade, and they overwhelmingly prefer English and use it with their spouse and close friends; two-thirds also report speaking only in English with their parents and (where applicable) their own children.

Table 6.
Language Proficiency, Preference, and Use among Young Adult Children of Immigrants:
Change Over Time, from 1992 (at age 14) to 2002 (at age 24), by Generational Cohort, Language Type, and Location
(CILS Longitudinal Sample)

Language Characteristics (in percents)	Survey Year (N =)	Total (3071)	Generational Cohort*				Language		Location	
			Foreign-born		US-born		Spanish (1892)	Asian Languages (494)	South Florida (1605)	Southern California (1466)
			1.5 (373)	1.75 (1096)	2.0 (1276)	2.5 (326)				
Language Proficiency:										
<i>Language spoken at home:</i>										
	1992									
Foreign		96.7	98.7	94.5	96.0	76.7	97.3	96.5	91.1	96.4
English		3.3	1.3	5.5	4.0	23.3	2.7	3.5	8.9	3.6
<i>English Language Fluency:</i>										
Speaks "very well":	1992	79.8	42.4	78.6	89.9	94.4	82.5	59.7	88.2	72.0
	1995	80.3	54.0	80.0	88.0	90.5	82.4	59.3	88.4	73.5
	2002	88.2	72.4	88.9	91.0	93.6	90.6	77.7	92.6	83.4
Reads "very well":	1992	75.4	44.7	72.3	85.7	90.4	76.1	55.5	83.5	68.4
	1995	80.3	54.0	80.0	88.0	90.5	82.4	59.3	88.4	73.5
	2002	88.8	72.4	89.1	91.9	93.9	90.9	76.5	93.2	83.9
Writes "very well":	1992	72.9	41.0	70.3	83.0	88.8	73.2	55.9	80.9	66.2
	1995	74.2	45.1	73.2	82.3	90.2	77.0	51.8	82.9	67.4
	2002	81.0	66.6	80.5	85.3	88.8	81.8	72.3	84.6	78.4
<i>Foreign Language Fluency:</i>										
Speaks "very well":	1992	33.0	50.4	37.4	27.1	11.5	40.9	33.0	33.1	29.7
	1995	33.7	49.3	36.0	30.0	10.6	44.0	29.4	35.1	29.0
	2002	46.0	55.8	52.6	43.7	22.1	60.1	34.8	57.1	33.9
Reads "very well":	1992	21.3	33.2	22.3	19.0	11.5	29.4	7.6	23.9	17.2
	1995	24.4	36.2	23.0	23.2	11.5	35.3	8.4	27.1	19.1
	2002	35.7	41.3	38.4	36.1	18.1	51.1	8.9	46.2	24.1
Writes "very well":	1992	17.2	29.0	17.6	15.0	8.2	23.5	6.1	18.5	14.5
	1995	17.5	25.6	16.4	17.8	5.7	25.8	5.6	19.3	14.0
	2002	23.7	34.9	24.1	23.4	10.8	33.4	7.5	27.0	20.1

Table 6, continued:

Language Characteristics (in percents)	Survey Year (N =)	Total (3071)	Generational Cohort*				Language		Location	
			Foreign-born		US-born		Spanish (1892)	Asian Languages (494)	South Florida (1605)	Southern California (1466)
			1.5 (373)	1.75 (1096)	2.0 (1276)	2.5 (326)				
Language Preference:										
<i>Language prefers to speak:</i>										
English	1992	75.0	52.6	71.8	80.7	89.8	72.9	63.4	81.0	68.4
English	1995	89.3	76.9	88.4	92.6	97.1	89.1	80.8	93.8	85.2
English or both the same	2002	97.6	95.7	97.3	98.3	98.5	97.0	98.2	97.9	97.3
Language uses with...										
<i>...own parents:</i> 2002										
Foreign language		43.8	55.7	62.2	32.6	11.5	52.6	58.7	50.6	36.5
Both the same		27.6	23.4	22.9	34.0	22.8	32.0	23.6	33.0	21.7
English only		28.6	20.9	14.9	33.4	65.7	15.4	17.8	16.3	41.8
<i>...spouse or partner:</i> 2002										
Foreign language		6.5	17.1	6.2	4.3	2.7	8.5	5.8	5.1	7.7
Both the same		23.8	29.8	27.0	22.0	13.6	30.6	24.0	28.0	20.3
English only		69.7	53.1	66.7	73.7	83.6	61.0	70.2	66.9	72.0
<i>...close friends:</i> 2002										
Foreign language		2.6	8.2	2.1	1.8	1.0	3.1	2.7	1.5	3.7
Both the same		25.9	30.5	28.6	24.5	16.4	33.4	22.4	30.5	20.8
English only		71.5	61.3	69.3	73.7	82.6	63.6	74.9	67.9	75.4
<i>...co-workers:</i> 2002										
Foreign language		3.6	5.8	4.0	3.0	2.4	5.1	2.4	4.4	2.9
Both the same		19.3	10.4	22.4	20.5	13.8	28.9	6.4	28.1	10.1
English only		77.1	83.8	73.6	76.5	83.8	66.0	91.1	67.5	87.1

Source: Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), survey waves I (1992), II (1995) and III (2001-03), S. California and South Florida.

Note: For this analysis, sample excludes immigrants from English-speaking countries.

