

**The Effect of Community Context on  
Intergenerational Spanish Maintenance  
and English Proficiency  
among Latina and Latino Children**

by

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BY

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THE EFFECT OF COMMUNITY CONTEXT ON INTERGENERATIONAL SPANISH  
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In this dissertation I investigate how community context affects Spanish language use and English proficiency among Latina and Latino children in the United States, focusing on the children of immigrants. I view children's language attributes through a sociological perspective that recognizes that children learn and use languages within specific social and cultural contexts, and that these contexts have an important effect on language acquisition and use. This theoretical perspective leads to the hypothesis that children's language skills and language use will be affected by the communities they live in. I predict that living in a metropolitan area with a greater propinquity and availability of Spanish speakers will increase a child's likelihood of speaking Spanish, because this will increase opportunities for using and hearing Spanish and promote Spanish within a larger United States context that often devalues languages other than English. At the same time, I hypothesize that community context will have little effect on children's English skills because of the ubiquitous presence of English in the daily life of any U.S. child.

I test these hypotheses using a national sample of children who live in metropolitan areas drawn from the 1990 Census. I find that levels of Spanish maintenance are extremely high among children of Latina/o immigrants, and that a large majority of children who are born in the U.S. speak English fluently. Multivariate analysis demonstrates that several dimensions of a metropolitan area's language context—in particular the saturation and segregation of Spanish speakers—have a strong effect on

second-generation children's likelihood of speaking Spanish that persists even after controlling for household- and individual-level variables. Contrary to my original hypothesis, I also find that the language characteristics of the metropolitan area have a significant effect on children's English proficiency. This effect, however, is smaller than the effect of metropolitan context on Spanish use.

This analysis produces a better understanding of the specific elements of household and community context that affect language use. The results imply that children of immigrants are following multiple paths to language adaptation, and that metropolitan context is an important influence on this process of adaptation.

*To Kevin*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The millions of immigrants who came to the United States from Latin America and Asia in the last 30 years brought hundreds of languages with them. Primarily as a result of these immigrants and their descendants, around 16% of the U.S. population speaks a language other than English at home (United States Bureau of the Census 1992). Yet in a country that is heavily saturated with English, what are the prospects for survival of such languages? The answers to this question ultimately rest with the children of the new immigrants. Whether children learn and use the languages their parents brought with them or exclusively turn to English determines the future of each language group (Stevens and Swicegood 1987). While people can and do learn second languages as adults, strong linguistic and sociological evidence suggests that childhood is a critical period for language acquisition, and that the home is the key social environment where people acquire language (Ely and Gleason 1995).

The shift to English and away from European languages among the children and grandchildren of the large groups of immigrants who arrived in the late 1800s and early 1900s was rapid and virtually complete (Lieberson et al. 1975). Yet Massey predicts that the nature of recent immigration will lead to the creation of relatively permanent language communities as minority languages are passed on between generations. He argues that we should expect a different pattern of assimilation than that observed in European immigrants at the turn of the century. Specifically, the greater geographic concentration of immigrants, the proximity of many sending countries, the different nature of the U.S. economy, and the continuous nature of immigrant flows will mean that social and economic assimilation may

not follow in successive generations. This classic assimilation model that researchers have used to describe the experiences of European immigrants may be replaced by a segmented model, in which some immigrants adapt to mainstream culture and life, others become part of the urban underclass, and a third group both moves upward in terms of socioeconomic status and maintains strong ties to an immigrant community (Portes and Zhou 1993). These scholars emphasize that the social context surrounding immigrants and their families will have a strong effect on their social and economic adaptation to life in the United States.

In this dissertation I will investigate how social context affects English proficiency and maintenance of Spanish among descendants of Latina and Latino immigrants. The ways in which the second generation of the most recent immigrants adapt to their linguistic surroundings is an important aspect of overall social and economic adaptation, and thus the findings of this project will add to our understanding of theories of immigrant assimilation and adaptation. Although adaptation across generations is a key element of assimilation theories, most research on adaptation among the new immigrants has focused on adult first-generation immigrants. It is therefore essential that researchers learn more about the adaptation patterns of the new immigrants' children (Landale and Oropesa 1995; Jensen and Chitose 1994). Examining the languages children of immigrants speak provides a unique opportunity for testing the applicability of assimilation theories to newly arrived immigrants. While most children of the new immigrants are not old enough to have passed through life course stages that indicate their degree of economic integration (employment, income, residence, etc.) (Hirschman 1994), they are speaking and learning languages from the beginning of their childhood.

