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## America's Newcomers and the Dynamics of Diversity

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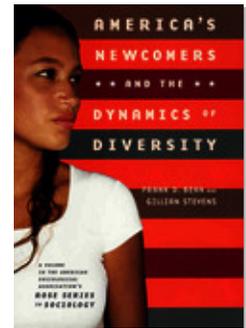
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## == Chapter 7 ==

# Linguistic Incorporation Among Immigrants

**T**HE SOCIAL and cultural integration of immigrants and their children into American society is a critical issue for the immigrants, national descent groups, and American society. Theories concerning the social and cultural integration of national-origin groups in American society have largely focused on the language characteristics of immigrants as measures of the incompleteness of integration into a society firmly dominated by the English language and by English speakers. Speaking a non-English language has been assumed to attest to an attachment to a culturally defined group, and English skills have been viewed as a prerequisite for socioeconomic mobility. As noted in chapter 5, theories of incorporation, including both assimilation and cultural pluralism, often acknowledge the general possibility that convergence between minority and majority groups may result from changes in the attributes of both populations. In the case of language, however, processes of adaptation in the United States have tended, at least up to now, to be mostly one-sided; the dynamics of incorporation have been presumed to occur primarily within the minority-language group.

Unlike other major immigrant-receiving countries such as Canada or Great Britain, the United States has never made the language characteristics of prospective immigrants an explicit part of legislation regulating the flow of migration into the country. (One exception is the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which provided an opportunity for undocumented aliens to gain legal status if they met certain conditions, such as demonstration of English literacy [Terdy and Spener 1990].) Instead, immigration policy has shaped the language characteristics of entering immigrants implicitly by affecting the numbers of immigrants from national populations typified by specific language repertoires, that is, by fluency in specific non-English

languages and possession of lower or higher skills in English. Changes in the national origins of immigrants over the course of the last century thus have been accompanied by changes in the language repertoires of new immigrants, of the resident foreign-born population, and of their children. The significant shifts in the sources of immigration flows over the last third of the twentieth century are therefore in the process of shifting the linguistic characteristics of the foreign-born population, their immediate descendants, and the nation as a whole.

The dynamics of linguistic adaptation are complex, especially in a context in which the linguistic characteristics of the newest entrants and of the larger society are changing. At the minimum, linguistic adaptation involves changes in the numbers of immigrants entering with certain language repertoires, processes of English acquisition largely occurring within the foreign-born generation, and processes of language shift toward English (or minority-language loss) occurring within and between generations. Moreover, the processes of English acquisition and minority-language shift are intertwined, although they need not occur simultaneously.

Because immigrants' language repertoires correspond to their national origin and race—though only roughly—processes of language adaptation are part and parcel of processes of cultural assimilation and discrimination. Processes of English acquisition are also strongly implicated in labor force-related attainments. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to consider processes of language adaptation apart from processes of cultural assimilation and social mobility. Discontinuities in the ability to speak a given language or dialect have the strong potential to divide communities, while a shared facility in a given language has the strong potential to unite. The Asian national-origin groups are strongly divided by language, whereas the Central and South American national-origin groups are not. The implications of these language differences in the formation of racially defined groups in the United States are still unknown. Unlike other cultural attributes, the ability to discard, maintain, or acquire a language is not entirely under individuals' control (Stromswold 2001). Acquiring a new language or maintaining a language first learned in childhood also requires individuals to have high levels of motivation as well as access to opportunities and resources to learn or continue to use the language, some of which must be available in or provided by the surrounding community.

Finally, there is the issue of one-sidedness in the linguistic adaptation of immigrant groups in the United States. The image of America as a monolingual English-speaking nation has reigned for at least a century. Still, the country does not have a federal language policy

favoring the English language (or any set of languages) over others, and there have been periods of time when non-English languages have been tolerated and even encouraged (Kloss 1977). The Bilingual Education Act, passed in 1968 and reauthorized in 1994, and the Amendments to the Voting Rights Act, passed in 1975 and reauthorized in 1992, both sought to preserve the rights of minority-language speakers. Thus, American society is accommodating minority-language populations to some extent, although the nature and extent of the accommodations are a major source of contention. Many argue, for example, that the accommodations are far from sufficient in the efforts to socially and politically integrate minority-language populations into American society while others maintain that accommodation may retard the integration of minority-language populations by removing incentives to learn English.

This chapter first discusses how various theories of incorporation have treated the linguistic attributes of immigrants and immigrant groups. It then turns to a discussion of changes in the national origins of immigrants over time and the language characteristics of newly entering immigrants, the resident foreign-born population and their children, and the entire American population. Next, it provides an overview of processes of English-language acquisition and minority-language shift among immigrants. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the contexts in which these processes occur may be changing.

### **Language Characteristics in Theories of Incorporation**

The ethos underlying the post-World War II reforms in immigration policy and law, which moved immigration policy away from exclusionary and race-specific terms toward cultural and national pluralism, had its roots in the early twentieth century. For example, in an article titled "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot," Horace Kallen argued in 1924 that nationality groups in America should not be robbed of their cultural identities and coercively Americanized. He famously described America as an "orchestra" in which "every type of instrument has its specific timbre and tonality . . . as every type has its appropriate theme and melody, and the harmony and dissonances and discords of them all make the symphony of civilization" (Kallen 1988 [1924]).

In spite of Kallen's vivid aural analogy, not even those holding the most positive attitudes toward immigrants during that time period—

the "Americanizers"—entertained the prospect that immigrants should be encouraged to maintain their own language or that the United States should be host to a chorus of languages. The leaders of the Americanization movement in the 1910s hoped to mold foreigners into good Americans by teaching them civics, English, and the values of American society (Dixon 1916). It was a movement of "structured experiences" (Knobel 1996) in which social institutions such as settlement houses, schools, and the YMCA offered numerous evening programs aimed at "Americanizing" foreigners. In practice, however, the main focus of these programs was the teaching of English, which was considered to be the "first step" in the assimilation of the immigrant (Drachler 1920; Hartmann 1967, 24).

Meanwhile, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the linkages between race, nationality, and language were hardening. For example, in 1910 the U.S. Bureau of the Census attached a "mother-tongue" question to the census schedule that was to be used as an "index of racial character and origin" (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1913). In 1910 and 1920, coding instructions for the information gathered in answer to the "mother-tongue" question assigned the mother tongue of immigrant parents to their native-born American offspring, thereby revealing the presumption that mother tongue was an inherited rather than learned characteristic. In 1933, tabulations of the mother tongues of the U.S. population excluded members of racially defined groups such as Mexicans or Japanese. The rationale was that the information would be redundant, since "most persons of each of the other races speak one characteristic language" (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1933).

The inferred correspondence between language and nationality or race became incorporated into the theories and frameworks about the integration and incorporation of immigrant groups. Major theorists of assimilation such as Gordon wrote in an era in which relatively few immigrants and few Americans of European descent were unable to speak English. In the 1950s and 1960s, the major issues confronting the nation concerned the final steps in the social and political integration of European-descent groups, who were by then largely fluent in English, as "white Americans." The significant numbers of immigrants and native-born Americans who were fluent in another language, notably Mexicans and Mexican Americans, were still being viewed through the lens of race, nationality, or citizenship. Language characteristics were not the salient identifying feature. Instead, differences in languages were overshadowed by differences of race or nationality.

