

Passing on the language: Heritage language diversity in Canada

by **Brian Harrison**

One of the most striking effects of immigration in the last quarter of the 20th century has been the diversity of new languages introduced in Canada. The number of people whose mother tongue was neither French nor English rose from 2.8 million in 1971 to 4.7 million in 1996. This multilingual aspect of the nation is one of its defining social characteristics, as few countries are home to such a broad range of cultural and linguistic groups.

While fluency in at least one of the official languages is generally necessary for socioeconomic success, maintaining one's mother tongue, and passing it on to the next generation, are often perceived as important to immigrants' cultural and personal well-being. To this end, many children participate in heritage language training, which is often held on weekends in schools, community centres and churches across the country. These programs signal the value that new Canadians place on their children speaking a heritage language.

Another indication of the importance of heritage languages is their proliferation in the broadcast and print media. Ethnic radio and television

CST What you should know about this study

This study uses language data from the Censuses of Population. Analysis focuses on the thirteen heritage language groups with a mother tongue population of more than 100,000 in 1996: Chinese, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Polish, Punjabi, Ukrainian, Arabic, Tagalog, Dutch, Greek and Vietnamese.

Heritage language: a language other than English or French.

Mother tongue: language first learned at home in childhood and still understood at the time of the census.

Home language: language spoken most often at home by the individual at the time of the census.

Knowledge of heritage language: the ability to conduct a conversation in a language other than English or French.

Children: children aged 5 to 14 in two-parent families.

Endogamous marriage: marriage within a group (i.e. both parents have the same heritage language as mother tongue).

Exogamous marriage: marriage outside a group (i.e. parents do not have the same heritage language mother tongue).

stations that broadcast in languages such as Chinese, Italian, Spanish and Polish have sprung up in cities with significant immigrant populations. For example, CFMT International in Ontario has a range of programming in more than fifteen languages and estimates their total audience at more

than 800,000 (excluding English language programming). There is an abundance of weekly and monthly newspapers and newsletters in languages other than English and French, but there are also daily publications for the larger ethnic populations. These include Chinese daily

newspapers that are published in Vancouver and Toronto, and an Italian daily, based in Toronto, which has been published for more than 40 years.

Obviously, there are many people in Canada who read, write, understand or speak a language other than English or French. This article looks at the evolution of heritage languages in the last half of the 20th century, with a focus on their transmission from one generation to the next.

Language changes in the 20th century reflect different origins of immigrants

Except for Aboriginal languages, the heritage languages are an imported phenomenon. Immigrants and their countries of origin changed considerably throughout the last century, contributing to a major transformation in the language composition of the nation. The most prominent heritage languages identified by the 1996 Census differ considerably from those of 1941, when the modern definition of mother tongue was used for the first time.

In 1941, German and Ukrainian were the most frequently reported heritage mother tongue languages in Canada. Many people had immigrated to Canada from Austria, Germany, the Ukraine and Russia in the first decades of the century. German has remained a major language group ever since, largely due to an influx of immigrants during the 1950s, but the number of Canadians with German mother tongue has declined since 1961. Ukrainian, which grew substantially until 1961, has also been declining since that time. Other languages, such as Yiddish, Norwegian, Swedish and Finnish — all major language groups in 1941 — were not replenished by new generations of immigrants from the same language groups, and have faded from the top ten.¹



Changes in the ranking of the top 10 heritage language groups reflect shifts in immigrants' countries of origin

	1941	1961	1981	1991	1996
Top 10 in 1941	(000s with language as mother tongue)				
German	322	564	516	491	471
Ukrainian	313	361	285	201	175
Yiddish	130	82	31	28	24
Polish	129	162	127	200	222
Italian	80	340	531	539	514
Norwegian	60	40	19	14	11
Russian	52	43	31	38	60
Swedish	50	33	17	13	11
Finnish	37	45	33	29	26
Chinese	34	49	224	517	736
Top 10 in 1996					
Chinese	34	49	224	517	736
Italian	80	340	531	539	514
German	322	564	516	491	471
Spanish	1	7	70	188	229
Portuguese	n/a	n/a	165	221	223
Polish	129	162	127	200	222
Punjabi	n/a	n/a	54	147	215
Ukrainian	313	361	285	201	175
Arabic	n/a	n/a	69	119	166
Tagalog	n/a	n/a	8	116	158

Note: Data for 1991 and 1996 include both single and multiple responses. Data not collected for Portuguese and Arabic until 1971; data not collected for Punjabi and Tagalog until 1981.
Source: Statistics Canada, Demography Division.