The language skills children develop have an important influence on their future endeavors, both economically and socially. Lack of fluency in English has negative effects

on job opportunities and can be a disadvantage in many aspects of American life, such as getting proper medical care (Baker 1996). At the same time, knowledge of other languages in addition to English can be an important asset in the job market (Gold 1988; Portes 1987; Resnick 1988), and bilingualism appears to have a positive effect on the cognitive development and achievement of students in school (Fernandez and Nielsen 1986; Peal and Lambert 1962; Rumbaut and Ima 1988). Maintaining use and knowledge of a non-English language also promotes maintenance of other aspects of culture, and both affects and reflects involvement with an ethnic community.

I expand the work of Portes and Schauffler (1994), who studied the language patterns of eighth and ninth grade children of immigrants in two Florida communities, to a national sample of Latina/o<sup>1</sup> children of all ages across a wide variety of settings. Portes and Schauffler measured context as a categorical variable, demonstrating that children's language patterns differ in one city compared with another. I delve deeper into the mechanisms behind the strong effect of social context, and explore the dimensions of household and community context that affect a child's constraints and opportunities for speaking English and/or Spanish. Finally, I analyze the effect of social context on the language characteristics of third-and-higher-generation children, in order to anticipate whether grandchildren and great-grandchildren of today's Latina/o immigrants will continue to speak Spanish.

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<sup>1</sup>Almost all Spanish speakers identify themselves as "Hispanic" on the U.S. Census, reflecting a tight link between language use and ethnicity for Spanish speakers. The "Hispanic" category, however, includes people who trace their ancestry to immigrants from Spain. These European Spanish speakers have immigration histories and experiences in the U.S. that are closer to those of other European immigrants than to those of Latin American immigrants. It is difficult to separate individuals of European ancestry from those of Latin American ancestry within the "Hispanic" category, however, because the Census Bureau included people who reported "Spanish" ancestry in the "Spaniard" category. (The response "Spanish" could have been used by people of Latin American descent.) I use the term Latina/Latino to describe individuals who reported Hispanic origin on the Census, although a small percentage (less than 4.4%) of these respondents actually trace their ancestry to Spain (United States Bureau of the Census 1993).

## **Plan of Dissertation**

This dissertation investigates the relationship between community context and Latina/o children's use of Spanish and English proficiency, using data from the 1990 Census. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the demography of Latinas and Latinos in the United States. Chapter 3 discusses theories of immigrant adaptation and develops my theoretical framework on the relationship between social context and children's language characteristics based on linguistic and sociological research. Chapter 4 describes the data sources, sampling procedures, and measures for the statistical models. Chapter 5 analyzes the effect of community context on Spanish maintenance, and Chapter 6 analyzes the effect of community context on English proficiency. Chapter 7 discusses the contributions, limitations, and implications of the project's findings.

## **2. LATINAS AND LATINOS IN THE UNITED STATES**

The prospects of survival for Spanish in an English-dominated country are better than they are for any other language, because of the long-term incorporation of Spanish speakers into the United States over many generations, the high geographic concentration and saturation of Spanish speakers, and the recent influx of huge numbers of Latin American immigrants. If the nature of the new immigration is making language maintenance beyond the first generation of immigrants prevalent in concentrated ethnic communities, this process should therefore be evident in Spanish-speaking communities. Studying the language characteristics of children of Spanish-speaking immigrants provides a good test of the hypothesis that adaptation processes of the new immigrants will differ substantially from those of European immigrants in the past.

