

SHIFT HAPPENS, BUT WHEN?
INTER- AND INTRA-GENERATIONAL LANGUAGE SHIFT AMONG
HISPANIC AMERICANS

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have argued that immigrant languages disappear through mother-tongue shift within three generations when immigrants or their immediate descendants do not teach their non-English language to the next generation. Here we consider the role of intra-generational language shift (when individuals shift to the use of English over time) as well as the role of inter-generational language shift (when the language repertoires of children and their parents do not match) in the disappearance of Spanish among Hispanic Americans. We use CPS data from 1979, 1989 and 2004 to trace both inter- and intra-generational language shift within and across generations. Our results show after the first generation that both inter- and intra-generational shift play important roles in the disappearance of Spanish in the American context. The results have implications for understanding when and why Americans let go of an increasingly valuable resource in a globalizing and multilingual world.

INTRODUCTION

The United States is the site of one of the world's foremost examples of language shift. Over the last two centuries, millions of non-English language immigrants and their immediate descendants have switched to the use of English in lieu of their mother tongue. Fishman's "three-generation model" summarizes the stages of language shift: the immigrant generation continues to speak their native language; the second generation becomes bilingual by virtue of learning their foreign-born parents' mother tongue within the home while learning and using English in social realms outside of the home; the third generation learns only English. The model is, however, ambiguous because it says little about whether the shift in language usage patterns is attributable to changes within generations when individuals modify their language usage patterns, or across generations when parents and children's language repertoires do not match.

In this paper, we rely on data from a series of large national surveys to ascertain the extent and timing of language shift within and between recent generations of Hispanic Americans. Unlike previous research, we follow real cohorts across time and show that language shift occurs both between and within generations of Hispanic Americans. Our results suggest that Fishman's "three generation model" is a simplistic rendering of the complexity of the extent and timing of language shift among Hispanic Americans. Our results also suggest that the causes and consequences of language shift among Hispanic Americans may differ, if not in kind, then in tenor from the causes and consequences of language shift among other immigrant descent groups.

THE THREE-GENERATION MODEL OF LANGUAGE SHIFT

Language shift is an important dimension of the assimilation of immigrant descent groups in the United States (Alba et al. 2002: 468) and is characterized by a change in habitual use of a non-English language to English monolingualism (Fishman 1965, 1966b). During the 19th and early 20th century, large numbers of non-English speaking immigrants, primarily European in origin, entered the United States. By the middle of the 20th century, almost all native-born Americans of European descent – the putative grandchildren of the earlier arriving immigrants – were monolingual English speakers (Fishman 1966a; Lieberman and Curry 1971; Veltman 1983) thus providing the observational basis of the “three-generation” model of language shift.

The shift from monolingualism in one language to monolingualism in a second language is, however, the result of several complex processes including second language acquisition, language attrition, and shifts in the extent to which individuals choose or are required to use specific languages in specific domains such as the family or the labor force. Moreover, it is possible for the changes in levels of proficiency and patterns of usage to occur either within or across generations.

- Figure 1a here -

In Figures 1a and 1b, we show two archetypes of language shift occurring over the course of three generations. In Figure 1a, the first generation is monolingual in a non-English language and rely on it in all situations throughout their lifespans; the second generation is bilingual in the non-English language and English using each language approximately equally across the course of their lives, and the third generation is monolingual in English using it in all situations. Here the changes in language

proficiency and usage patterns are all occurring across generations: the language repertoires of the second generation differ from those of the first, and the language repertoires of the third generation differs from those of the second.

- Figure 1b here-

In Figure 1b, on the other hand, the shifts in language use are all *intra-*generational, with each transition occurring *within* a specific generation. Here the first generation acquires English as a second language and relies on it more and more as they age in a context dominated by English. The second generation's language repertoires in childhood match those of their parents but they, in a manner parallel to their parents, continue the increasing emphasis on English to the exclusion of their non-English language over their life course. Similarly, the third generation's language repertoires in childhood match those of their parents although only a few learn and use the non-English language. By the time the third generation reaches adulthood, the process of language loss is complete and almost none speak any language other than English. The important processes in this scenario, which emphasizes changes within generations, are thus second language acquisition in the first generation and intra-generational shift during the second generation. In this scenario, the generations have matching language repertoires when they are most likely to be in close contact.