In contrast, the number of people claiming Chinese as their mother tongue increased sevenfold in the 40 years from 1941 to 1981, and then almost tripled in the next 15 years. By 1996, Chinese was by far the most common heritage language in Canada, reported as mother tongue by almost three-quarters of a million people. Italian also became a major language group in the last half of the 20th century, fuelled by heavy immigration during the two decades between 1951 and 1971. Meanwhile, languages as diverse as Spanish, Punjabi, Arabic and

Tagalog, some of them with so few speakers that data were not even tabulated for them before 1981, were all major heritage language groups by the 1990s.

The process of integration

The process of cultural integration in the 20th century is behind much of the shift in rankings of the early heritage language groups in Canada. When immigrants first arrive here,

1. In 1996, Yiddish was 34th, Norwegian 46th, Swedish 48th and Finnish 31st.



Note: Data for single responses only.

Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population.

they often have limited ability in the official languages and they identify strongly with their cultural heritage. Consequently, they often retain their mother tongue as the language they speak most often in the home. However, the children will be exposed to English or French at school, in playgrounds, on television and radio and often through sports and other community activities. In many cases, the children have a greater knowledge of the official languages than their parents. With the passage of time, both the immigrants and their children tend to function more within the dominant cultures, whether English or French. Eventually, the children may marry outside their linguistic and cultural group and when they have children of their own, those children may have little opportunity to speak the heritage language.²

Marriage into the mainstream

Although today's heritage language groups include people who were born in Canada, most have a very high proportion of immigrants. In 1996,

immigrants comprised 71% of the population of the 13 largest language groups. The proportion varies widely between the groups, from a high of 92% for Tagalog to a low of 25% for Ukrainian, but only four language groups — Italian, Greek, German and Ukrainian — were below the overall average of 71%.

It is not surprising to find that marriage to someone with a different mother tongue is generally more common among groups that came to Canada earlier in the century; among those that have a high percentage of newer immigrants, marriage into an official language group is uncommon. For example, in 1996, only 5% of wives whose mother tongue was Chinese had a husband whose mother tongue was English or French; by contrast, the figure was 34% for wives whose mother tongue was Dutch. Exogamous marriage is clearly a rarity in the newer Chinese community, but not in the older established Dutch, German and Ukrainian communities. However, some groups characterized by high immigration in the 1950s, 1960s, and

1970s (such as the Italian and Portuguese) have not experienced the same degree of exogamy.

Passing the language to the next generation easier in endogamous marriages

A common result of marriage outside one's own heritage language group is the adoption of an official language as the children's mother tongue. When only one parent has a heritage language as a mother tongue, the chances of the child having it as well are slim indeed. The percentages range from highs of 20% for children with a Spanish or Punjabi mother tongue parent to lows of 3% for those with an Italian or Ukrainian and only 1% for those with a Dutch mother tongue parent.

As one might expect, though, people in endogamous marriages where both parents have the same mother tongue have a far greater tendency to pass a heritage language on to their children. At least three-quarters of children whose parents' mother tongue was Polish, Chinese, Spanish, Punjabi or Vietnamese had the same mother tongue. On the other hand, some groups have a lower tendency to pass on the language. Such is the case for Dutch, Italian and Tagalog, where fewer than half of these children shared their parents' mother tongue.

The reasons why parents choose to transmit the heritage language are complex. Many new immigrants wish to promote a certain type of bilingualism for their children. They often want their children to identify with their cultural heritage and learn the concomitant language, but at the same time they recognize the economic and

2. This model does not describe the process for all groups in all circumstances. Some language groups can maintain or even increase their numbers because they are relatively isolated or because the people who speak those languages are highly concentrated in a geographic area, as, for example, the German Mennonite community.

social value of being fluent in one or both of the official languages. In addition, some heritage languages may be perceived as being very useful in the labour market of the future.

Another important language transfer issue occurs with respect to the next generation's use of the heritage language as the language they speak most often at home. Far fewer children have the heritage language as their home language than as their mother tongue; in other words, although the heritage language may be the first language they learned, they do not use it as their main language in the home. Even in endogamous marriages, fewer than half of the children use the heritage language as their home language, except in Polish, Chinese, Spanish or Vietnamese heritage language families. When only one of the parents has the heritage language as mother tongue, its use as the home language is very rare — less than one in 10 children. The only exceptions are children of exogamous marriages where one parent's mother tongue is Chinese, Punjabi or Vietnamese.