Latin Americans have been living in the United States for generations. Some Chicanas/os (people of Mexican descent) were incorporated into the United States as a result of conflict between Mexico and the United States, when Texas was annexed in 1845 and the Mexican-American war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 (Saenz and Greenlees 1996). However, in 1848 there were only around 80,000 persons of Mexican origin living in the United States, a tiny fraction of the Mexican population that voluntarily immigrated to the U.S. over the years (Bean and Tienda 1987). While immigration from Asia was restricted through the National Quotas Act of 1921, legislation said little about immigration from the Western Hemisphere. Implicit in the absence of quotas for Latin America was the understanding that business and agriculture could import Mexican labor when they needed it and force migrants to return to Mexico when jobs were scarce



(Rumbaut 1994b). As a result, immigrants have been arriving from Latin America throughout the century (Figure 1). In the last 30 years this immigration has accelerated, so that half of all Latina/o immigrants in the United States today arrived between 1980 and 1990 (United States Bureau of the Census 1993).

The large numbers of Latina/o immigrants, combined with higher fertility rates among Latinas/os compared with non-Latina/o whites, has led to a substantial increase in the Latina/o population in the last few decades. Latinas/os made up 4.5% of the U.S. population in 1970, 6.4% in 1980, and 9% in 1990. Immigration accounts for about half of the population increase during these decades, with fertility accounting for the other half (Chávez and Martínez 1996). The U.S. population will become increasingly Latina/o in origin, so that at least 1 in 10 Americans will report a Latina/o ethnicity by the year 2000 (O'Hare 1992).

High fertility rates and immigration patterns have led to a relatively young age structure among U.S. Latina/os. Around 40% of all Latinas/os are under age 20, vs. 28% of the total non-Latina/o U.S. population (United States Bureau of the Census 1993). As a result, a high proportion of U.S. children are Latina/o in origin. In some Southwest states nearly 1 in 3 children are Chicanas/os, and demographic momentum means that the Chicana/o population will increase as this large child population has children of their own, even without the influence of immigration (Baker 1996).

Most Latinas/os are Mexican in origin, representing 61.2% of all Latinos. Puerto Ricans are the second largest Latina/o group, making up 12.1% of all Latinos, followed by Central Americans, South Americans, Cubans, and Other Hispanics (United States Bureau of the Census 1993). Central and South Americans are relatively recent immigrants who have increased in numbers largely as a result of political and economic unrest (Bean and Tienda

1987). Only 21% of Central Americans and 25.1% of South Americans are native-born, compared to 66.7% of Chicanos (United States Bureau of the Census 1993).

Despite the diverse origins and histories of Latina/o groups, Spanish is a unifying characteristic among Latinos. Nearly all Latinas/os who speak a language other than English at home speak Spanish (United States Bureau of the Census 1993), and variations in dialect across Latina/o ethnicities are mutually intelligible. More people speak Spanish in the United States than any language other than English. Around 17.3 million people ages 5 and over speak Spanish at home, or 54% of all non-English language speakers, according to the 1990 Census (Table 1). The next most common language is French or French Creole, with 1.9 million speakers representing only 6% of all non-English language speakers.

These Spanish speakers are not evenly distributed across the landscape. They are a highly concentrated population, with 70% living in four states—California, Florida, New York, and Texas—and 40% living in just three metropolitan areas: Los Angeles, New York, and Miami (United States Bureau of the Census 1992). Many Spanish speakers live in the Southwest, where they make up a majority of the population in some communities (Table 2). I loosely define these groups of language speakers who live in the same metropolitan area as language communities. While speakers of languages such as French, German, and Chinese, also live in language communities, the Spanish language communities are unique in terms of their size—two have over one million people, and twenty have over 100,000—and in terms of their impact on the metropolitan area as a whole. In Laredo, Texas, for example, 92% of the total population ages 5 and over speaks Spanish, and in McAllen—Edinburg—Mission, Texas, 81% of the population speaks Spanish. In contrast, the largest non-Spanish language community is in the New York metropolitan area, where 276,000 Chinese speakers make up

only 2% of the entire New York population over the age of 5 (United States Bureau of the Census 1992).

Spanish is actually the official language of one area of the United States—Puerto Rico. Spanish is a dominant language in Puerto Rico, and Puerto Ricans migrating to the mainland U.S. enter an environment where English use is more necessary and more widespread, even within Spanish language communities. Therefore, in this analysis I examine the language transitions between generations of migrants from Puerto Rico, along with language transitions between generations of immigrants.