Theoretical frameworks of assimilation have thus largely assumed

the language characteristics of new immigrants and their immediate descendants either as secondary cultural attributes and thus involved in early processes of acculturation, as reflecting participation in social networks and thus measuring processes of structural assimilation, or as an aspect of human capital and thus involved in economic and occupational mobility. Scholars have argued, for example, that mastery of a non-English language and extent of usage be used as indexes of "acculturation" (see, for example, Samora and Deane 1956). In this view, languages, particularly those learned as "mother tongues" in early childhood, carry the ethos of culture. Mother tongues provide the means to access a culture's literature, art, and history. (At its most romanticized, this perspective argues that a person's cultural and national affiliations are forever anchored to his or her mother tongue [Coulmas 1997].) Continued usage of the mother tongue therefore betrays a tight identification with the culture and sense of peoplehood embodied in the language. Conversely, shifting to use of English implies a loosening of the ties of membership and identification with the immigrant's national origins. In addition, because the English language is seen to be the standard-bearer of ideals of liberty and democracy, learning English conveys "an understanding of American industrial standards and an American point of view" (Kellor 1916).

Because languages are also means of communication among people, patterns of language use follow patterns of social interaction within and across culturally defined groups. Continued usage of a minority language, particularly in a setting dominated by another language, therefore conveys continued interaction with others sharing facility in the minority language and thus continued participation in the delimited community of people involved in the negotiation of that culture (Hammel 1990). Patterns of language use are thus integrally bound to social relationships within and across socially and culturally defined boundaries. Decreased use of a minority language is thus associated with a retreat from the community and its culture and perhaps movement toward another. Language shift toward English is thus associated with subprocesses of primary and secondary assimilation such as migration across state boundaries (Kritz and Nogle 1994), movement into suburbs (Alba, Logan, and Crowder 1997), and intermarriage (Stevens and Schoen 1988; Stevens and Swicegood 1987).

Language characteristics of immigrants are also implicated in theoretical frameworks that emphasize proficiency in English as a necessary resource in the pursuit of educational and labor force attainments. The relationship between skills in English and occupational attainments was anticipated and advertised early in the century. For example, in 1915 in the city of Syracuse, forty thousand handbills,

printed in five languages (English, Polish, Italian, Yiddish, and German), read: "Can you speak well? Do you want to be an American citizen? It is hard to get a job in America without English. Go to night school and learn it!" (Dixon 1916, 23). Recent research of contemporary immigrants shows that their skills in English and levels of literacy in English are consistently strong predictors of occupational status and earnings (Chiswick 1991; Dávila and Mora 2001; Stolzenberg 1990). Moreover, this relationship may have strengthened during the 1980s (Mora 1998; Mora and Dávila 2000). Immigrants' skills in English are also strongly related to their levels of schooling (Warren 1994; White and Kaufman 1997), especially among those entering the United States during childhood or young adulthood. High levels of proficiency in English are thus viewed as a prerequisite for participating in the many social settings and institutions that most often presume an easy familiarity with the nation's dominant language.

The theoretical frameworks considering language characteristics of immigrants as an index of acculturation, participation in social networks, or a potential resource in occupational and related attainments have, however, been less successful in understanding how languages are implicated in the identity of the nation and what it means to be "American." It is incontrovertible, however, that the linguistic demography of the nation is being changed by immigration. We therefore turn to a discussion of changes in the language characteristics of immigrants over the last portion of the century and the ways these changes are altering the language characteristics of the nation as a whole.

### **Languages in the United States, 1980 to 2000**

The U.S. Census Bureau has gathered information on the language characteristics of the American population for over a hundred years. Although the questions and subpopulations vary across census years, making it impossible to describe the changes in the language characteristics of the American population over the course of the entire century (see Stevens 1999 for details), the questions asked in the last three censuses were the same. Table 7.1 shows the languages (in major groupings) spoken by Americans aged five and over from 1980 to 2000. The table is based on data from the 1980, 1990, and 2000 U.S. censuses and, for the percentage of minority-language speakers in 2000 who are foreign-born, the supplementary survey to the 2000 census. All of the figures refer to people aged five years or more who reported speaking a non-English language at home in the census year.

**Table 7.1 Numbers (In Thousands) and Percentages of Americans Speaking English Only or a Non-English Language at Home, 1980 to 2000**

Language Spoken at Home	1980 <sup>a</sup>	1990 <sup>a</sup>	2000 <sup>a</sup>
Total	210,248 100.00%	230,446 100.00%	262,375 100.00%
English only	187,187 89.03%	198,601 86.18%	215,423 82.11%
A non-English language (NEL)	23,060 10.97%	31,845 13.82%	46,951 17.89%
Spanish	11,116 5.29%	17,345 7.53%	28,101 10.71%
Other Indo-European language	7,941 3.78%	8,790 3.81%	10,018 3.82%
Asian or Pacific Island language	2,231 1.06%	4,472 1.94%	6,960 2.65%
Other language	1,772 <sup>b</sup> 0.84%	1,238 0.54%	1,872 .71%
Percentage NEL speakers who are foreign-born	42.19	48.45	55.3 <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>1980 and 1990 figures are from the 1980 and 1990 U.S. censuses, as reported by Gibson and Lennon (1999). Unless otherwise noted, the figures for the year 2000 are from the 2000 U.S. census (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002b).

<sup>b</sup>Includes some Indo-European languages.

<sup>c</sup>Percentage estimated from the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002a).

Because the question (and subsequent coding procedures) allowed only one language as a response, those who speak more than one non-English language at home are identified only by the first language they chose to report. Because the census schedules did not include questions asking about proficiency in the non-English language, it is unknown whether persons reporting that they spoke a non-English language are fully fluent in that language, a consideration that is probably more important for native-born than for foreign-born minority-language speakers. The figures also omit people who spoke a non-English language earlier in their lives but had shifted from usage of their non-English language to English by the time of the census, and people who speak a non-English language at the time of the census but did not use it at home.

Within a span of just twenty years, the absolute number of non-English language speakers more than doubled, from 23 million to 47 million with much of that increase being accounted for by increases in

the numbers of people speaking Spanish or an Asian or Pacific Island language. The percentage of Americans speaking only English at home dropped from 89 percent to 82 percent and the percentages of Americans speaking Spanish or an Asian or Pacific Island language increased from 5.3 percent to 10.7 percent and from 1 percent to almost 4 percent, respectively.

