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Analyzing Ethnic Orientation in the quantitative sociolinguistic paradigm



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ABSTRACT

Ethnic Orientation, defined as speakers' sociolinguistic practices and attitudes, does not affect all communities, languages, or linguistic variables equally. We illustrate that the types of differences that emerge depend on methodological decisions, particularly at the analysis stage. We provide examples of inter-community differences including some that emerge differently depending on the method of analysis. This is accomplished by comparison of Heritage Language patterns among groups of Toronto residents: speakers of Heritage Cantonese, Italian, Russian, Ukrainian and Polish; and English patterns in Chinese-descent and Italian-descent Torontonians, comparing across three generations since immigration. We examine the variables pro-drop and Voice Onset Time in the Heritage Language data. The Canadian Vowel Shift and consonant cluster simplification are examined in English. We show that *no* Ethnic Orientation facets correlate to all types of linguistic variation. The relationships found between linguistic variables and Ethnic Orientation variables suggest Ethnic Orientation is a key factor in modeling variation in Heritage Language communities – their variation should not be attributed solely to subtractive processes like incomplete acquisition or attrition.

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1. Introduction

Many speakers who control two or more languages may use features of one language while speaking the other. We expect that speakers' patterns of language use and attitudes toward each language that they speak (and toward the speakers of these languages) will influence the extent of this type of language mixing. When such contact effects are examined in the majority language (e.g., English in Toronto), the concept of ethnolect, or ethnically-indexed variety, may be called into play. However, when we examine minority language use within each ethnically-specified community, e.g., the use of Heritage Italian in Toronto, the ethnolect concept is not applicable – we are not looking for distinctions within a language that index different ethnicities. It is, however, fruitful to examine contact effects in both directions in tandem in order to best understand the multi-faceted nature of linguistic identity-construction in multilingual communities. Attitudes and patterns of language use are expected to play roles in both of a speaker's varieties. Indeed, Noels (2014, p. 88) describes Harzing's (2006) study showing that the very choice of language in which a survey is administered may influence how a speaker responds to a survey. This highlights the importance of considering each linguistic facet of a multilingual speaker in turn: identity may be constructed differently in each language. In this paper, we compare sociolinguistic variation in English and Heritage languages in several Toronto communities.

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We refer to attitudes toward a language and its speakers as “Ethnic Orientation,” which Noels (2014, p. 88) defines as a loosely connected cluster of thoughts, feelings and behaviours pertaining to a person’s orientation towards their ancestral ethnic group and/or any other relevant ethnic group.

In this paper, we compare how Ethnic Orientation measures correlate with linguistic variation in Heritage Languages and English. We show that Ethnic Orientation does not affect all communities, languages, or linguistic variables equally: there is no short, simple set of Ethnic Orientation “facts” that reliably correlate to all types of linguistic variation. We illustrate the types of differences that emerge depending on decisions made by the researchers at each step of analysis. The fact that different analytic methods provide different pictures of Ethnic Orientation effects highlights the importance of critically evaluating one’s methodology throughout the research process. We provide examples of these effects by exploring the role of Ethnic Orientation in variable linguistic behavior through a number of sociolinguistic comparisons, summarized in (1).

(1) **Cross-ethnicity comparisons**

We examine the linguistic behavior of groups of speakers who represent different ethnicities in Toronto. This includes comparisons of Heritage Language patterns among Cantonese, Italian, Russian, Ukrainian and Polish speakers; and English variation among Torontonians of Cantonese Chinese descent and Italian descent.

Cross-generational comparisons

We examine the Ethnic Orientation and linguistic behavior of first generation immigrant speakers versus second (and third) generation speakers.

Cross-linguistic comparisons

We examine the linguistic behavior of speakers in their two languages. This includes comparisons of, for instance, reflections of Ethnic Orientation in Heritage Cantonese to reflections of Ethnic Orientation in the English of the Cantonese community. This also includes comparisons between instantiations of Ethnic Orientation in English in the Cantonese communities versus in English in Toronto more broadly.

Cross-variable comparisons

We contrast effects of Ethnic Orientation on the variables pro-drop and Voice Onset Time in the Heritage Language data. The Canadian Vowel Shift and consonant cluster simplification are examined in English.

This project, investigating different instantiations of Ethnic Orientation via the comparisons described in (1), illustrates that different facets of EO behave differently according to language, community, generation, and linguistic variable within which they are studied. Section 2 describes the methods used to collect data in order to make these comparisons. We then explore two questions:

- Which aspects of speakers’ sociolinguistic behavior, attitudes and perceptions contribute to the construction of ethnic orientation? (Section 3).
- Which aspects of speakers’ ethnic orientation contribute to linguistic variation (Section 4)?

Before linguistic variation can be properly analyzed, we must resolve which aspects of Ethnic Orientation are independent, robust and relevant, as there are many potentially interacting and overlapping factors to disentangle before they can be introduced into a variationist model. Only then can we explore and develop methods of sociolinguistic analysis that may yield consistent cross-linguistic effects. The specification of generalizable principles about contact-induced language change, particularly with respect to identity and social practices, is at the heart of the research projects in which we are engaged.

One interesting finding is that, in general, factors relating to childhood accounted for more of the variance among speakers in the Ethnic Orientation data than factors relating to the participants’ current practices. As Fix (2014, p. 55) summarizes, “research in language and dialect acquisition [provides] evidence of the import of exposure to a language or variety before the critical period of early adolescence for its acquisition [. . . although there] is also evidence that more recent social relations also strongly conditions linguistic behavior.” We note, however, that there is not much difference in the effects of childhood vs. adult practices on *linguistic* variation.

A second important point is the different picture that emerges when univariate (correlation) vs. multivariate (regression) methods are applied: when we look at each social factor independently, seeking correlation to *rates of usage* of a particular linguistic variant, no consistent sociolinguistic patterns are revealed. In contrast, multivariate regression analysis does reveal certain sociolinguistic patterns.

Our goal is to understand how Ethnic Orientation operates as a predictor of linguistic variation across languages, communities, generations and variables. To effect such comparisons, a consistent method of organizing our understanding of Ethnic Orientation across languages, communities, and generations is needed. We therefore first operate on each corpus as a whole, in order to see how best to distill the responses to our EO questionnaire. Section 3 describes the approach. In Section 4 we turn to analysis of linguistic variation. At that stage, we model our EO data as described in Section 3, but using Ethnic Orientation responses only for the speakers who provided the linguistic data for each variable.

2. Data collection methods

Toronto provides an ideal site for this kind of research. It is a multicultural city, where only 54% of residents report English as their (only) mother tongue (Statistics Canada, 2012). We took our data from two ongoing projects that look at the effect of

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