Although many children may not employ their parent's heritage language as their mother tongue or use it as their home language, they are often able to speak it. In seven of the 13 largest language groups, at least 90% of children of endogamous marriages knew the heritage language well enough to conduct a conversation. Similarly, the children of exogamous marriages had a far greater tendency to know the heritage language. It is apparent that many children learn their parents' mother tongue as a second language.

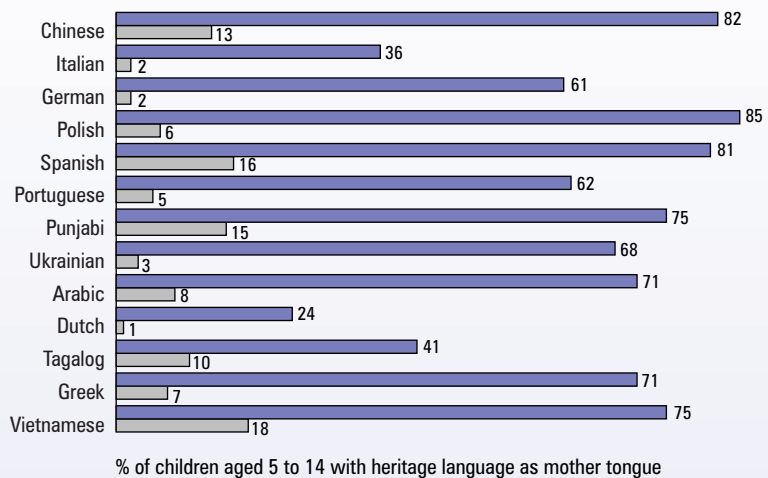
Inability to speak official languages preserves heritage language communities

Maintaining one's heritage language is important for cultural reasons, but knowledge of one of the official



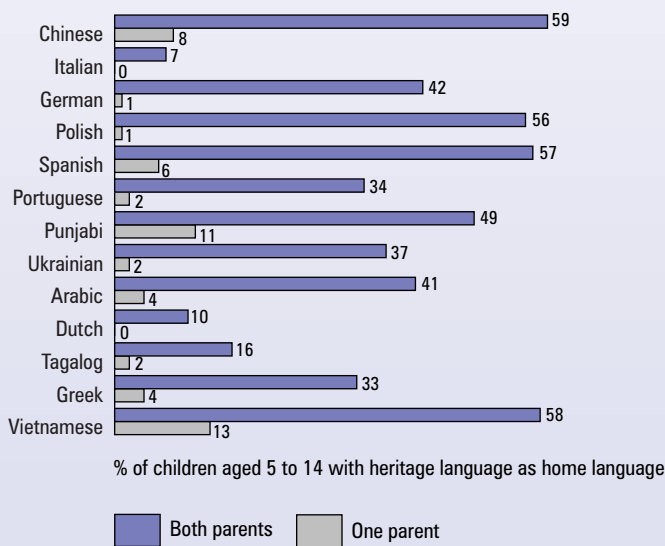
Children whose parents have the same heritage language are much more likely to learn it as their mother tongue...

Mother tongue of parent



... but fewer children use it as their home language

Mother tongue of parent



Note: Data for single responses only.
Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population.

languages is generally the best means to ensure economic integration and improve the family's prospects. However, the 1996 Census showed that the percentage of people unable to speak either official language was higher than at any other time during the 20th century.³

When large numbers of people in a heritage language group cannot speak

either official language, other members of that community speak to them in their mother tongue. This activity has the effect of increasing the use of that language. For example, one of the reasons that the Chinese language

3. This was largely attributable to heavy immigration in the first half of the nineties.

While immigrants are usually the focus of studies of heritage language groups, it should not be forgotten that many Canadian-born people learn a heritage language. The extent of this phenomenon can be measured using the "language ability index," a ratio of people able to speak a language to people with that language as their mother tongue.¹ All 13 of the largest heritage languages have an ability index of more than 100, meaning that the population able to conduct a conversation in that language is greater than the mother

tongue population. The highest score on the index appears for Spanish (221), followed by German (139), Italian (135) and Arabic (134).