In 1980, the majority (58 percent) of minority-language speakers were native-born. With the exceptions of the speakers of the indigenous North American languages and of Spanish speakers in the Southwest, the native-born portion of the non-English-language population in the United States consisted primarily of the U.S.-born children (and some grandchildren) of immigrants. This is because the high rates of language shift between generations over the course of the twentieth century quickly subtracted from the pool of speakers of languages other than English among later-generation Americans (Lieberson and Curry 1971; Stevens 1985). The inroads in the relative size of the native-born versus foreign-born minority-language population produced by high rates of intergenerational language shift were, however, counterbalanced by the virtual cessation of immigration of non-English speakers in the middle of the century. The return of high levels of immigration after the 1960s began to shift the nativity composition of the non-English-language-speaking population toward the foreign-born. By 1990, almost half (48 percent) of the minority-language speakers were foreign-born and the supplementary survey to the 2000 census suggests that in 2000, a small majority (55 percent) of non-English speakers were foreign-born. The shift would be even more pronounced but for the new second generation, which is native-born and also increasing in size. Many of the children of immigrants learn their parents' non-English language. As a result, although the relative percentage of native-born minority-language speakers dropped during the last portion of the twentieth century, the absolute number of native-born minority-language speakers grew between 1980 and 2000, from about 13 million in 1980 to over 20 million in 2000.

The nativity-specific numbers of non-English languages spoken by non-English-language American residents, largely immigrants and their children, is a lagged reflection of the timing and age distribution of major immigration streams over the last century. The increases in levels of immigration over the course of the last twenty years, and the consequent increases in the proportion of the total population that is foreign-born, are thus quickly changing the overall linguistic composition of the U.S. population as well as the nativity-specific composition of the minority-language population.

## Non-English Languages Spoken by Immigrants

The shifts in the national origins of immigrants entering the country over the last quarter of the twentieth century has dramatically changed the array of non-English languages spoken within the United States. Table 7.2 shows the distribution of non-English languages spoken by immigrants in the United States in 1980, 1990, and 2000 and the ratio of the number of speakers of each language in 2000 to the number in 1980. The changes between 1980 and 2000 in the absolute numbers of speakers of specific non-English languages clearly reflect the increases and decreases in levels of immigration from some countries during the 1980s and 1990s.

With the exception of Spanish, the numbers of Americans speaking a European language (or having a non-English mother tongue of European origin) were declining in the middle of the century; nevertheless, in 1960 the six biggest non-English mother-tongue populations were still European in origin (Fishman 1985b). Even by 1980 there were still well over half a million foreign-born speakers of German and Italian respectively. But the numbers of foreign-born persons speaking European-origin languages such as German, Italian, Greek, Hungarian, Dutch, or Yiddish, already in decline, dwindled as earlier-arriving immigrants died or left the U.S. and were not replaced by new immigrants who spoke those languages arriving during the 1980s and 1990s. Meanwhile, the number of foreign-born Spanish speakers increased 2.55 times between 1980 and 2000 while the number of speakers of Asian languages such as Chinese or Japanese and of Southeast Asian languages such as Thai, Mon-Khmer, Miao, or Vietnamese increased by between 2 and 11 times. By 2000, immigrants were most likely to speak Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog (one of the major languages spoken in the Philippines), Vietnamese, French, or Korean.

The changes in the national origins of the immigration streams entering the United States are responsible not only for changes in the overall array of languages spoken by immigrants but also for the different arrays of languages spoken by younger versus older Americans. Table 7.3, which is based on data from the supplementary survey to the 2000 census, shows the top ten minority languages spoken by children aged five to seventeen, adults aged eighteen to sixty-four, and by persons aged sixty-five and over.

The table shows that about two-thirds of children in the U.S. who spoke a minority language in 2000 spoke Spanish. The percentage is high, in large part, because of the growing predominance of immigra-

**Table 7.2 Non-English Languages Spoken by Immigrants Aged Five and Over, 1980 to 2000**

Non-English Language Spoken at Home	Number of Speakers			Ratio, 2000/1980
	1980	1990	2000	
All non-English languages	9,729,337	15,430,434	24,843,016	2.55
Spanish (includes creoles)	3,896,505	7,350,512	12,966,768	3.33
Chinese	494,855	1,088,296	1,249,429	2.52
Tagalog	402,968	746,443	973,421	2.42
Vietnamese	182,890	434,731	858,085	4.69
French (includes creoles)	376,060	534,192	736,095	1.96
Korean	237,516	530,860	683,409	2.88
Russian	127,605	186,514	643,043	5.04
German	627,998	529,678	471,472	.75
Arabic	164,953	251,409	420,776	2.55
Portuguese (includes creoles)	232,794	281,635	392,430	1.69
Italian	705,407	493,439	347,028	.49
Polish	260,341	286,896	339,612	1.30
Japanese	171,715	245,294	304,337	1.77
Hindi	115,774	287,067	251,681	2.17
Persian	94,395	178,354	210,243	2.23
Thai (Laotian)	73,542	173,226	197,502	2.69
Gujarati	32,065	87,539	182,680	5.70
Mon-Khmer (Cambodian)	15,089	113,910	170,923	11.33
Kru (Kwa)	22,454	58,172	153,610	6.84
Greek	215,700	181,965	144,130	.67
Armenian	69,995	115,017	134,976	1.93
Hebrew	49,044	74,985	109,646	2.24
Miao (Hmong)	14,638	62,699	92,979	6.35
Dutch	90,353	82,558	81,261	.90
Ukrainian	70,117	50,725	77,580	1.11
Romanian	24,058	53,493	75,450	3.14
Hungarian	105,298	87,024	55,449	0.53
Swedish, Danish, Norwegian	100,596	77,284	53,116	0.53
Serbo-Croatian	91,811	80,222	52,230	0.57
Yiddish	157,252	72,779	37,001	0.24
All other languages	505,549	633,516	2,376,654	4.70

*Sources:* Tabulations are based on data from the 1980 and 1990 U.S. censuses (Gibson and Lennon 1999) and from the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002a).

**Table 7.3 The Percentages of Minority-Language Speakers Speaking the Ten Most Commonly Spoken Languages in 2000, by Age Grouping**

	Children Ages Five to Seventeen	Adults Ages Eighteen to Sixty-Four	Adults Ages Sixty-Five and Over
Spanish	68.6%	55.8%	33.4%
French	3.4	5.2	4.5
Vietnamese	2.4	1.6	2.1
Chinese	2.3	4.3	6.6
German	1.8	4.6	7.8
Korean	1.7	2.2	<sup>a</sup>
Arabic	1.4	<sup>a</sup>	<sup>a</sup>
Russian	1.3	<sup>a</sup>	4.1
Tagalog	1.2	3.1	5.1
Miao (Hmong)	1.1	<sup>a</sup>	<sup>a</sup>
Italian	<sup>a</sup>	3.3	6.0
Polish	<sup>a</sup>	1.6	2.7
Japanese	<sup>a</sup>	1.4	2.1
Total <sup>b</sup>	85.2	83.1	74.4

Source: Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002a).

<sup>a</sup>Not one of the ten most frequently spoken minority languages in this age group.

