

*Immigrant Languages in the United States:  
Acquisition, Loss, Transmission and Change*

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WILA 7 Keynote Lecture

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Of enduring interest in linguistics is the way in which languages simplify over time and immigrant languages have a great deal to teach us about the normal and natural development of a native language in a bilingual context across the life course and across generations. Several linguists have suggested that second language learners and their imperfect language learning ability (non-native speakers) are the most obvious agents of diachronic language change. I argue that in some instances heritage speakers are also agents of language change and that their special language learning situation provides a unique testing ground for isolating those aspects of language that are more likely to undergo simplification. I will present results of recent studies on Spanish, Hindi and Romanian as heritage languages in the United States to support the conclusion that transfer from English and less frequent use of the heritage language by heritage speakers during late childhood and adolescence, in addition to other language-specific factors, appear to drive morphosyntactic erosion in Spanish, Hindi, and Romanian as heritage languages (incomplete acquisition or acquisition without mastery). However, the possibility also exists that, if the first generation of immigrants shows signs of attrition, these patterns may also affect the quality of the input and the language transmitted to the second generation, the heritage speakers. In this talk, I consider the opposite possibility instead: that the heritage speakers may contribute to specific patterns of attrition in the parental generation and I will support my claim with data from Spanish in the US. I discuss how the changing nature of input throughout the lifespan of heritage speakers may contribute to their degree of acquisition, maintenance, and potential change of the language at the individual level and across generations.