



## LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AMONGST THE SECOND GENERATION

■ Siew-Ean Khoo

*The maintenance of community languages in the home varies greatly amongst the second-generation by ethnic origin. The shift towards English is greatest in families where one parent is Australian-born. However, in all communities there is a marked shift towards English amongst the second generation aged 25 or more. This implies a further substantial contraction in the maintenance of community languages in the third generation.*

It has been suggested that the second generation will determine whether immigrant languages continue to be maintained from one generation to the next.<sup>1</sup> While the first generation may want to retain the use of their native language for a number of reasons such as familiarity, loyalty to and preservation of culture and tradition, homesickness and lack of proficiency with the language of their new country, the second generation, growing up entirely in their parents' adopted country, is usually exposed to the dominant language from an early age. Even if the ethnic language is spoken at home, the children have to communicate in school in the language which is the medium of instruction. Thus, the second generation is likely to be the transition generation in terms of the maintenance of the ethnic language, and the extent that they continue to retain their parents' native language is a question of research interest.

Research on language maintenance in Australia<sup>2</sup> has shown that there is a general trend for the ethnic language to be replaced by English with each succeeding generation, although the rate of replacement varies considerably among ethnic groups. Generally, persons of Western European or South Asian origins tend to drop their language in favour of English sooner than persons of Southern European, Middle-Eastern or Indochinese origins.

In more recent years, the concept of multiculturalism may have fostered the use and retention of immigrant languages to a greater extent compared with earlier times when immigrants were expected to learn English quickly and assimilate into Australian society. However, recent research has also shown that English language proficiency is important in the successful integration of immigrants into the labour market.<sup>3</sup> It therefore is in the interest of immigrants and their children to acquire such proficiency. Ethnic language retention among even the first

generation has been quite uneven<sup>4</sup> so that the extent to which the second generation continues to speak their parents' native language is likely to vary among different ethnic groups.<sup>5</sup>

This paper examines the 1991 population census data on ethnic language maintenance among the second generation — Australian-born children with one or both parents born overseas in a non-English-speaking-background (NESB) country<sup>6</sup> — with a particular focus on the effects of two demographic variables: age and parents' birthplace. It supplements and extends the analysis of the preceding paper in this issue of *People and Place* by Clyne and Kipp, which examines the language shift between the first and second generations.

### RETENTION OF ETHNIC LANGUAGE

The extent that the second generation of NESB continues to speak a language other than English at home varies enormously by country of origin, from 11 per cent among those whose parents were born in the Netherlands to over 96 per cent among those whose parents were born in Turkey or Viet Nam (Table 1, panel 1). The pattern of ethnic language retention shown in Table 1 is similar to the pattern observed by Price<sup>7</sup> from the analysis of 1986 Census data on ancestry.

Language maintenance appears to be stronger among groups from the Middle East, Northeast Asia, Indochina and South America, most of whom arrived in the last fifteen years. However, it is notable that the second generation whose parents were born in Sri Lanka, India, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines did not retain their ethnic language to such a great extent even though these groups were also fairly recent arrivals.<sup>8</sup> For the first generation from these countries, English is likely to be a familiar language. It is taught in schools and is spoken widely in

Table 1: Persons born in Australia by parents' birthplace, per cent speaking only English or another language at home

Birthplace of one or both parents	Both parents born in country in col. 1		Mother born in country in col.1*	Father born in country in col.1*
	Spoke a language other than English	Spoke only English	Spoke only English	Spoke only English
Netherlands	11.2	88.8	97.3	98.1
Sri Lanka	21.9	78.1	98.2	98.1
Austria	25.0	75.0	94.4	95.0
Germany	26.8	73.2	93.6	95.4
India	27.6	72.4	96.7	80.7
Singapore	36.1	63.9	93.3	96.1
Malta	36.5	63.5	92.2	93.0
former USSR	38.9	61.1	64.7	95.5
former Czechoslovakia	40.6	59.4	90.4	96.2
Hungary	41.4	58.6	89.8	95.0
Poland	43.4	56.6	86.1	92.8
Malaysia	48.7	51.3	92.0	94.6
France	55.1	44.9	83.5	89.4
Philippines	55.2	44.8	88.6	94.5
Italy	67.8	32.2	72.1	78.5
Spain	73.3	26.7	76.1	88.6
Indonesia	74.3	25.7	84.3	92.7
China	78.2	21.8	74.6	89.7
former Yugoslavia	80.6	19.4	72.2	80.4
Hong Kong	90.0	10.0	80.1	92.3
Greece	90.3	9.7	43.8	55.2
Chile	90.3	9.7	65.1	79.6
Japan	90.5	9.5	77.2	87.8
Lebanon	90.5	9.5	48.9	60.6
Laos	91.8	8.2	nc	nc
Uruguay	91.9	8.1	nc	nc
Taiwan	92.1	7.9	nc	nc
Cambodia	93.5	6.5	nc	nc
Korea	93.9	6.1	nc	nc
Viet Nam	96.1	3.9	43.7	71.7
Turkey	96.5	3.5	47.6	72.7

\* Other parent born in Australia nc = not calculated because of very small numbers  
Source: 1991 Census Matrix Table

these countries because of the influence of past British or American administration. It is not surprising that a large proportion of the Australian-born children of immigrants from these countries speak only English at home.