Most investigations of language shift among U.S. immigrant groups have been based on cross-sectional survey or census data and thus conflate processes leading to inter- and intra-generational language shift. The conclusions about language shift are thus strongly driven by the contrasts that are available in their data. For example, Alba et al. compare (2002) the percentages of second versus third-generation children speaking a

non-English language to assess “the magnitude of the *intergenerational* linguistic shift” between the second and third generations (pg. 472, italics added). Similarly, Stevens (1985) compares the languages spoken by foreign-born parents and their children in the same household and thus neglects the possibility of intra-generational shift occurring in the first generation. Rumbaut, Massey and Bean (2006) compare the use of non-English languages at home across fractional generations (defined through the number of parents and grandparents who are foreign-born or native-born). All of these studies conclude that intergenerational language shift, often referred to as “mother-tongue shift,” is pervasive, especially between the second and third generations, but all of the studies neglect the possibility of intra-generational shift.

Some research investigates intragenerational language shift, which occurs as individuals who learn a non-English language in childhood move from a heavy reliance on a non-English language to a reliance on English. Portes and Rumbaut’s (2001) longitudinal study, for example, shows a rapid shift towards the use of English occurring in early adolescence among respondents in Florida while Lutz notes that “the shift from Spanish to English as a usual language appears to occur as children progress through the school system” (Lutz 2006: 1423-1424). Studies such as these miss the prevalence of inter-generational language shift.

Data limitations in surveys and censuses thus dictate the emphasis in the conclusions on inter- versus intra-generational shift in studies of minority language shift. Comparisons across individuals of different generations but at the same life stage, such as Alba et al.’s (2002) comparison of second-generation children with third-generation children, are typically evaluated using cross-sectional data gathered at one point in time.

Yet the first (immigrant) generation represented in the data does not include the parents of the second-generation respondents or the grandparents of the third generation, nor does the second generation necessarily include the parents of the third generation.

Comparisons of the language characteristics of generations at different life stages, e.g., the languages spoken by first-generation parents and their second-generation children such as in Stevens' (1985) study, inevitably lead to conclusions about intergenerational shift even though the contrasts incorporate include changes across life-cycle stages as well as across generations. Finally, the use of cross-sectional data means that inter- and intra-generational changes in individuals' language repertoires may be confounded with period-specific phenomena. For example, sustained increases in the numbers of non-English language speaking immigrants entering the United States during the last part of the 20th century may be strengthening the viability of bilingualism (Linton 2004; López 1999; Pease-Alvarez 2002) within the native-born American generations.

DATA, MEASURES, & METHODS

Data

Because longitudinal data for multiple generations (immigrant, second generation, third generation, etc.) do not exist, we use data from repeated cross-sectional surveys to study the dynamics of language use over time over several generations. Our main sources of data are the November 1979, November 1989, and October 2004 Current Population Surveys (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1982, 1992, 2005). Because these surveys ask both child and adult respondents what language they speak at home, they currently offer the best, nationally representative data with which to study language shift within as well as across generations.

Modeling Inter- and Intragenerational Change

To assess the level of intergenerational change we use a Lagged Generation Model (Myers, Park and Min 2006). In this model, the approximate spacing between generations is taken into account by comparing one generation in one decade with a successive generation in a later period. To assess the level of intragenerational change, we use a Period Cross-Section approach. This approach involves the comparison of the same generational cohort at multiple points in time to assess the level of change that takes place within a generation (c.f. Borjas 1985, 1995; Myers et al. 2006).