* Generational cohorts: 1.5 = Foreign-born, 6-12 years at arrival in U.S. (middle childhood); 1.75 = Foreign-born, 0-5 years at U.S. arrival; (early childhood); 2.0 = Foreign-born, one parent foreign-born; 2.5 = U.S.-born, one parent foreign-born, one parent U.S.-born.

Table 7.
Language Proficiency, Preference, and Use among Young Adult Children of Immigrants, by National Origin:
Change Over Time, from 1992 (at age 14) to 2002 (at age 24)
(CILS Longitudinal Sample)

Language Characteristics (in percents)	Survey Year (N =)	National Origin									
		Mexican (415)	Cuban (811)	Nicaraguan (227)	Colombian (155)	Dominican (55)	Haitian (97)	Filipino (588)	Vietnamese (195)	Laotian, Cambodian (187)	Chinese (51)
Language Proficiency:											
<i>Language spoken at home:</i>											
Foreign	1992	98.3	96.8	96.9	98.1	98.2	97.9	94.5	99.0	100.0	92.2
English		1.7	3.2	3.1	1.9	1.8	2.1	5.5	1.0	0.0	7.8
English Language Fluency:											
Speaks "very well":	1992	67.7	90.1	75.3	87.7	81.8	90.7	86.4	61.0	45.5	70.6
	1995	67.5	89.5	80.0	88.6	81.3	92.8	90.1	59.6	46.4	64.7
	2002	83.5	93.6	89.4	94.2	90.9	94.8	88.4	72.3	76.5	82.4
Reads "very well":	1992	59.5	84.5	68.3	79.4	80.0	88.7	87.8	56.4	39.6	70.6
	1995	67.5	89.5	80.0	88.6	81.3	92.8	90.1	59.6	46.4	64.7
	2002	83.6	93.7	89.0	94.2	92.7	96.9	90.8	70.8	74.3	84.3
Writes "very well":	1992	55.4	81.1	69.2	74.8	78.2	87.6	83.9	57.9	40.1	68.6
	1995	62.9	83.8	71.3	82.0	78.7	84.3	83.6	50.5	38.3	60.8
	2002	75.2	85.8	76.2	82.6	81.8	84.5	85.4	65.1	70.6	76.5
Foreign Language Fluency:											
Speaks "very well":	1992	53.4	34.4	43.4	41.3	30.9	22.9	9.4	33.8	39.0	29.4
	1995	56.9	38.4	48.7	44.3	37.5	24.1	8.5	27.1	38.8	19.6
	2002	63.6	56.7	62.6	67.1	63.6	43.3	10.4	29.7	50.8	17.6
Reads "very well":	1992	37.3	24.8	30.2	30.3	32.7	9.3	8.9	9.7	5.5	7.8
	1995	46.8	31.2	37.9	33.6	29.2	9.6	7.8	10.6	6.0	9.8
	2002	58.1	47.3	54.6	53.5	49.1	24.7	10.4	12.3	7.0	5.9
Writes "very well":	1992	31.8	19.8	23.0	23.9	21.8	6.2	8.0	7.2	4.9	3.9
	1995	35.3	22.9	25.6	24.3	20.8	6.0	4.6	6.4	5.5	3.9
	2002	48.7	28.9	30.4	30.3	27.3	12.4	8.0	10.3	5.9	2.0

Table 7, continued:

Language Characteristics (in percents)	Survey Year (N=)	National Origin									
		Mexican (415)	Cuban (811)	Nicaraguan (227)	Colombian (155)	Dominican (55)	Haitian (97)	Filipino (588)	Vietnamese (195)	Laotian, Cambodian (187)	Chinese (51)
Language Preference:											
Language prefers to speak:											
English	1992	45.3	84.6	76.2	71.6	72.7	83.5	89.8	54.4	60.4	78.4
English	1995	75.3	94.7	92.3	92.9	81.3	94.0	96.6	77.7	77.6	86.3
English or both the same	2002	93.4	98.3	97.4	98.1	96.4	94.6	99.7	99.5	96.3	100.0
Language uses with...											
<i>...own parents:</i> 2002											
Foreign language		55.2	45.9	72.2	60.0	57.4	34.7	5.0	66.1	66.8	50.0
Both the same		32.0	35.8	24.7	28.7	25.9	44.2	13.9	20.8	28.3	16.0
English only		12.8	18.3	3.1	11.3	16.7	21.1	81.1	13.0	4.9	34.0
<i>...spouse or partner:</i> 2002											
Foreign language		16.8	4.0	4.9	4.8	10.0	4.5	1.8	7.7	5.8	4.5
Both the same		37.0	30.3	26.8	31.0	43.3	25.0	5.5	23.1	32.2	9.1
English only		46.2	65.8	68.3	64.3	46.7	70.5	92.7	69.2	62.0	86.4
<i>...close friends:</i> 2002											
Foreign language		8.5	0.8	2.7	1.3	5.5	3.1	0.9	2.7	3.8	2.0
Both the same		42.6	33.2	28.7	28.9	43.6	28.1	4.5	25.5	27.5	10.0
English only		48.9	66.1	68.6	69.8	50.9	68.8	94.7	71.8	68.7	88.0
<i>...co-workers:</i> 2002											
Foreign language		6.4	4.5	4.7	2.1	8.3	1.1	0.5	3.3	2.3	2.3
Both the same		26.9	32.3	29.4	25.7	27.1	8.0	1.6	6.6	6.9	4.5
English only		66.7	63.2	65.9	72.2	64.6	90.8	97.9	90.1	90.8	93.2

Source: Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), survey waves I (1992), II (1995) and III (2001-03), Southern California and South Florida samples.