When an immigrant of non-English speaking-background marries an Australia-born person, their offspring are also much more likely to speak only English at home. If the second generation is defined to include Australia-born children with either one or both overseas-born parents, then those with one overseas-born parent are much more likely to speak only English at home than those with two overseas-born parents (Table 1, panels 2, 3, and 4). A study of out-marriage and language maintenance among the Dutch community in Australia,<sup>9</sup> and the preceding paper by Clyne and Kipp, show a

similar pattern. The proportion speaking only English at home is also lower when the mother is overseas-born than when the father is overseas-born, an indication that the mother is the more important parent in the intergenerational transmission of language.

Maintenance of the ethnic language is also related to age. A greater proportion of the second generation in the older age groups speak only English at home compared with the younger ones. More significantly, there is a noticeable increase in the proportion speaking only English at home among the second generation aged 25 and over compared with those under age 25 (Figure 1). This increase suggests that one of the reasons for maintaining the ethnic language among the second generation is for communicating with their parents, because those aged 25 and over are

likely to have left the parental home while those under the age of 25 are more likely to be still living with their parents. It appears that once the second generation has left their parents' home, they are more likely to speak only English at home. Another reason that those aged 25 and over might be more likely to speak only English at home is that they grew up during the period before multiculturalism when migrants and their children were expected to learn English and assimilate.

Figure 1 also shows that the difference in the proportion speaking only English at home between children with one parent born in an non-English speaking (NES) country and those with both parents born in NES countries is much greater in the younger age groups than in the older age groups. Among children with one parent born in a NES country and one Australia-born parent, more than 70 per cent were speaking only English at home from an early age compared with fewer than 30 per cent of those with both parents born in NES countries. This gap narrows with increasing age, with more than 60 per cent of the second generation over age 30 with both parents born in NES countries speaking only English at home.

Further disaggregation of parents' birthplace into broad regional groupings shows interesting differences in the proportion speaking only English at home by age among the five groups shown in Figure 2. There is an increasing share speaking only English from age 25 onwards among the second generation whose parents were born in Southern Europe, Eastern Europe or the Middle East. However, the increase begins from quite different levels among the younger ages and plateaus at different levels at the older ages. Only the second generation of Western-European background has a high proportion speaking

Figure 1: Persons born in Australia with one or both parents born overseas; per cent speaking only English at home by age

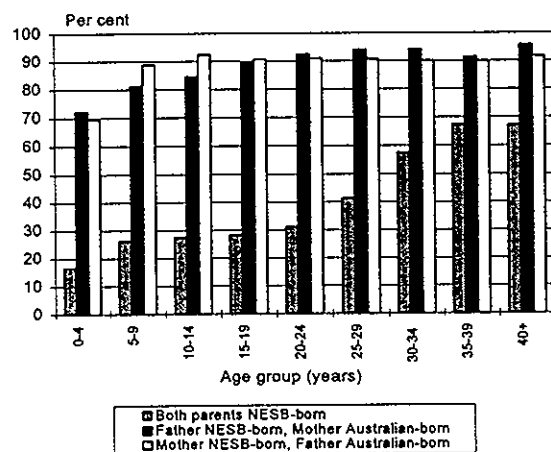
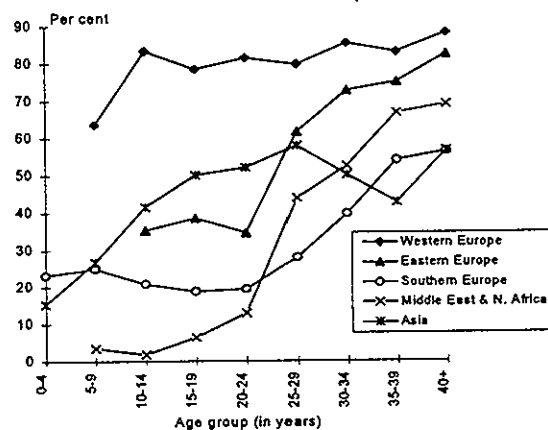