### **3. RELATED LITERATURE**

Theories of immigrant adaptation help build my theoretical framework for investigating English proficiency and Spanish maintenance among children of immigrants. I will first discuss the two most influential theories, classic assimilation theory and segmented assimilation theory, and the predictions these theories make about language maintenance and shift between generations. Next I discuss my theoretical approach to children's language acquisition and use, and review past research on the relationship between social context and language use. Finally, I outline my approach to the different aspects of social context that may affect children's language use, and briefly discuss individual-level influences on language use.

#### **Theories of Immigrant Adaptation**

##### **Classic Assimilation Theory**

Since the beginning of the century, scholars have used the concept of assimilation to describe the process of minority groups adapting to a majority group's values and norms (Park 1950). As a theoretical framework for studying immigration to the United States, the assimilationist perspective views immigrant adaptation as a linear process of giving up values, norms, and behaviors from an immigrant's country of origin and replacing them with those of the United States. Gordon (1964) decomposed the concept of assimilation into seven dimensions:

- cultural assimilation or acculturation;

- structural assimilation, or entrance into the social groups and institutions of the host society on a large scale;
- marital assimilation, or large-scale intermarriage with majority group members;
- identificational assimilation, or a sense of identity that comes solely from the host society;
- attitude receptional assimilation, or absence of prejudice about host society members;
- behavior receptional assimilation, or absence of discrimination against host society members;
- and civic assimilation, or absence of value and power conflict with the host society.

Gordon argued that structural assimilation was the most important dimension of assimilation, in that once it occurred, all other types of assimilation would eventually follow. He also believed that cultural assimilation would be the first form of assimilation to occur, but that other dimensions of assimilation would not necessarily follow.

The assimilationist perspective makes several assumptions that many researchers have criticized. It often views immigrant adaptation as a zero-sum game, in which values and behaviors from an immigrant's country of origin are so incompatible with American values and behaviors that one must eventually replace the other. It also assumes that there is such a thing as one "host society" that immigrants will adapt to, without addressing the diversity of social groups within the United States. Assimilation theory does not deal with the social stratification by race and ethnicity so evident in American life that has a major impact on immigrants when they arrive in the United States. By emphasizing the incorporation of immigrants into "mainstream" social groups and institutions, assimilation theory ignores the role of ethnic social groups and institutions in the adaptation process of immigrants. Finally,

it does not allow for the possibility of reverse assimilation (Portes and Stepick 1993)—that the majority group may also change as a result of contact with the minority group.

Nonetheless, Gordon's framework is heuristically useful to us. Examining language shift and language maintenance using his framework, we would predict that immigrants would begin to learn the English language immediately upon arrival to the U.S., but that they would not fully assimilate until they participated in mainstream social groups and institutions. The children of immigrants would learn English and adapt to American culture due to their exposure to American culture through school and the mass media. Gordon did allow for the possibility that in some ethnic enclaves this process of cultural assimilation would not occur, and that the values and norms immigrants and their children would be exposed to would differ according to their socioeconomic status. These themes are picked up and emphasized in the segmented assimilation theory discussed below.

In summary, assimilation theory predicts that a shift from minority languages to English is a central aspect of immigrant adaptation to U.S. life, and that immigrants and their descendants will eventually stop speaking their minority languages as they replace them with English. The central dimension of adaptation according to assimilation theory is full participation in mainstream social groups and institutions. In spite of the flaws in the basic assumptions of the assimilation perspective, its emphasis on the power of exposure to aspects of culture like the English language and on the importance of participation in community life are useful ideas that have been expanded in other theories of immigrant adaptation.

### **Segmented Assimilation Theory**

In contrast to Gordon's unilinear model of assimilation, Portes and Zhou (1993) introduced the concept of segmented assimilation to describe three possible paths to adaptation of the children of immigrants. They argue that immigration since 1965 is different

in important ways from previous immigration to the United States, and that studies that have focused on the immigrants themselves do not give us insight into the adaptation process of the next generation of immigrants. In their framework, there are three possible paths of segmented assimilation:

- adaptation and integration into the white middle-class;
- adaptation to the underclass and a condition of permanent poverty;
- and socioeconomic adaptation that occurs along with maintenance of strong cultural ties with an ethnic community.