Note: For this analysis, sample excludes immigrants from English-speaking countries.

Similar generational patterns obtained, in reverse, for their proficiency in the mother tongue (the non-English language spoken at home), except that there was basically no change over time in their ability to speak the foreign language very well (proficiency levels remained unchanged during adolescence from 1992 to 1995, followed by a slight increase from 1995 to 2002 for all cohorts in their transitions to adulthood, most notably seen among the Spanish-speakers). Still, even among the 1.5ers, only about half could speak the mother tongue very well, as did a third of the 1.75ers, around a fourth of the 2.0 cohort, and only about a tenth of the 2.5ers. Their literacy skills were much worse, indicative of the fragility and instability of this bilingualism.

There are also clear differences by national origin, as Table 7 shows, with the starkest contrasts between Spanish speakers and the various Asian languages (with Filipinos standing out for its very rapid switch to English among all Asian-origin ethnic groups). Among the Asian-origin nationalities, with often tonal languages and entirely different alphabets, reading and writing literacy skills were in the single-digits, but even spoken proficiency was far behind their ability to speak English. All the Spanish-speakers (including the Colombians, Dominicans, Nicaraguans, Cubans and Mexicans) were by comparison much more fluent in Spanish than the Asian groups were in their mother tongues, but even among them their proficiency levels in English were much superior to those in Spanish, so that even among the Mexicans and the Cubans their linguistic preferences and patterns of use had switched decisively to English—i.e., even among the groups who would have been expected to have remained most loyal to Spanish, respectively, in San Diego, a Spanish-named city on the Mexican border with the busiest international border crossing in the world, and in the heart of Miami (dubbed “Havana USA”), where more than 3 out of every 4 residents are either foreign-born or of foreign-parentage, and the majority report speaking Spanish to some degree at home. Expressed preferences for English over the mother tongue ranged from 93.4 percent for the Mexicans to 98.3 percent for the Cubans, with other Hispanic groups in between; 94.6 percent for the Haitians; and virtually 100 percent for the Asian groups (only slightly less, 96.3 percent, for the poorest and least educated groups, the Laotians and Cambodians).

Linguistic Life Expectancies

To test Huntington’s assertion of linguistic retention among persons of Latin American as well as Asian origin, by far the two largest sources of immigration to the United States over the past 40 years, we merged the CILS-San Diego and IIMMLA data sets to generate an innovative analysis of “linguistic life expectancies.” Specifically, we use data on the degree to which immigrants and their descendants in different generational cohorts are able to speak and actually use their mother tongue to derive linguistic “survival curves” across the generations. These survival curves yield “mortality rates” to which we can apply life table methods to develop “linguistic life expectancies”—the average number of generations a mother tongue can be expected to survive in the United States after the arrival of an immigrant. In doing so, we hope to provide the public with an intuitively appealing way of understanding that Spanish in no way constitutes a threat to the continued predominance of English within the United States, because use of Spanish dies out rapidly across the generations, even in the area of highest Hispanic immigrant concentration in the United States.

The surveys we use were conducted in Southern California, a region adjacent to the Mexican border that was not only the nation’s largest net receiver of immigrants during the period 1970-2006, but one that also contained more Spanish-speakers and persons of Mexican

origin than any other megalopolitan area, and displayed a rising level of Hispanic residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1987; Iceland, Weinberg, and Steinmetz 2002). By the year 2000 one of every five immigrants in the United States resided in the region's six contiguous counties (San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura, Riverside and San Bernardino), including the largest communities of Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Koreans, Iranians, and Cambodians outside of their countries of origin. In the Los Angeles metropolitan area alone, according to Current Population Survey estimates, by the year 2000 the Mexican-origin population surpassed 5 million persons, including some 2.2 million born in Mexico, 2 million born in the U.S. of Mexican-born parents, and another million who were third generation or higher; and in the huge television market of Greater Los Angeles in the summer of 2005, 9 of the 10 most-watched prime-time programs were telenovelas broadcast in Spanish by KMEX, the Univisión channel (see López 2005). For these reasons our analysis offers a "hard test" of Huntington's hypothesis. If speaking Spanish does not persist across immigrant generations in the urban corridor stretching from San Diego on the Mexican border to Los Angeles, then it probably will not persist in other communities throughout the United States.