Measures

The November 1979, November 1989, and October 2004 supplements to the Current Population Survey provide information about home language use, asking the same question of all respondents aged 5 and older: “Does...speak a language other than English at home? Yes or no.” Those who responded yes were then asked: “What is that language?” Unfortunately, information on proficiency and frequency of minority language use were not gathered.

Generational Status is defined through nativity status, and among native-born respondents through the nativity status of their parents. The first generation includes all individuals born outside of the United States¹. The second generation includes individuals who are born in the United States with at least one foreign-born parent. The third (and later) generation includes all native-born individuals whose parents are also

¹ Countries where English is a dominant or official language are excluded from the foreign born classification.

native-born. (Unfortunately the data do not allow us to distinguish among third and later generations.)

RESULTS

Inter- or Intragenerational Change?

We use a Lagged Generation Model to assess the amount of intergenerational language shift by comparing the home language of the first-generation adult cohort² in 1979 with the home language of the second-generation adult cohort in 2004. Next, we use a *Period Cross-Section* approach to examine changes over time within a generation and compare the home language of the second generation³, child cohort in 1979 with the second generation, adult cohort in 2004. The results of both comparisons are presented in Figure 2.

- Figure 2 here -

The intergenerational comparison of first-generation adults with second-generation adults shows the difference in home language use between the two generations. There is a slight drop in the proportion of minority language speakers from over 90 percent in the first generation to about 80 percent in the second generation. This comparison indicates that there is a difference between generations, but does not indicate when the change in language use occurs. To ascertain the timing of the shift – whether it occurs between or within a generation – we also compare second-generation children at the first time point with second-generation adults at the later point in time. This

² The adult cohort includes individuals 18 years of age or older. Children include those aged 5 to 17 years.

³ Comparisons of the second generation with one native-born parent and one foreign-born parent more closely resembled trends found for the third generation and are not included here.

comparison follows the second generation as that generation ages through childhood into adulthood. This intragenerational comparison mirrors the change that was seen in the intergenerational comparison. Just over 90 percent of second-generation children speak a minority language at home during their childhood and there was about a 10 percent decrease in the percentage using the minority language by the time they were in adulthood.

- Figure 3 here -

Figure 3 is constructed in a manner parallel to Figure 2, comparing first the home language use of second-generation adults in 1979 with third generation adults in 2004 and second the home language use of third generation children in 1979 with third-generation adults in 2004. There is a substantial decrease in the proportion of minority language speakers when comparing second-generation adults with third-generation adults at a later point in time: over 80 percent of second-generation adults speak Spanish versus less than 60 percent of the third-generation adults. The figure shows little decline in the usage of Spanish during the third generation. It appears that differences in minority language use between the second and third generations may be attributed largely to mother-tongue shift (intergenerational language loss).

Intragenerational Language Shift

The simultaneous use of the Lagged Generation Model and Period Cross-Section approach indicate that changes in language attributes between the first and second generations and especially between the second and third-plus generations is intragenerational language shift. To better understand the dynamics of language shift it may

be more useful to study changes over the life course rather than just comparing levels of minority language use between generations.

Figures 4 through 6 represent the age-specific incidence of minority language use at home within each generation. In each of these figures, a specified birth or arrival cohort⁴ within each generation is measured at three points in time to show the change in their use of minority languages at home over a 25-year period. The distribution produced by compiling this information for all age groups within the generation approximates the changes in home language use that would be expected if a cohort of individuals were to experience the same age-specific changes in minority language use over the course of their lives. Changes in the proportion of minority language speakers over the life cycle suggest the degree of change that occurs within each generation. The shape of the distribution indicates the pace of that change. If the change in home language use proceeds at the same pace at all stages in the life course, the line would be straight and the slope would remain unchanged across the life course. This would indicate a gradual shift to English monolingualism over time with that generation. In contrast, changes in the slope suggest that there is a greater (or lesser) degree of language maintenance at particular life stages than at others.