<sup>b</sup>The percentage of minority language speakers in this age group who speak one of the top ten languages.

tion from the Spanish-language countries in Central and Latin America in the last quarter of the twentieth century but the percentage of minority-language children speaking Spanish has also been pushed upward by the higher levels of fertility among the Spanish-speaking national origin groups in the United States (Bean, Swicegood, and Berg 2000), and the apparently higher rates of language retention between generations among the Spanish language population (Stevens 1985) especially in the American southwest.

Table 7.3 also shows that in contrast to the strong preponderance of Spanish speakers among minority-language children, only a little more than half of minority-language adults aged eighteen to sixty-four and a third of minority-language adults aged 65 or over spoke Spanish in 2000. Substantial percentages of adults spoke other minority languages, such as French, German, Chinese, or Italian. Linguistic diversity is clearly much greater among adult minority-language speakers than among children in the sense that significant percentages of adults speak different languages.

The higher levels of linguistic diversity among minority-language

adults are a product of the confluence of several demographic and social processes. Some of the elderly European language speakers are the last survivors among the cohorts of non-English-language immigrants who entered the United States as children or young adults in the first third of the twentieth century. Other minority-language adults are the native-born descendants of the cohorts of European immigrants who entered in the first portion of the last century. Some of the older Asian-language speakers are the first few members of the large cohorts that began to enter the United States in the late 1960s as young adults and who are now entering the older age groupings while others entered the country as older adults during the 1970s or 1980s under the auspices of the family reunification provisions of immigration policy.

The diversity of languages spoken by immigrants has numerous implications for the incorporation of minority-language speakers and populations into American society. The preponderance of Spanish speakers among children, many of whom live in linguistically isolated households (defined as households that do not contain a person aged fourteen or over who speaks English "very well" or as his or her only language), points to the need for specialized services, particularly educational services, for Spanish speakers. At the same time, the wide variety of languages spoken by the non-Spanish minority-language children—the other 31 percent—highlights the difficulty of providing services to all young minority-language speakers, whether by means of traditional or transitional bilingual schooling programs or programs designed to enhance the chances of minority-language maintenance. The much higher levels of diversity among the elderly population suggests other problems. The wide array of languages spoken by significant percentages of the elderly coupled with their generally lower levels of English proficiency and the relatively high likelihood that elderly minority-language speakers live in linguistically isolated households (Mutchler and Brallier 1999; Stevens and Muehl 2001) point to a need for the provision of services and programs in a wide variety of languages in order to respond to the entire population of elderly minority-language speakers.

The discrepancies between the age groups—particularly the children and the elderly—in the array of minority languages spoken produce additional problems. Immigrant communities are often presumed to consist of demographically complete populations in the sense that their members span the entire age range. The discrepancies between the non-English languages represented among the younger and older minority-language speakers implies that many minority-language populations do not include all ages. Even if non-English-language

children require or would benefit from specific educational, service-oriented, or ethnically based programs in their own minority language, it is possible that the pool of older adults with appropriate language skills from whom personnel can be found to manage or to participate in these programs is limited in size. The result is a shortage of appropriately qualified speakers who can work in educational and government institutions to provide bilingual services and programs (see, for example, August and Hakuta 1997). The difficulties associated with the ratio of the number of adult Spanish-language speakers to the number of young Spanish-language speakers is particularly acute because of the lower levels of education among the adult Spanish speakers (see chapter 6 for a description of the educational attainments of immigrant and native-born Americans by ethnic origins).

Changes in immigration policy, especially the implementation of the 1965 Immigration Act, have therefore changed the array and representation of minority languages represented among immigrants by changing the country of origins, and the corresponding non-English languages, spoken by immigrants and their children. Because immigration is highly selective of young adults, the shifts in the national origins of immigrant streams and the ancillary shifts in languages spoken by immigrants and their children have generated highly age-graded minority-language populations in the United States. Not only do different age groups require different arrays of services, but also the relative paucity of adult speakers of some minority languages has produced a relative shortage of personnel qualified to manage and participate in programs geared to particular age groups.

### **English-Language Skills at Time of Arrival**

Recent censuses have gathered information on English proficiency for persons who reported speaking a non-English language at home. Of the approximately 31 million foreign-born persons over the age of five in 2000, about 80 percent reported speaking a non-English language at home and of these, less than half reported that they did not speak English "very well," the phrase often considered to denote fluency in English (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993). The percentage of immigrants who do not speak English "very well" at the time they first enter the United States is, however, much higher. Many immigrants improve their English skills between their arrival and the time of the census, and some non-English-language immigrants who lack skills in English at time of entry and lack the motivation, opportuni-

**Table 7.4 Level of Proficiency in English Reported by Recent Immigrants, by Official or Dominant Language of Their Country of Birth**

Speaks English	Total	Official or Dominant Language of Immigrant's Country of Birth			
		English Dominant	English Official	Spanish Dominant	Other
Not well at all	19.5%	0.9%	1.6%	39.3%	11.6%
Not well	21.6	4.4	5.1	27.9	25.2
Well	19.8	5.7	20.1	13.0	28.8
Very well (or speaks only English)	39.0	89.0	73.1	19.9	34.4
Total	99.9	100.0	99.9	100.1	100.0

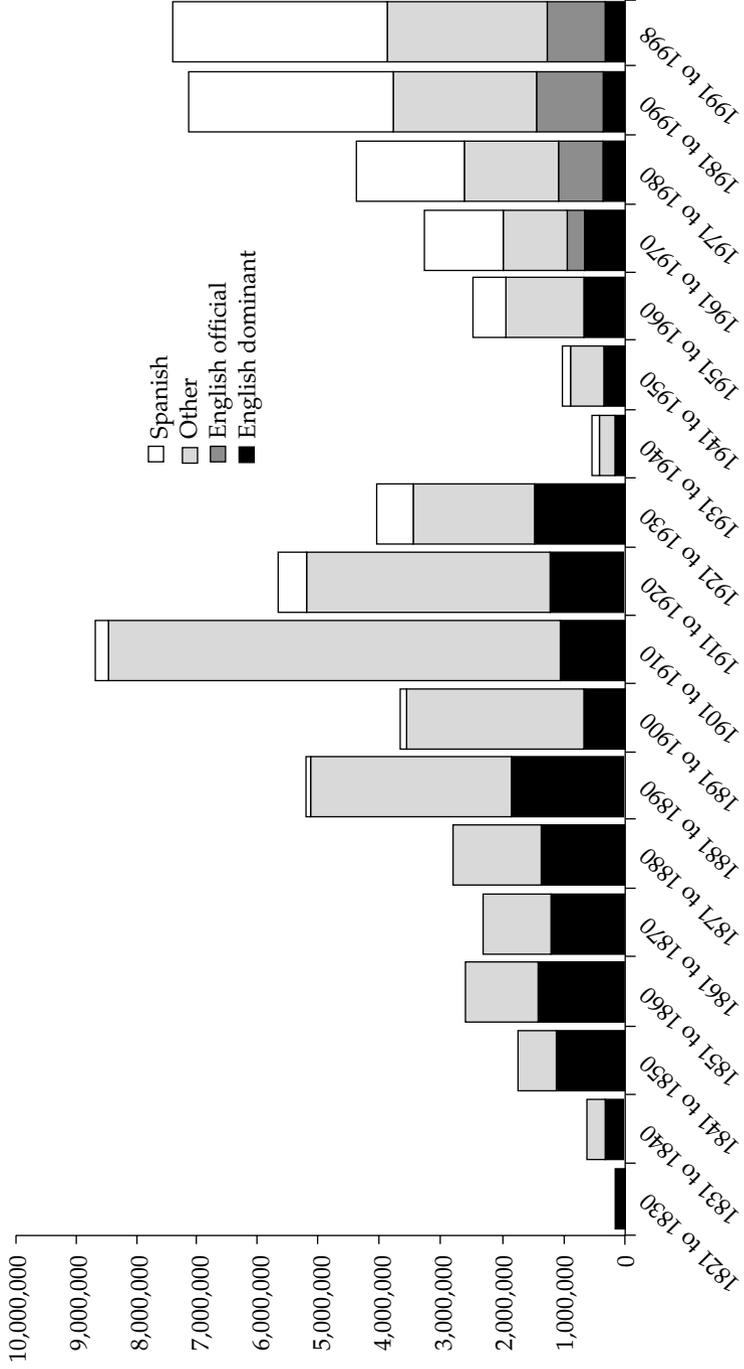
*Source:* Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002a).