This framework avoids many of the problematic assumptions of classic assimilation theory. It allows for the possibility that immigrant adaptation is not a zero-sum game, but that an ethnic culture can be part of life as an American, and recognizes that ethnic institutions can be a major benefit for immigrants and their descendants. It also takes into account the effect stratification by race and ethnicity can have on immigrants and their families.

The resources that may be available to help immigrants include government programs, a positive societal reception, and a coethnic community. Portes and Zhou stress that the coethnic community is the most important resource, and that the children of immigrants who enter a community that is "well-established and diversified" (1993: 87) will benefit enormously in terms of economic opportunities. On the other hand, second-generation immigrants who live in poverty-stricken ethnic communities may be worse off than those who live outside of an ethnic community.

This theory accords well with evidence that in some cases second-generation immigrants who participate actively in ethnic communities do better in school than those who are more distant from an ethnic community (Gibson 1989; Zhou and Bankston 1994). Matute-Bianchi (1986) studied students of Mexican descent in a California high school, and

found that the most academically successful students were those who maintained their Mexican identity, including knowledge of Spanish. Students who renounced ties with the Mexican community formed a Chicana/o or Cholo identity, and felt that doing well in school would mean being disloyal to their group.

Other researchers also support the idea that the classic model of assimilation is inadequate to describe the adaptation process of new immigrants and their children. Massey (1995) argues that many features of post-1965 immigration distinguish it from previous waves of immigration, and that these changes will lead to a slower and possibly very different process of adaptation.

Massey predicts that the most recent waves of immigration will be sustained for long periods, as opposed to European immigration at the turn of the century which ceased abruptly after 1930. New immigrants are also entering a highly stratified economy characterized by a dual labor market, in which movement from secondary sector to primary sector jobs requires high educational and skill levels that may be out of reach for many first- and second-generation immigrants. Finally, the geographic destinations of new immigrants within the U.S. are highly concentrated (Frey 1995), and Massey predicts that these increasing levels of ethnic and racial concentration will lead to the existence of large foreign-language and ethnic communities that sustain themselves across generations.

In summary, segmented assimilation theory takes into account the unique aspects of recent immigrant flows and predicts that there are three different adaptation patterns children of immigrants may follow. A key variable that distinguishes which path children will follow is their social context: children who live in concentrated ethnic communities can take advantage of the community's social capital (Portes 1995). Since language is an important signifier of culture, children who speak Spanish are probably more closely connected to their



ethnic community than those who speak only English, and thus can capitalize on their community resources to achieve upward economic mobility. On the other hand, children who do not use Spanish could be following either of the first two paths to assimilation: they could be adapting to the white middle class while experiencing upward mobility, or adapting to permanent poverty and the underclass along with downward economic mobility. In my analysis, I focus on the language characteristics of children of immigrants rather than their academic or economic achievements; therefore, I do not distinguish between these two paths to adaptation. The segmented assimilation theory unequivocally predicts, however, that the ethnic community exerts a powerful influence on children of immigrants, and that children who participate in this community may be as successful (or possibly even more successful) as those who identify with a middle-class white non-ethnic community.

## **Social Context and Language Use**

### **Theoretical Framework**

I view children's language development through a sociological perspective that emphasizes the critical role of social interaction in learning language. Recent developments in linguistic and psychological theories about language acquisition have increasingly turned to these social factors, recognizing that children learn and use languages within contexts that have specific social and cultural meanings, and that these contexts have an important effect on language acquisition and use. I argue that social context is important because it determines a child's opportunities and constraints for hearing and using language, and it also affects the values a child associates with specific languages.

In this section, I will discuss the most influential theories that attempt to explain how people acquire language, and argue that social context is an important and overlooked factor

in linguistic and psychological research. Next I draw from theories specifically developed to explain second language acquisition and argue that context is equally important for children who already know one language. I discuss the distinction and overlap between Spanish maintenance and English proficiency, and the way social context affects each process. Finally, I examine how children are involved in various dimensions of social context that may affect their language acquisition and language use.