Figure 2: Persons born in Australia with both parent overseas-born: per cent speaking only English at home, by age and parents' birthplace



only English at home from an early age. The more gradual increase among the second generation of Southern European background (who make up more than 50 per cent of all second generation with NESB parents) compared with those of Middle-Eastern or Eastern-European background could be due partly to many adult children still living with their parents.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless the proportion more than doubles between age 20-24 and age 35-39. The sharp contrast between the

younger (below age 20) second generation of Middle-Eastern background and the older ones (those aged 25 or more) is likely to be related also to their parents being from two different migration cohorts. People who migrated in more recent years and those who migrated more than 25 years ago differ on many characteristics and in the circumstances of their migration.<sup>11</sup>

The fact that a greater proportion of the second generation over age 25 spoke only English at home compared with those under age 25 has important implications for the transmission of the ethnic language to the third generation. If many second-generation people, having left their parents' home, speak only English in their own home then their children will be brought up speaking only English at home too. Language maintenance therefore will decline further among the third generation.

#### CONCLUSION

Data from the 1991 Census show that ethnic language maintenance varies considerably among the second generation according to their origin, age and whether they have one or both parents of non-English-speaking background. In some ethnic groups, the second generation are much more likely to speak the ethnic language at home.

The data also suggest that the second generation who speak a language other than English at home might be doing so because they are still living at home with immigrant parents. At older ages when many would have left their parental home, they were more likely to speak only English at home. This implies that many in the third generation are growing up in homes where only English is spoken, in contrast to their parents (the second generation) who were more likely to grow up speaking their immigrant parents' (the first generation) language at home. In this sense the second generation is very much the transition generation in terms of language shift away from their immigrant parents' native language.

It is important to note that the second generation under age 25 and those over age 25 in 1991 represent two different cohorts, one growing up in a society more encouraging of multiculturalism, the other having done so amidst greater expectation of assimilation. Their parents might also have migrated in different times, had different characteristics and faced different social and economic

conditions on arrival. Therefore it cannot be assumed that the age pattern of language shift to English observed in 1991 will necessarily apply when the second generation now under the age of 25 moves into the older age groups in the coming years.

#### Note

Views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research. Comments received from colleagues at the Bureau, Bob Birrell and Michael Clyne on an earlier draft were much appreciated.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> A. Portes and R. Schauffler 'Language and the second generation: bilingualism yesterday and today', *International Migration Review*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1994, pp. 640-661
- <sup>2</sup> C. A. Price, 'Language retention by ancestry and generation', *Vox: The Journal of the Australian Advisory Council on Languages and Multicultural Education*, Issue No. 4, 1990, pp. 57-64; M.G.Clyne, *Community Languages: The Australian Experience*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991
- <sup>3</sup> See, for example, Wooden, *Migrant Labour Force Status*, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), 1990; R. Jones and I. McAllister, *Migrant Unemployment and Labour Market Programs*, Canberra, AGPS, 1991
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, S.E. Khoo, P. Kee, T. Dang and J. Shu, 'Asian immigrant settlement and adjustment in Australia', *Asia-Pacific Migration Journal*, vol. 3 (no.s 2-3), for data on Asian immigrants, 1994, pp. 339-372
- <sup>5</sup> Some of the factors affecting ethnic language retention are discussed in S. Kipp, M. Clyne and A. Pauwels, *Immigration and Australia's Language Resources*, Canberra, AGPS, 1995
- <sup>6</sup> The definition of second generation does not include the overseas-born who migrated as young children with their parents.
- <sup>7</sup> Price, op. cit.
- <sup>8</sup> Some of the second generation in the older ages whose parents were born in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia or Singapore might be the offspring of native English speakers. However, they were likely to be a very small proportion. A large proportion of the second generation with Asian-born parents were aged 0-14 in 1991 and the figures in Table 1 did not change very much when analysis was restricted to this age group only.
- <sup>9</sup> A. Pauwels, 'The role of mixed marriages in language shift in the Dutch communities', in M.C. Clyne (ed.), *Australia, Meeting Place of Languages*, Canberra, Department of Linguistics, Australia National University, 1985
- <sup>10</sup> This is indicated by data on household and family structure from the 1991 Census. See Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, *Immigrant Families: A Statistical Profile*, Statistical Report No. 12. Canberra, AGPS, 1994.
- <sup>11</sup> See for example, Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, *Community Profiles 1991 Census Lebanon Born*, Canberra, AGPS, 1994, about the different waves of migration from Lebanon. Over 50 per cent of the second generation of Middle-Eastern origin had parents born in Lebanon.