ties, or resources to learn English return to their country of origin before the census is fielded.

Because neither the census nor the Immigration and Naturalization Service collects information about the language skills of immigrants at time of arrival, we use an indirect approach to try to ascertain immigrants' skills at time of arrival. Focusing first on recently arrived immigrants, who have not had much opportunity to increase their levels of proficiency in English, we tie their reported skills in English to their countries of origin. Among recently arrived immigrants there is a strong correspondence between English skills and the language characteristics of their countries of origin. Immigrants born in countries in which English is a dominant language spoken by the general population—such as the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada—are almost all fully fluent in English. Many immigrants born in countries in which English is an official language, such as India and South Africa, are fluent in English. On the other hand, relatively fewer immigrants from countries in which Spanish is the dominant language—such as Mexico, Spain, and most Latin American countries—enter the country already fluent in English (see table 7.4).

The strong correspondence between country of origin and level of English proficiency at or near the time of arrival means that shifts in the country-of-origin distribution of immigrants can influence the overall prevalence of English fluency among newly arrived immigrants. Figure 7.1, which is based on data produced by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service 2001), shows the shifts over the twentieth century in the num-

Figure 7.1 Legally Admitted Immigrants by Decade and Language Characteristics of Country of Origin



Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (2001).

bers of legally admitted immigrants who have been classified by the language characteristics of their country of origin. The figure therefore omits the significant numbers of immigrants entering without documentation who tend to have low levels of proficiency in English (Chiswick 1991), and it does not refer to the language skills of individual immigrants. Still, the figure suggests that the English-language skills of newly legally admitted immigrants declined in the last third of the twentieth century. Geoffrey Carliner (2000), for example, estimates a decrease of .3 percent per year since 1970 in the probability that new entering cohorts of immigrants speak English "very well" or speak only English.

Immigration policy thus affects, inadvertently, the distribution of English skills among immigrants by affecting the overall distribution of countries of origin among newly arrived immigrants. The largely unanticipated shifts in the national origins of immigrants after the implementation of the 1965 Immigration Act have resulted in higher proportions of immigrants from countries in which English is neither a dominant nor an official language and has therefore resulted in higher proportions of immigrants entering the United States with lower levels of proficiency in English. In addition, recent results from the pilot study for the New Immigrant Survey, a panel study of new immigrants, show that the emphasis on family reunification is closely associated with lower levels of English proficiency among immigrants admitted under family preferences. About 58 percent of young adult immigrants admitted under the employment categories do not speak English "very well" but almost all persons (and their spouses) admitted under the sibling category do not speak English very well (Jasso et al. 2000b).

### **Changes in Language Attributes After Arrival**

The language attributes of the first and second generations (immigrants and their native-born children, respectively) are the outcome of the language attributes of immigrants at the time they enter the United States and processes of change occurring after entry. Immigrants from non-English language countries can learn English as a second language or become more fluent in it. They may also increase the frequency with which they speak English vis-à-vis their minority language (a process known as intragenerational minority language shift). Immigrants may also choose to speak only English to their children. If their children learn and speak only English, then the minority language disappears between generations through intergenerational

language shift, or “mother-tongue shift.” These processes—the acquisition of English as a second language and minority language shift (both intragenerational and intergenerational)—have different causes and implications for the individuals involved, minority language communities, and the larger society.

### *Acquisition of English*

After arriving in the United States, non-English-language immigrants face numerous pressures and incentives to learn English as a second or higher-order language or to increase their skills in English. Numerous researchers from a variety of disciplines including sociology, anthropology, economics, and linguistics have investigated the acquisition of English as a second or higher-order language among immigrants. There are several robust findings. The most important one, usually based on cross-sectional data, is that immigrants who have lived in the United States for longer periods of time have higher levels of proficiency in English than those who have lived in the United States for shorter periods of time (Carliner 2000; Espenshade and Fu 1997; Espinosa and Massey 1997; Jasso and Rosenzweig 1990; Stevens 1992).

Three possible explanations for the cross-sectional positive relationship between level of English proficiency and length of residence among immigrants are changes in levels of English skills across entry cohorts (as discussed above), selective emigration, and the acquisition of English skills while living in the United States. The changes in levels of English skills across entering cohorts at year of entry cannot, however, explain the increases in English proficiency that are routinely observed in cross-sectional comparisons of cohorts arrayed by year of entry. The possibility of selective emigration with respect to English skills suggests that immigrants who are less proficient in English at time of entry or who are less able or less motivated to improve their skills in English after arrival are more likely to return to their country of origin. But the available research suggests that the impact of selective emigration on the association between English skills and length of residence in the United States is minor (Lindstrom and Massey 1994; Stevens 1994) and cannot explain the strong positive relationship between skills in English and length of residence (which is synonymous with year of entry in cross-sectional data). Most of the cross-sectional association between immigrants’ English skills and entry cohort must thus be attributable to immigrants’ acquisition of English as a second or higher-order language while living in the United States.

A variety of theoretical approaches have been used in the study of second-language acquisition among immigrants. Linguists and psychologists often investigate the neurolinguistic, linguistic, and psycholinguistic subprocesses (which may be biologically based) underlying the acquisition of competency in phonology, syntax, lexicon, semantics, and communication. This research often focuses on the possibility that maturational constraints (or a sensitive period for second-language learning) govern the ability of non-English-language immigrants to become fluent English speakers (Long 1990). Linguists often point out, for example, that all else being equal, immigrants who have lived longer in the United States immigrated earlier in life. If maturational constraints govern the possibility of and extent of second-language acquisition, then the observed relationship between length of residence and English skills should be attributed to the operation of these constraints.