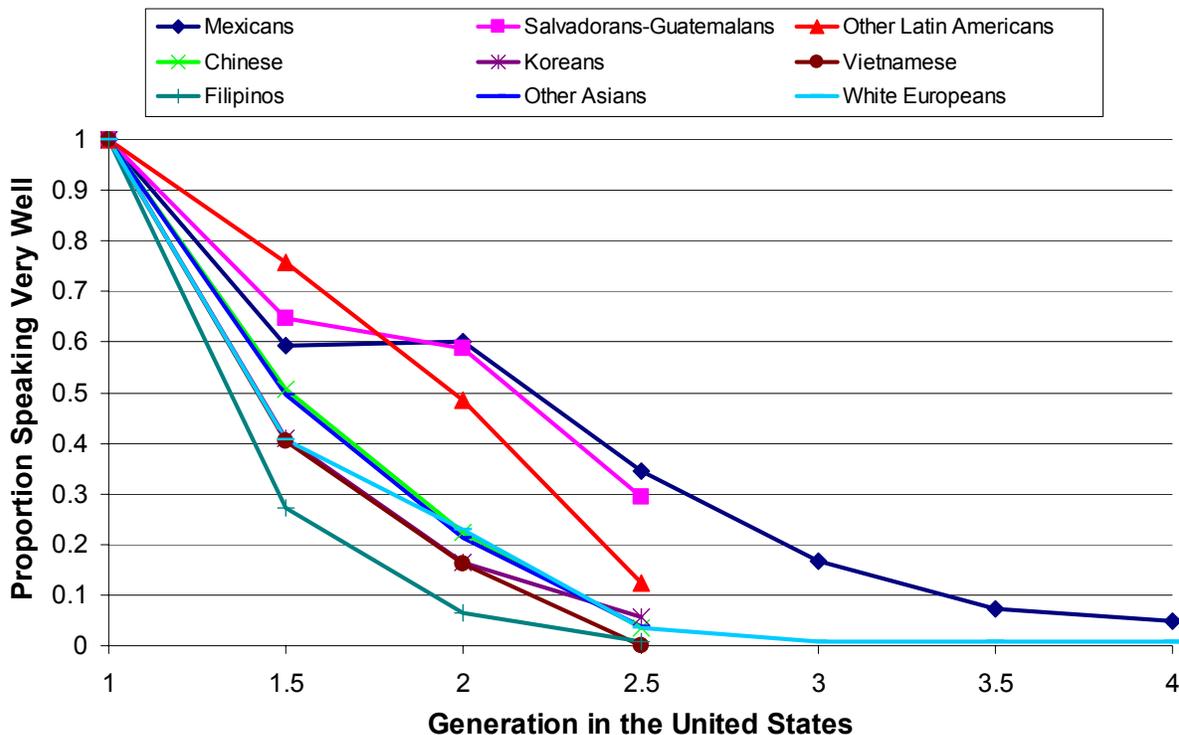
For purposes of this analysis the IIMMLA and CILS-San Diego data sets were merged (N=5,703), since they are based on representative samples of respondents evenly divided by gender, of the same approximate age (28.6 years for IIMMLA respondents and 24.2 years for CILS) and national origins (Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Filipinos, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Koreans make up 78% of the merged sample, and other Latin American and Asian nationalities 10%), who were surveyed at about the same time (IIMMLA in 2004, CILS in 2001-2003) in the same metropolitan region (the six contiguous Southern California counties); and both surveys used identical measures of English and non-English language proficiency and preference, and of other relevant variables. By merging the two data sets we thus gain larger sample sizes for significant subgroups and greater precision and reliability for our estimates of linguistic life expectancies by group and generation (for methodological details on sampling and measurement, see the references cited below). The merged data sets reflect the diversity of contemporary immigration (immigrants and refugees, laborers and professionals, documented and undocumented), including significant subsamples of the least educated and poorest immigrants from Latin America (particularly from Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala) and Southeast Asia (especially from Laos and Cambodia).

To analyze linguistic variation across the generations, we defined generational categories following the approach of Rumbaut (2004). Those born outside the United States comprise the *first generation*, divided into two cohorts based on their age at arrival: the 1.0 generation of immigrants who arrived as adults (who will not concern us in this analysis), and the 1.5 generation of those who arrived as children (here restricted to those who arrived in the U.S. before age 15). The U.S.-born *second generation* is also divided into two cohorts: members of the 2.0 generation were born in the United States of two foreign-born parents, whereas members of the 2.5 generation were born in the United States of one foreign-born parent and one U.S.-born parent. The *third generation* consists of U.S.-born persons with two U.S.-born parents, but among them we distinguish the 3.0 cohort (those with 3 or 4 foreign-born grandparents) from the 3.5 cohort (with only 1 or 2 foreign-born grandparents). Finally, those in the *fourth generation* are respondents whose parents and grandparents were all born in the United States. These generational intervals effectively constitute meaningful representations of time in the life of a foreign language. We then apply life table methods to figure out how long languages can be expected to last in the United States.

For all groups of IIMMLA and CILS respondents (N=5,703) except Mexicans and European whites, immigration is so recent that sampling is infeasible beyond the 2.5 generation. Indeed, for those groups without exception, more than 70 percent of their total population in the U.S. is foreign-born, and of the remainder nearly all belong to the U.S.-born second generation. For those groups and their descendants in Southern California, members of the fourth generation have not yet been born and members of the third generation are small in number and still in infancy or childhood. Thus, Mexicans offer the strongest test of Huntington’s hypothesis; and clearly, by his frequent mention of their situation and population size in the United States, they were the group most salient in his mind. In total, the merged IIMMLA and CILS data set used in this analysis contains 1,642 respondents of Mexican origin above the 1.0 generation, including 423 in the 1.5 generation, 578 in the 2.0, 240 in the 2.5, 48 in the 3.0, 164 in the 3.5, and 189 in the 4.0 or higher generational cohorts. These cell sizes are large enough to provide robust estimates of linguistic life expectancies.

We measure the “survival” of immigrants’ mother tongues using answers to two survey questions. The first asked how well a respondent spoke the language of his or her ancestors and those who did not answer “very well” were assigned the equivalent of a linguistic death certificate. We consider the mother tongue “dead” in the sense that the respondent has lost the ability to speak it with fluency. The second question asked which language the respondent preferred to speak in the household. If the respondent answered “English,” then the mother tongue was considered to have “died” in the sense that it was no longer used within the intimate confines of family life. Those two criteria are reasonable predictors of language death.