### Theories of Language Acquisition

Almost everyone, no matter what society they grow up in, becomes proficient in at least one language as a child (Schumann 1975). Language is thus one of the defining elements of the human experience. A great deal of controversy, however, surrounds the discussion of exactly how children learn language. Psychologists and linguists have developed several major frameworks for approaching the study of language acquisition that are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Chomsky argues that children develop fluent language abilities, both in speaking and hearing, without explicit instruction. Children learn to put together sentences they have never heard before, and learn systems of grammar and meaning even if the conversations they have with adults do not involve the proper use of these systems. He concludes from evidence such as this that the parameters for language learning are innate and universal. People in all cultures share the same biological framework for learning and using language—language is not simply a socially acquired skill, it is based on an instinct (Pinker 1994). Chomsky and others, such as Fodor, Piaget, and Meisel, who agree that language is based on an innate universal grammar, view language acquisition as an individual process focused on a child's internal language parameters (Erneling 1993).

Erneling argues that language acquisition theory should focus not just on individual processes, but on the individual's interaction with others and the environment. She thus moves closer to sociological theory that studies an individual actor in terms of her symbolic relationship with individuals and groups. She explains that in her theory:

“the framework of learning does not consist of innate or acquired cognitive-linguistic mental structures, but of a combination of the child's natural behavior, sociolinguistic interaction, and the language spoken around him or her, thus involving other things than the individual's mind” (Erneling 1993: 4).

Language socialization theory also shifts the focus of language acquisition from individual cognitive processes to the effect of social context on language learning. Socialization theorists argue that “grammatical development cannot be adequately accounted for without serious analysis of the social and cultural milieu of the language acquiring child” (Ochs and Schieffelin 1995: 91). Children learn language through contact with caregivers and peers, and these contacts and the communities in which they take place have an important influence on children's language acquisition.

Ochs and Schieffelin argue that two major aspects of social context influence language development: the settings where children participate in “socially and culturally organized activities”, and the ideologies that surround languages in a given setting. If children are “involved routinely in a community's social network and in the everyday activities that hold that community together” (1995: 92), they will learn language—children learn a first language through this community participation, rather than through specific linguistic training. Evidence to support this claim comes from studies of how children learn language cross-culturally. In some societies, such as white middle-class communities in the United States, parents try to speak with their children from birth, and try to engage their

toddlers in conversations. In other societies such as in Java, however, adults rarely speak directly to infants. In fact, caregivers in Java hold their infants with their faces hidden or facing outward, so that dialogue with their children is not even physically possible.

Although children are socialized to act differently in terms of their speaking relationship with adults in these two cultures, children in all societies acquire the same degree of grammatical competence at approximately the same ages. Whether children are engaged in central communicative roles such as the person who is talking or being talked to, or more peripheral roles such as a person who overhears other's conversations, they are still participating in "linguistically complex" activities that facilitate language development (92). Thus the important common factor in language acquisition cross-culturally is a child's involvement in social activities.

In communities where more than one language is spoken, however, the values associated with each language have an important impact on children's language acquisition—children will be encouraged to learn highly valued languages, and may not learn devalued languages even if they are exposed to them. Along with the technical aspects of language, children learn the social values attached to language, even if the ideologies surrounding language are not explicitly stated and lie below a level of conscious awareness. The "cultural knowledge" (Ochs and Schieffelin 1995: 92) that children obtain by participating in social activities that involve language affect children's language acquisition. If children in a multilingual setting learn to associate one language with social and economic achievement, they will be more likely to learn and use the highly valued language. For example, in a study of the Gapun community of Papua New Guinea, parents stated that it is very important to them that children learn their local language. However, the language socialization practices of parents and caregivers teach children to associate the language used between villages, Tok

Pisin, with "modernity, Christianity, and education" and the local language, Taiap, with "backwardness and paganism." Thus few children learn the local language well, and they usually choose to use the more highly valued language (Kulick 1992, in Ochs and Schieffelin 1995: 91).

Exploration of how social context affects individual language learning has been a neglected part of linguistic and psychological theories of language acquisition (Fletcher and MacWhinney 1995). Researchers such as Ochs, Schieffelin, and Erneling have called attention to the fact that people do not learn languages by themselves, but that interaction with others and participation in language communities is a crucial component of language acquisition. In my approach to the relationship between social context and language use, I draw on Ochs and Schieffelin's emphasis on two aspects of social context: a child's participation in community life, and the values associated with different languages in a multilingual setting.