Social scientists, on the other hand, usually rely on human capital and exposure models in which second-language learning is presumed to be the outcome of opportunities and motivation. In human capital or exposure models, length of residence in the United States, a society firmly dominated by English, is often considered a simple and direct measure of immigrants' exposure to opportunities to learn the English language (as in Jasso and Rosenzweig 1990), although some social scientists, including sociolinguists, note that length of residence in the United States may reflect the general opportunities and pressures on immigrants to acculturate to various aspects of American society (Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Schumann 1986). Sociologists have begun to refine measures of the amount and degree of "exposure" to opportunities to learn English by considering societal contexts in which second-language learning and use may be differentially encouraged. For example, immigrants who live in a household with a native-born American who is likely to be fluent in English are more likely to have advanced English skills themselves because of the frequent opportunities to engage in conversations and discussions with a native English speaker.

Numerous studies have shown that educational attainment is particularly strongly associated with immigrants' proficiency in English, although scholars' interpretations of that relationship are often discipline-specific. Sociologists, for example, interpret the positive association between educational attainment and English proficiency as attributable to immigrants' length of participation in an English language-dominated environment, to the added cognitive skills relevant to second-language learning that are gained through more schooling, or to selection processes in which immigrants with better English

skills achieve more schooling (see, for example, Espenshade and Fu 1997; Stevens 1994; Warren 1996). Economists, on the other hand, interpret the relationship between educational attainment and English-language proficiency as reflecting the higher relative costs of poor English skills among the better-educated (see, for example, Grenier 1984; Grin 1990).

Table 7.5 shows the results from an analysis of English-language proficiency among adult immigrants who were born in a non-English-language country. It includes some measures of exposure and opportunities for immigrants to learn English, as well as a measure of age at immigration, which is considered by linguists to be a reasonable proxy for the age at which second-language learning commences (Birdsong and Molis 2001; Johnson and Newport 1989). The data are from the supplementary survey to the 2000 U.S. census. As in the 2000 census, only persons who reported using a non-English language at home were asked whether they spoke English "very well," "well," "not well," or "not at all" in the supplementary survey and thereby were included in the analysis.

The first panel in table 7.5 shows that about 40 percent of immigrants born in a non-English-language country speak English "very well" and only about 10 percent do not speak English at all. On average, these immigrants entered the United States early in adulthood and have been in the country for several decades. The average level of education is high school graduation but the standard deviation is quite large. A large fraction of the immigrants appear to have attended school in the United States for at least a short time (although this variable was estimated by comparing the immigrants' time period of immigration, year of birth, and level of schooling and so is somewhat ambiguous). Most of the immigrants are married, a sizable fraction of the married immigrants have native-born spouses, and a majority report being employed in the labor force.

The coefficients in the last column of the table represent the logged odds that the respondent reports a higher level of proficiency in English rather than the immediately lower category, for example, "very well" rather than "well" or "well" rather than "not well," given a one-unit increase in the independent variable. The results support both social scientists' and linguists' expectations. The net effect of length of residence in the United States is strong and positive: the longer immigrants have lived in the United States, the more likely they are to report a higher level of proficiency in English. In addition, the net effect of age at immigration is negative. The older the immigrant at age of entry into the United States, the less likely he or she is to report a higher level of proficiency in English. The high levels of

**Table 7.5 Means, Standard Deviations, and Coefficients for Variables in an Ordered Logistic Model Predicting Level of Proficiency in English Among Immigrants from Non-English-Language Countries**

Variables	Proportion or Mean	Standard Deviation	Coefficients
Level of proficiency in English			
Very well	.41		
Well	.27		
Not well	.22		
Not at all	.10		
Length and timing of residence in U.S.			
Years in U.S.	22.38	15.50	.036*
Age at immigration	22.73	12.96	-.038*
Gender and family background			
Gender (female = 1)	.52	.50	-.076
Born in Spanish-language country? (yes = 1)	.38	.48	-.844*
Educational characteristics			
Years of education	12.30	4.47	.204*
Attended school in U.S.? (yes = 1)	.42	.49	.300*
Current family characteristics			
Married to native-born spouse? (yes = 1)	.15	.36	.878*
Married to foreign-born spouse? (yes = 1)	.43	.49	-.014
Not married (yes = 1)	.42	.49	<sup>a</sup>
Current major activity			
In labor force? (yes = 1)	.60	.49	.383*
Enrolled in school? (yes = 1)	.11	.31	.561*
Other activity? (yes = 1)	.29	.45	<sup>a</sup>
Model constants			
$\kappa_1$			3.022
$\kappa_2$			1.397
$\kappa_3$			-0.642
Model chi-square (with 10 df)			11,611

Source: Data from the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002a).

<sup>a</sup>Omitted category.

\*Significant at .001 level.

English proficiency among the “1.5” generation—immigrants who entered the United States in childhood—may therefore be partly attributable to “maturational constraints” working in these immigrants’ favor.

It is plausible, however, that the empirical relationship between age at immigration and lack of English proficiency is slightly overstated. The data describing “level of English proficiency” are based on respondents’ self-assessments of how well they speak English. These self-assessments reflect their personal overall evaluations and expectations about how well they can communicate orally in English in social settings that are relevant to them. Of all the spheres of language competency, phonology appears to be the most sensitive to the age at which people begin to learn a second language (Bialystok and Hakuta 1994). Accents, even slight accents that do not deter communication, are readily decoded by linguistically naïve listeners. Because immigrants who immigrate later in life are likely to retain an accent even if they are communicatively competent in English, they may understate their level of proficiency in speaking English.

The coefficients for the social and demographic variables in the logistic model also show that immigrants’ levels of proficiency are strongly predicted by their national origins, educational characteristics, marital characteristics, and labor force–related activities. More highly educated immigrants report higher levels of proficiency in English, particularly if they have completed at least some schooling in the United States. Immigrants with a native-born spouse are much more likely to report speaking at a higher level of proficiency than those with a foreign-born spouse or those who are currently not married. (This result is of particular interest given the high prevalence of cross-nativity marriages among immigrants of selected national origins—a topic we examine in the next chapter.)

The results presented in the logistic regression model also suggest that immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries are less likely to be highly proficient English speakers than immigrants from other non-English-language countries, even after controlling for a wide array of explanatory variables. This deficit could be attributable to several different factors. Results presented earlier in this chapter suggest that immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries report lower levels of proficiency in English than immigrants from other non-English-language countries shortly after they enter the country. Perhaps there are fewer opportunities to learn English or to begin learning English in Spanish-speaking countries than in other non-English-language countries and so immigrants from Spanish-language countries embark upon learning English in the United States with a smaller cache of

English skills than others. If this is the case, the continuing, seemingly inexorable spread around the globe of English as a world language will erase this differential in due time (Kachru 1992).

It is also possible that the lower levels of fluency in English among immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries reflect the higher proportions of unauthorized migrants from Spanish-speaking than from other non-English-language countries. Unauthorized migrants may lack the motivation to learn English because they anticipate only a short sojourn in the United States. They may also lack the necessary resources—including the appropriate documents—to participate in American social settings that encourage English-language learning. The growth in immigration from Spanish-speaking countries, the large native-born populations of Spanish speakers in the United States, and the geographic concentration of the Spanish speakers in California, the Southwest, and Florida also means that Spanish-speaking immigrants may be able to live in areas that lessen the need (and lower the number of opportunities) to learn English.