Figure 1. Proportion who speak mother tongue very well by generation



Other data from the IIMMLA and CILS surveys, as we saw above, showed that the ability of children of immigrants to read or write a non-English language fares much worse than their ability to speak it, and that once literacy in a language dies, the remaining level of fluency in the language is much more likely to atrophy over time, and bilingualism becomes increasingly uneven and unstable. Moreover, it is in the home where a non-English mother tongue is most likely to be used, especially with immigrant parents who arrived as adults; among the 1.5 and higher generations in Southern California, communication with coworkers, close friends, and even spouses and children is far more likely to take place in English.

Figure 1 shows linguistic survival curves defined according to the first criterion. The x-axis gives generations spent in the United States in increments of 0.5, and the y-axis indicates the proportion of group members still speaking the mother tongue very well—i.e. the proportion among whom language fluency has “survived.” Given the sheer number and density of Spanish language speakers in Southern California, and the long history of Mexican settlement, we would logically expect the generational survival curves for Spanish-speaking groups to be above those of Asians and white Europeans, and this is indeed the case. At each generational point from 1.5 to 2.5 the proportion speaking Spanish is higher than the proportion speaking any other mother tongue.

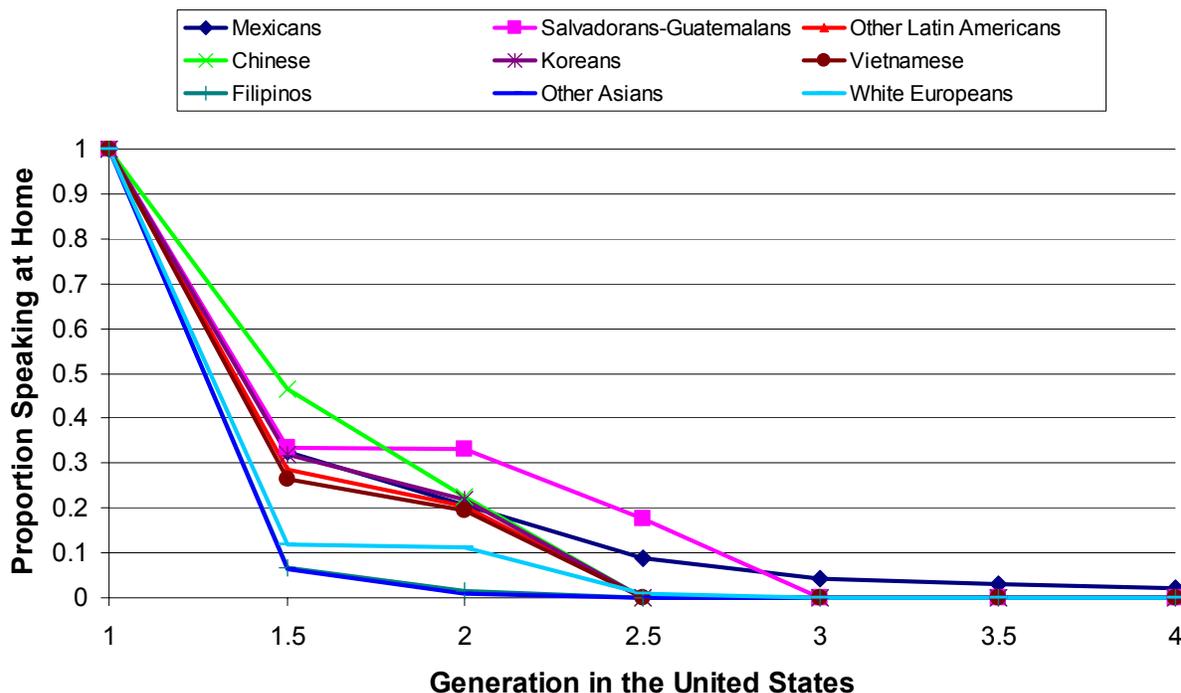
In generation 2.5, 34.6% of Mexicans, 29.4% of Salvadorans and Guatemalans, and 12.5% of Other Latin Americans still speak Spanish very well. In contrast, the proportion speaking the mother tongue very well in generation 2.5 does not rise above 6% for any other group. In the third generation and beyond, we can only compare Mexicans and European whites. Despite the strong retention of the mother tongue among Mexicans through generation 2.5 (35% compared with just 3% of white Europeans, thereafter the survival curves begin to converge. At generation 3.0 only 17% of Mexicans still speak fluent Spanish and at 3.5 the figure drops to just 7%. By the time we arrive at the fourth generation, the proportion of Mexicans who speak Spanish very well is just 5%, compared to around 1% for white Europeans. In other words, given the linguistic death rates prevailing in Southern California, Mexican immigrants arriving today can expect only 5 of every 100 of their great grandchildren to speak fluent Spanish.

Linguistic ability is not linguistic use, however, and although some descendants of Mexican immigrants may retain the basic ability to speak Spanish, they may prefer to use English in most settings. If they prefer to speak English at home, for example, they are not likely to prefer Spanish in other settings and probably will only use it when the social situation appears to require a linguistic shift. Figure 2 thus presents survival curves where the “death” of the mother tongue occurs when a respondent in a particular generation states that he or she prefers to speak English at home. Although even according to this definition, Mexicans and Central Americans continue to display elevated survival curves compared with other groups, they no longer stand out as visually distinct in the graph, and other Latin Americans display a curve that is indistinguishable from that of the Vietnamese or the Koreans. Even among Mexicans, by the third generation 96% prefer to speak English at home.