Ely and Gleason further explored the types of social context that could affect children's language development. They argue that the home is a very important setting for language acquisition, particularly for the youngest children; that school exerts an important influence on language development among school-age children, because "school is the epitome of socialization" (1995: 265); and that children can learn language from larger social contexts through activities such as watching television. I will expand upon the idea that children learn and use language through their participation in different groups and environments in a later section.

### Theories of Second Language Acquisition

The crucial distinction between first and second language acquisition is age. Learning a first language is an integral part of a child's development, and most children who do not

learn a language by mid-childhood because of social isolation or other unusual circumstances do not achieve the same level of fluency in any language as children who learn language from birth (see discussion of Genie in Curtiss 1977, and Chelsea in Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). Recently, however, “Alex” has become the first child to become fluent in a first language in late childhood (Trudeau 1997). He did not develop language skills because of a rare brain disease until the age of 8 and a half, when surgeons removed the left side of his brain. At this point, Alex went through the stages of first language learning at an accelerated pace, so that within 10 months he spoke English fluently and without an accent. Thus the critical period for first language learning may be longer than previously thought, or perhaps nonexistent under special circumstances. Language learning occurs very early in most children’s development, and by the age of 3, a child knows the core aspects of linguistic structure (Fletcher and MacWhinney 1995).

Children who begin to learn more than one language before the age of two may acquire two first languages, while children who learn a second language after this age have a first and a second language (de Houwer 1995). This distinction is important because of the strong evidence for maturational constraints in both first and second language learning. Children who learn a second language at a young age may eventually attain native-like language abilities in that language, but ability to learn a second language deteriorates gradually throughout childhood and probably adolescence (Stevens 1995).

Whether children learn a language as a first or second language is important for the life histories and linguistic characteristics of children, such as whether children speak a language with an accent. However, in this study I focus on the outcomes of language acquisition and opportunities to use language skills. Children who are bilingual from birth and bilingual because they learned English as a second language in school are both proficient

speakers of two languages, and thus have the same language outcomes for the purposes of this analysis (see Table 3). Therefore, I utilize theories of both first and second language acquisition in my theoretical approach to children's language characteristics.

While the linguistic and psychological theories outlined above can apply to both first and second language acquisition, specific theories about second language acquisition have been developed to describe the experience of immigrants who encounter a new language in their country of destination. Theories of second language acquisition have focused on how children or adults who already know one language learn a second language after entering a situation where second language use is desirable or necessary.

The psychologist Jim Cummins has focused on individual-level factors, such as personality, attitude, preferred learning style, and prior language experiences, that account for differences in second language attainment (Cummins 1979). He is a proponent of a threshold model, which predicts that children must achieve native attainment in one language in order to become highly proficient in a second language. Children who do not have age-appropriate skills in one language will have more difficulty learning a second language, and may experience slower intellectual and educational progress than similar children who were not exposed to a second language (Cummins 1979).

Testing the threshold model of second language acquisition, however, requires knowledge of a child's history in terms of exposure and acquisition of languages. For descendants of immigrants who are the main focus of my analysis, I do not have information on first vs. second language acquisition, or on the household and community contexts surrounding a child as she/he grew up. I could assume that immigrant children were not

exposed to English before they arrived in the U.S., but this assumption is problematic, since children around the world learn English in school and through international media.

Furthermore, while the Census measures English proficiency, it does not measure Spanish proficiency, so I have no way to gauge a child's skills in Spanish vs. English. Because of these limitations, the threshold model is of limited value in predicting language outcomes among the children in this analysis. In addition, this explanation for second language acquisition does not take into account the influence of social context on language acquisition.

Economists usually view language skills as an important aspect of human capital, or skills that can help a person maximize their earnings in the labor market (Chiswick 1992). In this perspective, social context can alter the extent to which specific language skills are valued on the job, and thus change individual's motivations for achieving a difficult task like learning a new language. Jasso and Rosenzweig found that non-English speaking immigrants mitigated the negative economic effect of lack of proficiency in English by living in a community surrounded by other same-language speakers, and that people are thus less likely to invest in learning English if they live in a language community (Jasso and Rosenzweig 1990). The human capital approach, however, ignores the social and cultural elements of language, and also has limited applicability for children who have not yet entered the labor force.