### **Minority-Language Shift**

The “straight-line” theory of assimilation argues that the full incorporation of immigrants and immigrant groups requires that minority-language speakers learn English and then shift to the use of only English. The shift may occur within a generation, with minority-language speakers first learning and then increasing the extent to which they use English at the expense of continuing to use their minority language. While it is clear that non-English-language immigrants are likely to become more proficient in English, as demonstrated in the analysis in the previous section, it is less clear to what extent (or in which situations) immigrants shift to the use of English in lieu of their non-English language. It is also unclear what the implications of learning and using English are for immigrants’ continued facility in their non-English languages. Unfortunately there are very few major sources of data that allow the investigation of shifts in patterns of language use, or measure language loss (sometimes referred to as first-language attrition) occurring within a generation. The U.S. censuses after 1970, for example, do not include measures of “mother tongue” or first learned language, and instead only assess whether a person speaks a minority language at home at the time of the census. It is therefore not possible to compare individuals’ patterns of language use at the time of the census with patterns of language use at a younger age. For immigrants from a non-English-language country, it seems plausible that even those who speak only English at the time of the census or survey originally learned and spoke a non-English lan-

guage in childhood (although the assumption is not perfect). Moreover, even if the explicit comparison between patterns of language use earlier and later in life were possible, there are still issues concerning the degree to which individuals retain full proficiency in their non-English language.

The Survey of Income and Education (SIE), fielded in 1976 by the U.S. Census Bureau, is one of the few major surveys that does include a measure of "mother tongue." Analyses based on the SIE show that the predictors of shifts in patterns of language use—from the presumably heavy reliance on a minority language in early childhood to higher frequencies of English use later in adulthood—parallel those predicting the acquisition of English as a second language (Stevens 1992). Foreign-born Americans with a non-English mother tongue are less likely to shift to higher levels of English usage than their native-born counterparts, and higher levels of education are associated with higher levels of English usage among both foreign-born and native-born generations. In addition, one of the most important predictors of language shift is intermarriage. Couples in which the spouses do not share the same mother tongue are very likely to speak only English (Stevens 1985). The results are particularly telling when considering language shift among the native-born generations, almost all of whom learned English early in life. For native-born Americans, the impact of variables such as "education" on pattern of English use can be read as reflecting either the impact of the immediately surrounding context and allied opportunities to use the minority language, rather than the opportunities to learn English. In general, the research supports the proposition that processes of intragenerational minority-language shift are intertwined with processes of structural assimilation (Mironowsky and Ross 1984). Unfortunately these conclusions are very general because they are based on analyses of data sources such as the Survey of Income and Education in which the measures of patterns of language use are typically global in nature and do not pertain to any specific social setting.

Intergenerational language shift (or "mother-tongue shift"), the second form of language shift, occurs when children do not learn their parent(s)' non-English mother tongue. There are two approaches to assessing the extent of intergenerational mother-tongue shift. The first is through a direct comparison of children's language repertoires with those of their parents—an analytic approach that limits investigations to the subset of children living in the same household as their parents at the time the data are collected. Studies using this approach often show high rates of mother-tongue shift between the first and later generations (Lopez 1978; Stevens 1985).

A second approach to the study of minority-language shift over

generations examines communal shift, the gradual replacement of the non-English language with English over an extended period of time within an ethno-linguistic community. Over several generations, families and language communities progressively learn, and prefer to use, more and more English, and each succeeding generation learns (and uses) less and less of the minority language (Hakuta and D'Andrea 1992; Lopez 1982). Other allied research shows strong preferences for English vis-à-vis minority languages among first- and second-generation Vietnamese children in New Orleans (Zhou and Bankston 1998), and Spanish and Asian children in Florida and California (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Schauffler 1994).

Often, research on minority-language shift focuses explicitly or implicitly on the "linguistic vitality" of the minority language, that is, its potential to survive over time. The acquisition of a minority language is often incomplete if children learn and use a minority language only in one domain, for example, only with family members in the home. The availability of institutional resources and incentives for maintaining and fostering the use of a minority language in a wide range of settings is therefore crucial in countering the downward drift over generations in levels of competency. Recent theories of cultural pluralism or segmented or selective assimilation acknowledge that stable bilingualism is a possible outcome that may be supported by educational and occupational incentives for individuals and communities (Yinger 1994; Portes and Rumbaut 2001. A wide-ranging survey in the United States concluded, however, that community resources for "intergenerational linguistic continuity . . . [are] not only generally weak but unconscious, unfocused, unspotlighted and undramatized" (Fishman 1985a). When considering the wider societal context, Chiswick (1991) concludes that the occupational and earnings rewards for fluency in a minority language are limited.

Because the U.S. census does not provide information on fluency in non-English languages, the large and increasing numbers of native-born Americans identified in recent censuses as "minority-language speakers" may overstate the apparent continuity of minority languages into the native-born generations because a significant fraction may not be fully fluent or literate in their non-English language. A recent survey of university students who reported speaking a non-English language at home provides clear evidence that many native-born Americans who spoke a non-English language in childhood do not acquire or maintain high levels of literacy into young adulthood. The native-born American students reported only slightly lower levels of proficiency in understanding and speaking their childhood home language than did the foreign-born students. But they reported

markedly lower levels of proficiency in reading and writing their non-English language than the foreign-born students (Stevens and Gonzo 1998).

Nonetheless, educational institutions could support and encourage proficiency in non-English languages through the teaching of minority languages to English monolingual students, or by using minority languages as the means of teaching other subjects to any student. Joshua Fishman (1985a) argues that “ethnic-community mother-tongue schools” are, unfortunately, only meager language-maintenance auxiliary agencies; that they stabilize American ways of being ethnic rather than developing proficiency and literacy in minority languages and so fostering language maintenance. Viewed more broadly, competency in a second language is a major intellectual achievement and a source of cultural enrichment. Yet few children outside ethnolinguistic communities learn and become fully fluent speakers of a non-English language by virtue of being taught it (or being taught in it) in school. With the exception of the Spanish language, the mismatch between the foreign languages that are commonly taught in American schools—such as French, German, and Latin—and the languages that are spoken at home by many children of immigrants—such as Chinese, Korean, and Farsi—do not build upon the extant language repertoires of the minority-language children. Furthermore, most secondary schools do not orient their foreign-language instruction toward eventual adult use (Lambert 1994). Even universities, which often impose a foreign-language requirement for graduation upon their students, fail to build upon the extant language capabilities of many of their students (Stevens and Gonzo 1998).