Thereafter the graph levels off with just 3% expressing a preference for Spanish. Put another way, the probability is 97% that the great grandchildren of Mexican immigrants will not speak Spanish. With only three out of 100 persons of Mexican origin speaking Spanish after the third generation, the language is clearly on life support if not entirely dead. If the vast majority of Mexicans in Southern California cannot retain fluency in Spanish or a preference for its household use beyond the third generation, then its survival prospects elsewhere in the United

States are probably equally dim. Contrary to Huntington’s assertions, even the nation’s largest Spanish speaking enclave, within a border region that historically belonged to Mexico, Spanish for all intents and purposes appears to be well on the way to a quiet natural death by the third generation of U.S. residence.

Figure 2. Proportion who prefer to speak mother tongue at home by generation



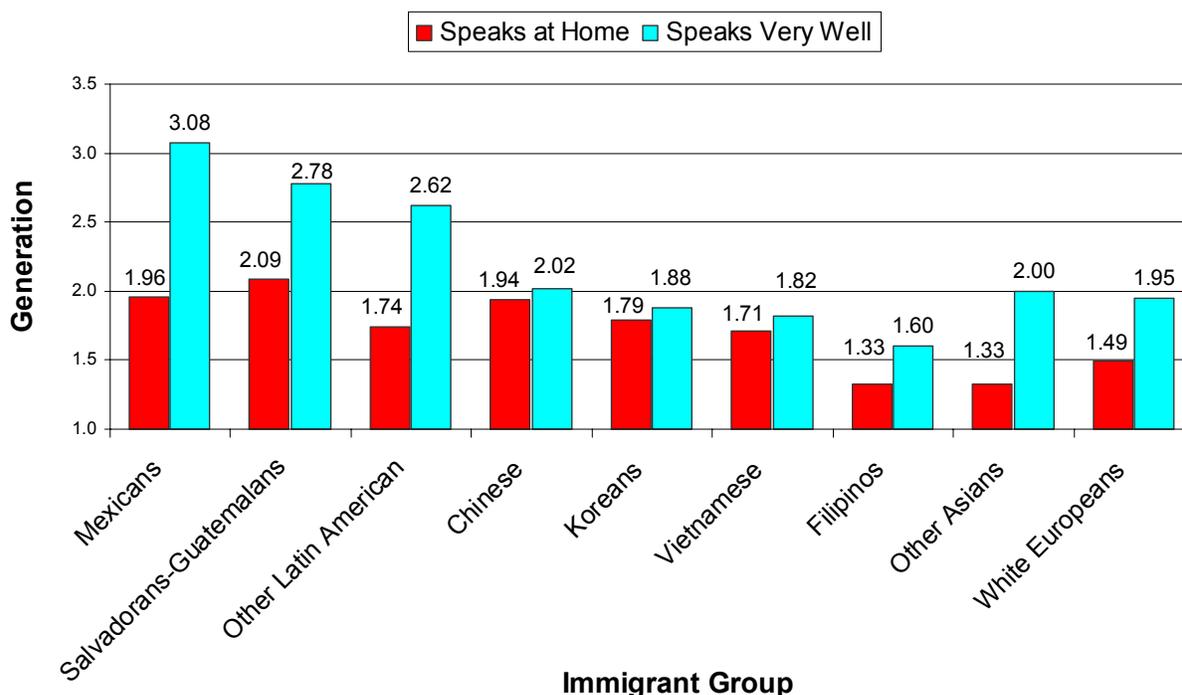
In order to compare the survival prospects for different mother tongues across groups using a simple and easily interpretable metric, we employed life table methods to compute linguistic life expectancies based on the survival curves shown in Figures 1 and 2. In doing so, we follow a hypothetical cohort of ethnic group members as they “age” across the generations and experience the linguistic mortality rates prevailing in Southern California according to the IIMMLA and CILS data. Rather than a person aging year to year, duration here is measured in terms of half-generation increments. A language is “born” in the United States with the arrival of first generation immigrants and then it survives over time to the extent that people in different generations continue to retain the ability to speak it and use it within their households.

We can further extend the analogy between human life and death and linguistic life and death by applying the classic formulae of the life table (see Preston, Heuveline, and Guillot 2000) to compute “generational life expectancies” for the mother tongues spoken by different immigrant groups in Southern California. The only complete generational survival curves, of course, are for Mexicans and white Europeans. To enable computations of life expectancies among other immigrant origins we linearly extrapolate the most recent half generation and once the curve falls below a survival threshold of 0.05, we close out the life table in the next half-generational segment. The resulting life expectancies give the average number of generations a

foreign language can be expected to survive within the cultural and linguistic milieu of contemporary Southern California.

The bar chart in [Figure 3](#) shows the life expectancies for the mother tongue of the various origin groups studied to this point. For each group, the left-hand bar shows the life expectancy computed when death is defined to occur when the respondent no longer prefers to speak it at home, and the right-hand bar shows the life expectancy computed when the respondent reports he or she cannot speak it very well. As can be seen, irrespective of which definition is considered, no mother tongue can be expected to survive beyond the third generation given the linguistic survival probabilities now prevailing in Southern California.

