JI-YEON O. JO AND SEOK-IN LEE

10. HERITAGE LANGUAGE SUSTAINABILITY AND TRANSNATIONAL AFFECT

The Case of Second-Generation Korean Americans

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors explore how Korean as a heritage language is acquired and sustained by second-generation Korean Americans. We also examine contexts, challenges, and contributing factors of heritage language sustainability. The primary data is taken from interviews with second-generation Korean Americans regarding their experiences of heritage language learning and their various transnational activities, such as trips to Korea, engagement with Korean media, and consumption of Korean products. After opening with a brief history of Korean immigration to the United States and of the status of Korean language education in North Carolina, the authors present study findings, which highlight the contexts and challenges of sustaining Korean language at home, in community school, and in college. What the findings reveal is that affect is salient not only to heritage language proficiency but also to developing heritage language aspirations, which shape the sustainability of heritage language.

Keywords: second-generation, Korean American, heritage language, transnational affect, language sustainability

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we explore how second-generation Korean Americans acquire and sustain Korean as a heritage language, investigating in particular how their transnational affect influences their proficiency and the perceived value of knowing the language. This study is situated in North Carolina, a new U.S. gateway state where the ethnic Korean presence is a recent phenomenon and the ethnic Korean community has not yet been extensively established.

Language “sustainability” denotes the extent to which a language is introduced, developed, and maintained or lost from generation to generation and within and across communities. We adopt the term sustainability, rather than the more commonly used term maintenance, in order to highlight the varying degrees of language proficiency and to register the nonlinear process of language learning and maintenance. After
all, language learning and proficiency are susceptible to the speaker’s environment: on the one hand, proficient speakers may lose fluency after an extended period in which they do not use the language; on the other hand, those who have lost fluency can regain or relearn their skills if given the chance to again speak the language consistently. With the concept of language sustainability, moreover, we not only encompass changing degrees of proficiency, but also attend to how learners’ affective conditions influence their relationship to the language to be learned. This allows us to explore how environment and language interact with each other to shape an individual’s language repertoires, proficiencies, and values. By engaging the notion of language sustainability, we thus aim to enrich the conversation around language maintenance and loss.

The concept of sustainability, as we employ it, is influenced by Haugen’s (1972) theoretical perspective on the ecology of language, which he defined as “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment” (p. 325). According to Fill and Penz (2007), linguistic sustainability involves the preservation of language diversity within societies and across the world and the ways in which languages are “supported, sustained and salvaged” (p. 1). Various factors influence heritage language sustainability among immigrants, including ethnic and cultural identity (Chinen & Tucker, 2006; Lee, 2002; Tse, 1998a), grandparental and parental intervention (Li, 2006; Park, 2006; Park & Sarkar, 2007), perceived value and symbolic power of the language (Gao, 2009; Goke-Pariola, 1993; Zentella, 1999), motivation and interest of the learner (Cho et al., 1997; Shin & Lee, 2013), language ideology and educational programs and policies (Jeon, 2007; Jo & Rong, 2003; Ryang, 1997; Trifonas & Aravossitas, 2014), and socialization (Song, 2010). What we intend to highlight is how Korean as a heritage language is “supported, sustained and salvaged” among Korean Americans and the challenges that second-generation Korean Americans face in this regard.

As one of the most popular migration destinations of the world, the United States has incredibly rich linguistic diversity: over 300 languages are spoken at home by 60.6 million people, who comprise 21 percent of the total population of the country (Ryan, 2013). A closer examination, however, reveals instability in terms of intergenerational language sustainability. That is, the proliferation of languages is sustained primarily by incoming transnational migrants who speak languages other than English. Among post-immigrant generations—those whose parents immigrated, but who themselves did not—language diversity is quickly subsiding (Rumbaut, 2002). Despite popular outcry over immigrants’ lack of proficiency in English and the rhetoric of declining English dominance in the United States, empirical studies have repeatedly documented that the shift from heritage language to English happens rather quickly in immigrant households, especially among Asian Americans (Cummins, 2000; Tse, 2001).

In a study of language adaptation among approximately 5,000 second-generation students in south Florida and southern California, Portes and Hao (1998) found that 73.6 percent of second generation Asian Americans preferred to use English.