- Figure 4 here -

Figure 4 illustrates very little change in the home language use of the first generation among foreign-born Hispanics, regardless of the age at entry, within the first 25 years after arrival in the United States. Figure 5, on the other hand, shows significant decreases in the use of Spanish by second-generation Hispanics across the 25-year span

⁴ The first generation is disaggregated by age at arrival instead of birth cohort.

within each birth cohort until about age 50. The percentages of second-generation Hispanics using Spanish drop after childhood and continue to drop during early and middle adulthood.

- Figure 5 here -

Figure 6 shows a complex and unanticipated pattern: the percentage of third and later-generation Hispanics using Spanish increases across each birth cohort between 1979 (the first date of observation) until 2004 (the final date of observation) although the percentages decrease across time within birth cohorts. The explanation may lie in data issues. The dotted lines in the figure are based on small numbers of observations and the first three lines representing the cohorts aged 5-9, 10-14 and 15-19 in 1979 all show significant decreases in the percentages using Spanish as they age into young adulthood. Another part of the explanation may lie in the linkage between the use of the Spanish language and respondents identifying themselves as Hispanics in the third and later generations. Older respondents who speak only English may be so far removed from their Hispanic ancestry that they do not identify themselves as Hispanic and thus are not included in our sample. Alternatively, because we are unable to separate third from fourth or later generations, the younger respondents in this group could be more likely to be fourth or even fifth generation Hispanics than the older respondents in this group and thus less likely to have learned Spanish at home.

- Figure 6 here -

CONCLUSIONS

The classic three-generation model of language shift in which an immigrant group in the United States brings a non-English language to the country, raises their native-born

American children as bilingual speakers, and then the third generation does not learn their grandparents' and parents' non-English mother tongue, does not seem to fully apply to Hispanics in the United States. Following birth and age-at-entry cohorts across a 25-year span, and comparing patterns of language use across and between generations, we found almost no change within the first generation in the probability that Hispanics spoke Spanish and a very modest amount of shift between the first and second generation. Almost all second-generation Hispanic children appear to have learned their immigrant parents' mother tongue.

However, a substantial and statistically significant amount of language shift takes place between the second-generation and third-generation Hispanic adults. While over 80 percent of second-generation Hispanic adults speak Spanish, less than half, only about 44 percent, of third-generation Hispanic adults do so. This high incidence of language shift incorporates both mother-tongue shift (i.e., third-generation Hispanics not learning Spanish from their parents) and intragenerational language shift occurring as some of the third-generation Hispanics who learned Spanish in childhood shift to English as they enter and progress through early and middle adulthood. Still, although the effects of shifts towards English accumulate across and within generations, a substantial minority – about 44 percent – of third and later respondents identifying themselves as Hispanic report speaking Spanish.

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Figure 1a. Intergenerational Language Shift.