Figure 3. Linguistic life expectancies for selected immigrant groups



The most liberal definition of linguistic life—retaining the ability to speak a language as opposed to a preference for its daily use—yields a life expectancy of 3.08 generations for Mexican Spanish, 2.78 generations for the Spanish spoken by Guatemalans and Salvadorans, and 2.62 for that spoken by other Latin Americans. Under current conditions, therefore, the ability to speak Spanish very well can be expected to disappear sometime between the second and third generation for all Latin American groups in Southern California. Life expectancies are even lower when life is defined by a preference for its use at home. In terms of daily use, Spanish can be expected to die out after 1.96 generations among Mexicans, 2.09 generations among Guatemalans and Salvadorans, and 1.74 generations for other Latin Americans.

Among Asian groups, the two definitions of linguistic life and death generally do not yield very different life expectancies, and in some circumstances the speaking of the mother tongue at home yields a slightly higher expectation of life than the ability to speak it very well. Nonetheless, no matter which group or definition considered, the average Asian language can be expected to die out at or near the second generation. The lowest life expectancies are observed among immigrants from the Philippines, a former U.S. colony where English is widely spoken.

The average life expectancy for the mother tongue of Filipinos (usually Tagalog) is only around 1.3 generations for the preference-based definition and 1.6 generations for the ability-based definition. In general, however, life expectancies for Asian languages (including Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean) among immigrants in Southern California vary in the narrow range between 1.5 and 2.0 generations of U.S. residence, which is comparable to the range of linguistic life expectancies observed among white Europeans (1.49 to 1.95, depending on which definition is considered).

A Language Graveyard?

In this analysis we have drawn on newly available data from two surveys—the Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles survey, and the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study in San Diego—to test Huntington’s assertion that Spanish is unlikely to go the way of other immigrant languages in the United States and succumb to English language dominance across the generations. Southern California offers an ideal critical test of his hypothesis because it is the largest Spanish-speaking enclave in the United States and houses some of the oldest and largest Mexican neighborhoods in the country, as well as the nation’s largest concentration of immigrants. We defined linguistic survival in two ways: a preference for speaking a mother tongue within the household and the ability to speak that language very well. We then computed survival curves in half-generation increments and applied life table methods to derive linguistic life expectancies.

Our findings directly contradict Huntington’s assertions. The United States has aptly been described as a “graveyard” for languages because of its historical ability to absorb immigrants by the millions and extinguish their mother tongues within a few generations (Portes and Rumbaut 2006), and Spanish appears to offer no threat to this reputation. Owing to the number and density of Spanish speakers in metropolitan Southern California, Mexicans and other Latin American groups retain a greater ability to speak their mother tongue very well compared with other groups, but thereafter ability drops sharply and converges toward the pattern observed for white Europeans. However, when survival is defined in terms of a preference for speaking Spanish at home, the survival curves for Mexicans and other Latin American groups look much more like those of Asians and white Europeans.

Consistent with the basic survival curves, the average life expectancy for Spanish among Mexicans in Southern California is just 1.96 generations using preference-based definitions of linguistic life and death and 3.08 generations using ability-based definitions. The respective figures for Salvadorans and Guatemalans are 2.09 and 2.7 generations, and for other Latin Americans 1.74 and 2.62 generations. For all other groups the corresponding linguistic life expectancies varied between 1.5 and 2.1 generations. Although the life expectancy of Spanish may be slightly greater among Mexicans in Southern California, its ultimate demise nonetheless seems assured by the third generation. Like taxes and biological death, linguistic death seems to be a sure thing in the United States, even for Mexicans living in Los Angeles, currently one of the largest Spanish speaking cities in the world.

This analysis carries the same caveat as any other study based on a period life table estimated from cross sectional data: it assumes that the linguistic behavior of today’s second, third, and fourth generation immigrants accurately forecasts the behavior of future generations. It is possible that Spanish will be retained more in the future because it is no longer negatively stigmatized in schools; because continuous immigration creates more opportunities to speak

Spanish in the future; or because Spanish-language media become increasingly prevalent over time. At this point, however, after at least 50 years of continuous Mexican migration into Southern California, Spanish appears to draw its last feeble breath in the third generation.

The death of immigrant languages in the United States is not only an empirical fact, but can also be considered as part of a larger and widespread global process of “language death” (Crystal 2000). Whether this is desirable or not, of course, is another question altogether. To the extent that language fluency is an asset and that knowledge of a foreign tongue represents a scarce resource in a global economy, immigrants' efforts to maintain this part of their cultural heritage and pass it on to their children seem worth supporting.

Table 8.
Attitudes About English and Foreign Languages in the United States (2000)
(2000 General Social Survey, MEUS Module, N=1,398)

	N	%		N	%
Speaking English as the common national language is what unites all Americans:			English is threatened if other languages are used frequently in large immigrant communities in the US:		
Strongly agree	354	26	Strongly agree	120	9
Agree	670	50	Agree	318	24
Disagree	285	21	Disagree	692	51
Strongly disagree	37	3	Strongly disagree	217	16
Learning a foreign language is as valuable as learning math and science in school:			Children in the U.S. should learn a second language fluently before they finish high school:		
Strongly agree	278	21	Strongly agree	362	26
Agree	583	43	Agree	665	49
Disagree	422	31	Disagree	298	22
Strongly disagree	70	5	Strongly disagree	42	3
Bilingual education programs should be eliminated in American public schools:			Election ballots should be printed in other languages in areas where lots of people don't speak English:		
Strongly agree	80	6	Strongly agree	227	17
Agree	218	16	Agree	665	49
Disagree	665	50	Disagree	293	22
Strongly disagree	380	28	Strongly disagree	166	12

Source: Rumbaut and Alba (2003).