The very high score for Spanish reflects the fact that it is often taught in Canadian schools and is a global language that facilitates communication in the countries to which many Canadians travel. Canada's growing economic and social links with Mexico and Latin America may further enhance the desirability of learning Spanish.

	Mother tongue (MT)	Knowledge (Kn) (000s)	Ability index (Kn/MT)
Spanish	229	506	221
German	471	654	139
Italian	514	694	135
Arabic	167	223	134
Vietnamese	112	148	132
Greek	128	162	126
Ukrainian	175	218	125
Tagalog	158	192	121
Dutch	139	166	119
Portuguese	223	259	116
Polish	222	258	116
Punjabi	215	249	116
Chinese	736	791	108

Note: Data include both single and multiple responses.
Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population.

1. Note that some Canadians can understand conversations in their mother tongue but can no longer speak the language, according to the Census.

has such a high rate of use is because one in five people who have Chinese mother tongue speaks neither French nor English.

Interestingly, it is not only new-immigrant heritage language groups in which this situation exists. About one in six Canadians with Portuguese mother tongue and one in 10 of those with Italian mother tongue cannot converse in either official language. The reason may be linked to labour market activity. An earlier study has

shown that a large percentage of immigrants from southern Europe who were unable to speak English or French were women who were not in the labour force, or else were employed in low-paying manual occupations where knowledge of an official language was not essential to do the job.⁴

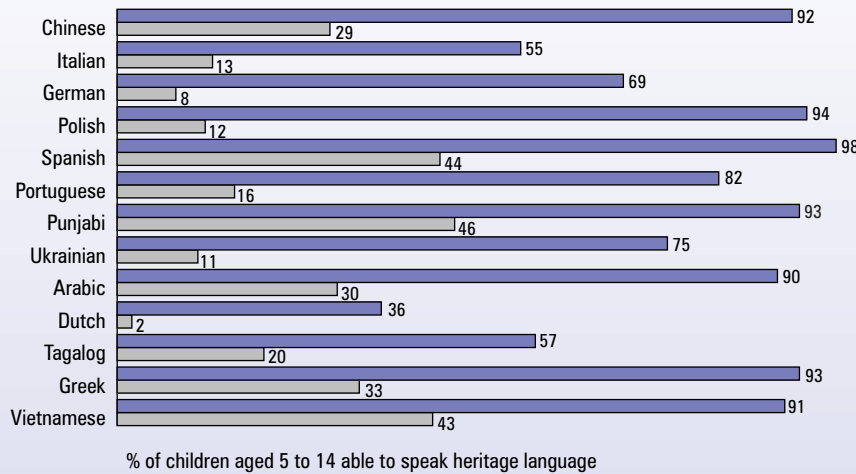
Summary

The late 20th century saw a considerable increase in the number and

diversity of heritage languages spoken in Canada. Immigration from non-European countries was largely responsible for the shift towards a varied range of languages with non-European origins: almost eight in 10 immigrants who arrived in

4. Harrison, B. 1985. *Non-English Speaking Immigrants in Ontario, 1981: Socio-Economic Characteristics*. Toronto: Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture.

Mother tongue of parent



Note: Data for single responses only.
Source: Statistics Canada, 1996 Census of Population.

Canada between 1991 and 1996 were from countries outside Europe or the United States.

The tendency to pass the heritage language to the next generation is affected by a number of factors, including time spent in Canada and the degree of exposure to the language of the majority. It is also highly related to exogamy — the propensity to marry outside the original linguistic group. Children of parents who have the same heritage language mother tongue are far more likely to speak the language than children of exogamous marriages. As immigrant groups spend more time in Canada, there is a tendency to marry more often outside the language group, making it less likely that the children will speak the heritage language.

Whether new immigrants to Canada will follow a pattern similar to that of their predecessors is a matter of debate, and will be the result of a number of factors which have divergent effects on language maintenance. In the past, a greater concentration of ethnic groups in specific neighbourhoods and labour markets tended to increase language maintenance, and this trend is likely to continue. On the other hand, children of immigrants will spend much of their time in front of personal computers that have a considerable amount of information in English and French — an activity which hastens the learning of an official language. However, the Internet may also give them more access to content in their heritage language and this may increase their knowledge of the language of their parents and grandparents.



Brian Harrison began work on the study of heritage languages as a senior analyst with the Demography Division, Statistics Canada. He is now with the Housing, Family and Social Statistics Division.

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