On the other hand, many children of immigrant parents do have some facility in their parents’ non-English language and the numbers are increasing. The demographic weight of the numbers involved could change patterns of language maintenance within and across generations. Research shows that persons with a non-English mother tongue use the language more often if there are larger numbers of persons sharing the language in the same demographic context (Stevens 1992). Lopez’s (1982) research on the use of only English among Latino and Asian groups in Los Angeles shows that the presence of large numbers of immigrants may slow the pace of language shift toward English among native-born ethnic group members, perhaps because immigrant speakers, who are likely to be fully fluent in their non-English language, are less likely to speak English very well and so prefer using their non-English language with others in the community whenever possible. The continuous flow of immigrants, especially from Spanish-speaking countries, a globalizing economy, and

the emergence of transnational communities (Portes 2001) may also be altering Americans' attitudes toward bilingualism and minority-language maintenance versus English monolingualism. The contexts in which minority-language speakers (and English monolingual Americans) live, go to school, and work are changing.

## Summary and Conclusions

The language attributes of immigrants—their facility in non-English languages and their skills in English—are fundamental considerations in the social and cultural incorporation of immigrant groups. Many theories of assimilation and incorporation, however, view language characteristics only as indicators of processes of acculturation, identification, and assimilation. They also presume that the dynamics of integration and incorporation involving language characteristics are limited to the foreign-born minority-language population. This view is based on the experiences of European immigrants who entered the United States in the early twentieth century, among whom the probability of English acquisition was high (Labov 1998) and among whose descendants rates of mother-tongue shift across over the course of the twentieth century were strikingly high (Lieberson, Dalto, and Johnston 1975).

Whether or not the story will play out exactly the same way for the newest immigrants is unclear. On the one hand, there remain strong expectations that immigrants in the United States learn English. In 1994 the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform stated this expectation as an obligation: “[I]mmigration to the United States should be understood as a privilege, not a right. Immigration carries with it obligations to embrace the common core of the American civic culture, to become able to communicate—to the extent possible—in English with other citizens and residents, and to adapt to fundamental constitutional principles and democratic institutions” (U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform 1994). The perception that immigrants and their children are, or should be, obligated to learn English is widespread. Over 90 percent of Mexican-origin persons in the United States agree that U.S. citizens and residents should learn English (de la Garza et al. 1992) and over two thirds of Asians and Hispanics believe that speaking English is “very important in making one an American” (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990). Although there are few longitudinal studies, studies based on cross-sectional data consistently demonstrate (as in this chapter) that immigrants' levels of English proficiency improve as they live out their lives in the United States. The children of immi-

grants, both the “1.5” generation and native-born children, are very likely to learn English early in their lives.

The language characteristics of contemporary immigrants are, however, different from those of earlier immigrants, and in many respects the context is different and is continuing to change. The lack of explicit attention paid in immigration policy to the language characteristics of prospective immigrants means that the array of language skills of newly admitted immigrants is largely an unanticipated by-product of their national origins. The languages spoken by contemporary immigrants differ from those spoken by earlier immigrants, and the perceived linkages between language, race, and national origins may be tighter. For example, George Sánchez (1997) argues that language differences have become involved in a new form of nativism that intertwines a new American racism with traditional hostility toward new immigrants. It seems possible that the differing receptions granted to immigrants of differing national and racial origins, and differences in personal and community resources, could result in immigrants’ and their children’s selecting different strategies with respect to language attributes. Mary C. Waters (1999) suggests, for example, that blacks of Caribbean descent appear to associate fluency in another language—or even just exhibiting a Caribbean accent while speaking English—as a means of dissociating themselves from the native-born American black population.

The demographic and social contexts differ as well. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, about 18 percent of the American population—more than one in six Americans—speaks a non-English language. The continuation of high levels of immigration from non-English-language countries may be increasing the perceived benefits of language maintenance and of bilingualism. The economic and social forces behind globalization increase the value of bilingualism and multilingualism for speakers of all languages. The call from the U.S. Department of Defense for interpreters with facility in the languages spoken in Afghanistan after the events of September 11, 2001, is a recent example of the acknowledged need for Americans with skills in even the less commonly spoken languages. The scenario of stronger language maintenance is particularly conceivable for the Spanish language in the United States. In three states—New Mexico, Texas, and California—over a quarter of the population speaks Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau 2002b). The continuing numerical dominance of immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries, the increasing economic ties between the United States and Mexico, and the long-standing native-born Spanish-speaking population in Florida, California, and the Southwest may be altering the understanding of the perceived value

of Spanish in the United States. Polls in California suggest that about three quarters of Americans do not believe that it is a "bad thing" for immigrants to preserve their foreign languages (Field Institute, various dates).

Theories of the social integration of immigrants into American society have largely focused on the language characteristics of immigrants and their children as measures of the incompleteness of integration into a society still firmly dominated by the English language and by English speakers. The presumption that both processes of language adaptation—English-language acquisition and minority-language shift—are prerequisites for full incorporation follows from the importance of patterns of language use as indicators of acculturation, identification, and structural assimilation. Yet classic theories of assimilation rest on the assumption that learning and using English is the flip side of minority-language retention (that it's a zero-sum process) and that the dynamics of language change occur primarily within the minority group.

The assumption that learning and using English occur in tandem with minority-language shift may be too simplistic because it ignores the possibility of bilingualism, particularly within the native-born generations. It also ignores the impact of context. Almost all of the available evidence suggests that English acquisition proceeds quickly and, at an aggregate level, is complete within a generation or two. The increases in the aggregate numbers of minority-language speakers who are not proficient in English appear to be primarily a product of the influx of large numbers of immigrants who have not yet had access to the opportunities and resources to learn the country's dominant language. But the assumption that the trajectory of minority-language shift inevitably follows English-language acquisition is based on weaker evidence. Research, largely based on cross-sectional surveys, suggests that fluency in and usage of minority languages dissipate across generations. But it is often not clear when, over the progression of lifetimes and generations, the language shift occurred. For example, the intergenerational mother-tongue shift that resulted in the lower levels of Spanish usage among third-generation children at the turn of the twenty-first century may have occurred over a generation ago in the 1970s—a different context from today. A more nuanced understanding of processes of adaptation and integration should consider uncoupling the two processes and the impact of changes in the social and demographic contexts in which these processes occur.

Second, the view that the dynamics of language change occur only within the minority-language group has had at least one unfortunate

corollary. If changes occur only in the minority-language group, then the responsibility for change rests on the shoulders of the minority group, and changes in the dominant society are not pertinent. Yet the linguistic characteristics of the American population as a whole are in a state of flux because of the historically vacillating impact of immigration and processes of English acquisition and minority-language shift within and between generations. Newly admitted non-English-language immigrants add demographic weight to extant minority-language communities (or establish new ones), change the linguistic characteristics of the native-born generations, and alter the balance of younger versus older speakers. The last several decades have seen an eruption of social and political controversies over the costs and benefits of providing services—particularly bilingual education—as well as the appropriate role of English vis-à-vis other languages in American society. These controversies clearly demonstrate that the increasing presence of minority-language immigrants in the United States is exciting strong and vociferous reactions. A more comprehensive understanding of the processes of adaptation and integration of immigrant groups thus requires considering how their language characteristics are affecting the larger American society.