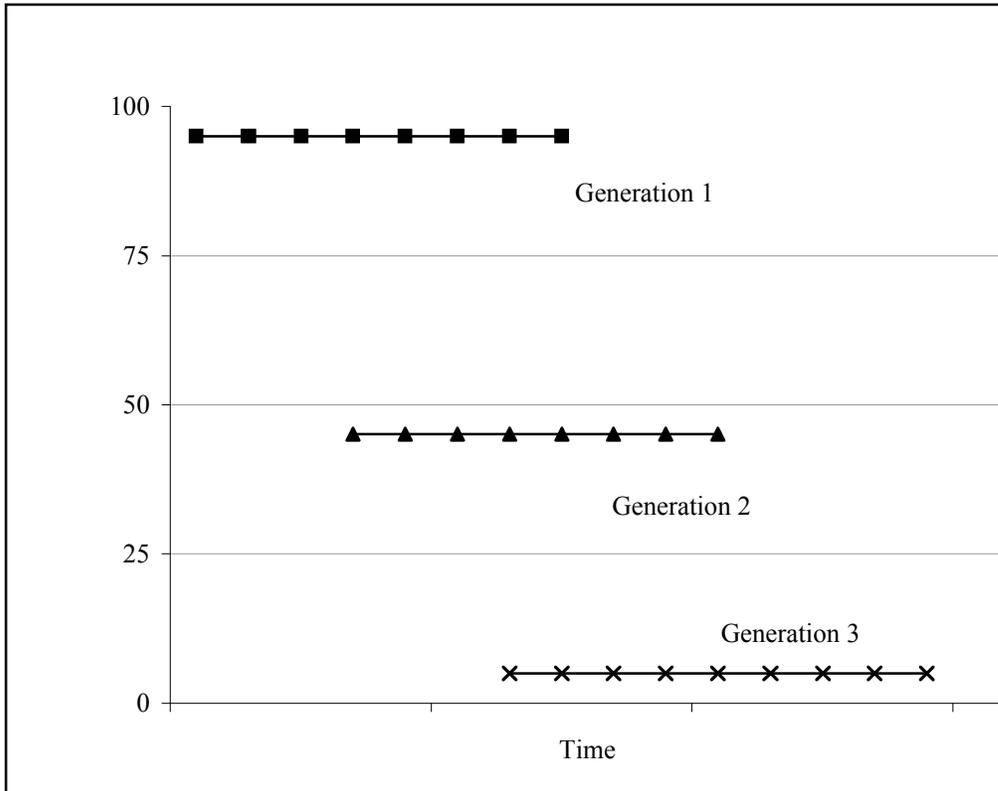


Figure 1b. Intragenerational Language Shift.

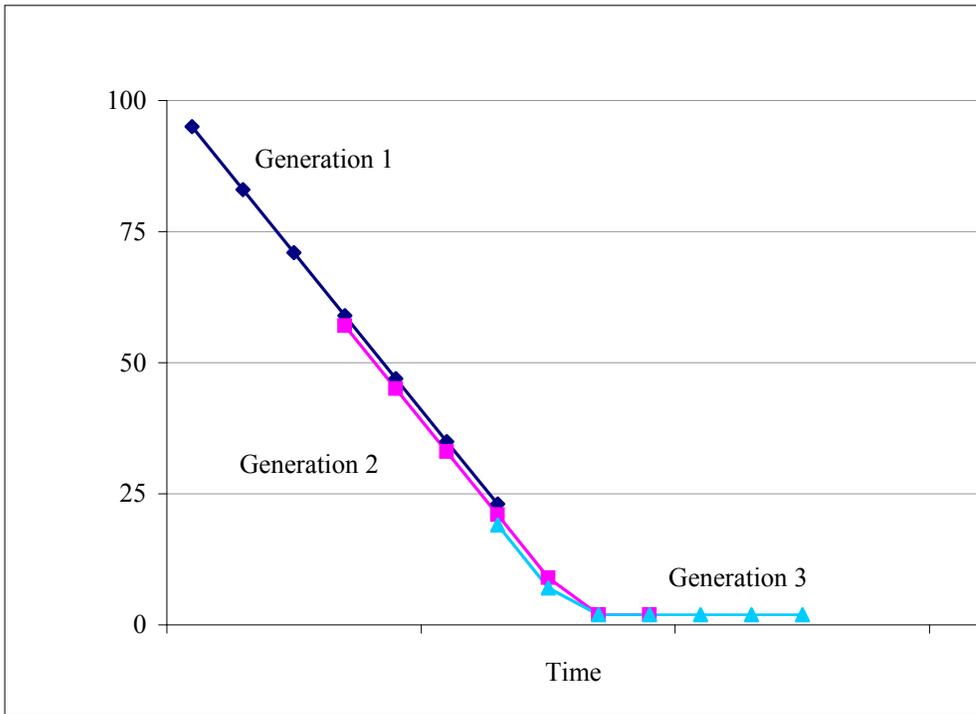


Figure 2. Inter- and Intragenerational Comparisons of the First and Second Generations, Hispanic Origin. November 1979 and October 2004 CPS.