In fact, results from the General Social Survey taken in 2000 with a nationally representative sample of American adults, summarized in [Table 8](#) above, indicate that solid majorities of Americans want their own children to develop fluency in a second language before they graduate from high school (75 percent) and believe that learning a foreign language is as valuable as learning math and science in school (64 percent). They strongly disagreed (by 78 percent to 22 percent) that bilingual education programs should be eliminated in American public schools, and agreed (66 percent) that election ballots should be printed in other languages where needed. And by a two-thirds margin (67 percent), they disagreed with the statement that “English is threatened if other languages are used frequently in large immigrant communities in the U.S.” Those results show much more open attitudes to language learning and bilingualism than one might find in a “language graveyard.” However, 3 out of 4 (76 percent) also believe that “Speaking English as the common national language is what unites all Americans.” Taken together, these responses, by large majorities, suggest that Americans favor not a subtractive but an additive language policy—English, naturally, but English-*plus*.

English proficiency has always been a key to socioeconomic mobility for immigrants, and to their full participation in their adoptive society. The findings reported here demonstrate the rapidity with which English is acquired by young immigrants and their US-born children—perhaps faster than at any time in U.S. history. It is worth noting that in the same year that Proposition 63 (the initiative declaring English as the state's official language) passed in California, over 40,000 immigrants were turned away from ESL classes in the Los Angeles Unified School District alone: the supply of services had not meet the vigorous demand for English training. Twenty years later in Los Angeles, that demand has not waned and continues to far exceed the supply.

Ironically, in recent years the lack of fluent bilinguals who can serve as reliable translators and interlocutors has even emerged as a national security concern, as it did in the days after September 11 (when intelligence agencies like the CIA, FBI and NSA found a dearth of bilingual speakers in newly critical languages), or last December 2006, when the Iraq Study Group in its bipartisan report, noting that of the 1,000 people who worked in the U.S. Embassy in Iraq only six spoke Arabic fluently, observed that “all of our efforts in Iraq, military and civilian, are handicapped by Americans’ lack of knowledge of language and cultural understanding...in a conflict that demands effective and efficient communication,” and recommended that the U.S. Government give high priority to professional language proficiency.

However, without strong social structural supports, the chances of sustaining fluent bilingualism in American communities seem slim. Given the immense pressure for linguistic conformity on immigrant children from peers, schools and the media, the preservation of fluent bilingualism in the U.S. beyond the first generation is an exceptional outcome. It is dependent both on the intellectual and economic resources of parents (such as well-educated immigrant professionals) and their efforts to transmit the mother tongue to their children, and on the presence of institutionally complete ethnic communities where literacy in a second language is taught in schools and its use is valued in business and the labor market (such as those found in large entrepreneurial enclaves). The combination of these factors is rare: Miami may provide the closest approximation in the U.S. today, but even there, as the data presented above show, the progressive anglicization of the Cuban second generation is evident.

Our conclusions thus reverse the concerns and alarms often found in some sectors of the popular literature, which call attention to the proliferation of foreign languages and to the supposed threat they pose to English dominance. Historical and contemporary evidence indicates that English has never been seriously threatened as the dominant language of the United States and that—with nearly a quarter of a billion monolingual English speakers—it is certainly not threatened today, not even in Southern California. For that matter, English has become firmly established throughout the world as the premier international language of commerce, diplomacy, education, journalism, aviation, technology, the Internet and mass culture. What is endangered instead is the survivability of the non-English languages that immigrants bring with them to the United States.

REFERENCES

- Alba, Richard D., John Logan, Amy Lutz, and Brian 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.
- Alba, Richard D., and Victor Nee. 2003. Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Crystal, David. 2000. Language Death. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 2004. Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Iceland, John, Daniel H. Weinberg, and Erika Steinmetz. 2002. Racial and Ethnic Residential Segregation in the United States 1980-2000. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- López, Steve. 2005. "A Spanish Soap Opera Cleans Up in L.A." The Los Angeles Times, September 3, p.B1.
- Massey, Douglas S., and Nancy A. Denton. 1987. "Trends in the Residential Segregation of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians." American Sociological Review 52: 802-25.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut. 2006. Immigrant America: A Portrait. 3rd edition. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut. 2001. Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation. Berkeley and New York: University of California Press and Russell Sage Foundation.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut. 2005. "The Second Generation and the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study." Ethnic and Racial Studies 28, 6: 983-999.
- Preston, Samuel P., Patrick Heuveline, and Michele Guillot. 2000. Demography: Measuring and Modeling Population Processes. New York: Blackwell.
- Rumbaut, Rubén G. 2004. "Ages, Life Stages, and Generational Cohorts: Decomposing the Immigrant First and Second Generations in the United States." International Migration Review 38: 1160-1205.
- Rumbaut, Rubén G., and Richard A. Alba. 2003. "Perceptions of Group Size and Group Position in 'Multi-Ethnic United States.'" Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, Georgia.
- Rumbaut, Rubén G., Frank Bean, Susan K. Brown, Leo R. Chávez, Louis DeSipio, Jennifer Lee, and Min Zhou. 2005. "Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles." Report to the Russell Sage Foundation. Irvine: University of California.
- Rumbaut, Rubén G., Douglas S. Massey, and Frank Bean. 2006. "Linguistic Life Expectancies: Immigrant Language Retention in Southern California." Population and Development Review, September.