Sociological approaches to second language acquisition have used a life course perspective, which emphasizes the age-graded statuses that affect opportunities and motivations for language learning (Meiller 1996, Espenshade and Fu 1995). Social context is indirectly implicated in this perspective, since the age-graded statuses affect participation in social institutions such as school, marriage, and work. However, sociological analyses using



a life course perspective have not explicitly addressed the aspects of community and household context that may affect language learning and use.

The linguist John Schumann (1986) discusses both social factors and individual-level factors that affect second language learning. He divides the social factors that affect language learning into two categories: the social dominance of a language group, and the integration strategy in terms of overall way of life of a language group. Factors that promote contact between two language groups will increase the probability that an individual will learn a second language. For example, if social dominance of one group over another is limited, so that "the two groups are approximately equal in political and social status and power, more extensive intergroup contact and hence more possibilities for second language acquisition will occur" (319). If a group's integration strategy revolves around preservation of their culture including language, however, contact between language groups is reduced and individuals will be less likely to learn a second language. Attributes of language groups that promote social contact and thus increase second language learning in Schumann's framework include size, cohesiveness, congruence, attitude, and intended length of residence. Individual factors that explain second language acquisition are psychological, and determine the psychological distance an individual feels from her or his language community. While he developed this theory to explain language acquisition among adults with no formal training in a second language, it is also applicable to children's second language acquisition (McGroarty 1988).

Schumann's framework for understanding second language acquisition pays close attention to the role of the community in the process of an individual learning a second language. His insight that aspects of the language community's relationship with the larger

community can affect language acquisition is significant, and will influence my approach to the effect of social context on Spanish maintenance and English proficiency.

### Spanish Maintenance vs. English Proficiency

Spanish language maintenance and English skills are closely related language characteristics that are nevertheless distinct. Language maintenance usually refers to children learning the minority language of their parents, while language shift has in the U.S. context meant replacing one's minority tongue with English, either within or between generations (Stevens 1985). In this study, however, I focus on children's English skills rather than intergenerational language shift to English. English acquisition is a key element of immigrant adaptation, whether English is a child's exclusive language or one of many in her or his repertoire. In addition, the focus on English proficiency as opposed to language shift to English avoids the assumption of classic assimilation theory that adaptation is a process of replacing values and behaviors of the country of origin with those of the receiving country.

Spanish maintenance is by definition a group process in which we view children as part of a larger ethnic/linguistic group, since it refers to the transfer of Spanish skills across generations. English acquisition, on the other hand, describes the English skills of each individual child. While Spanish maintenance and English language proficiency are distinct aspects of language adaptation that occur at different levels of analysis, for children at the individual level, both involve language acquisition and language maintenance. In order to "maintain" use of Spanish across generations, children must acquire knowledge of Spanish, just as children must acquire English knowledge in order to speak English. At the same time, children must use both English and Spanish in order to retain this knowledge.

Theories about how children acquire language, therefore, help us understand how children of immigrants learn both English and Spanish. However, these theories do not

specifically address the issue of language use—what factors determine whether a child who has learned a language will continue to use that language? I argue that language use within one individual’s life is a direct result of opportunities for continued use of that language and the values attached to language use, which is largely determined by social context. A child who learns both Spanish and English from birth may choose only to use English if she or he lives in a community where Spanish is devalued. For example, a study of Haitian families in New York found that children most often spoke English at home, even though parents themselves used Haitian creole and assumed that their children learned it as well. Parents praised and rewarded children for using English, which was seen as the language of academic and social success, and felt that children needed practice and instruction with English (Schieffelin 1994). I therefore apply theories about the relationship between social context and language acquisition to both language learning and language use.

While Spanish language maintenance and English proficiency are distinct aspects of language adaptation, they are determined by the same individual-level processes of language acquisition and language use. I view language acquisition and language use from a sociological perspective that emphasizes the critical role of community and household factors. Because of the unique position of English vs. Spanish in the United States today, I predict that community context will have a different effect on Spanish maintenance than it will on English proficiency. Specifically, living in a Spanish-language community, neighborhood, and/or household will increase the likelihood that children will learn and use Spanish, but will have little effect on children’s English abilities.