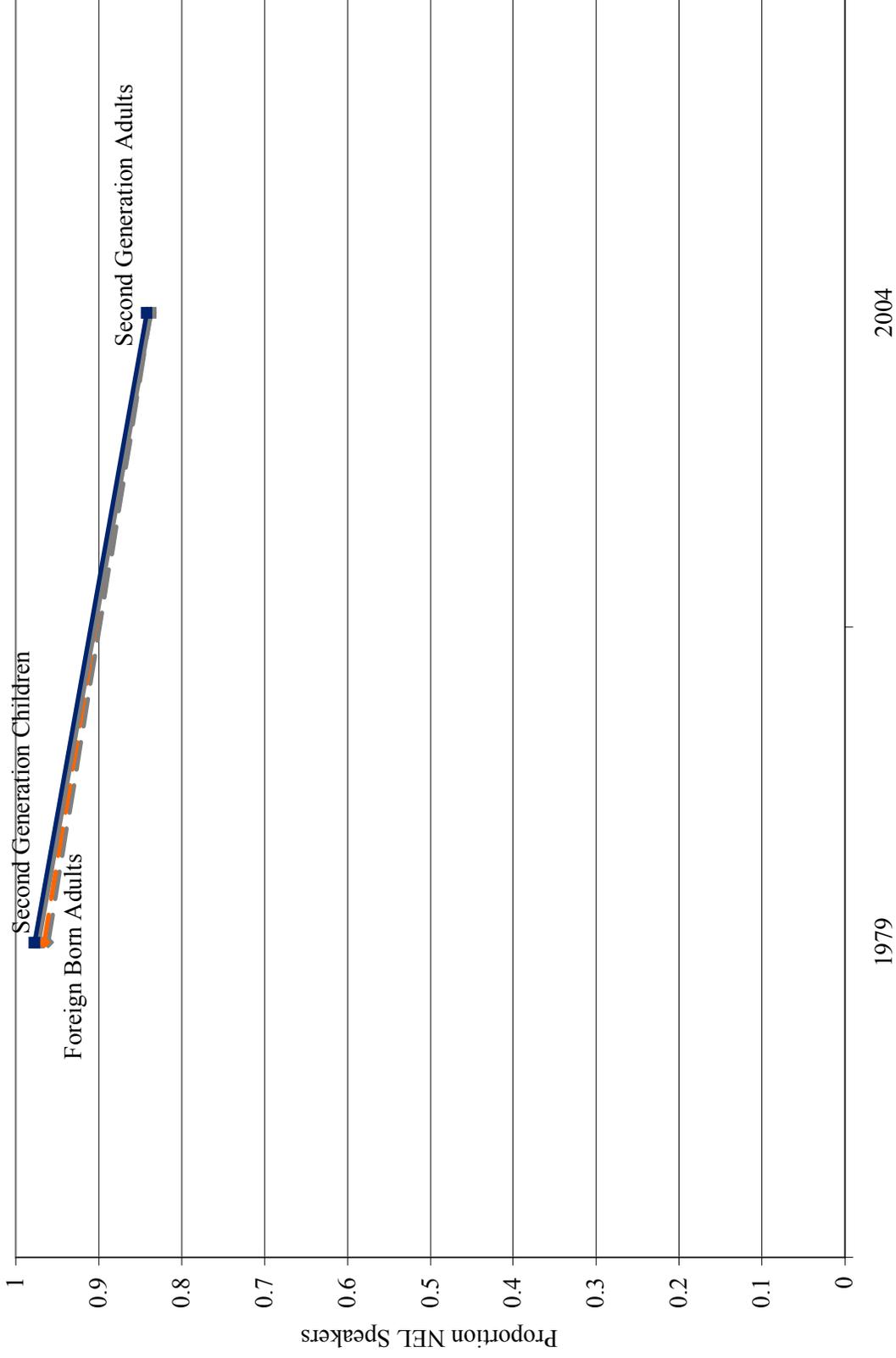


Figure 3. Inter- and Intragenerational Comparisons of the Second and Third Generations, Hispanic Origin, November 1979 and October 2004 CPS.

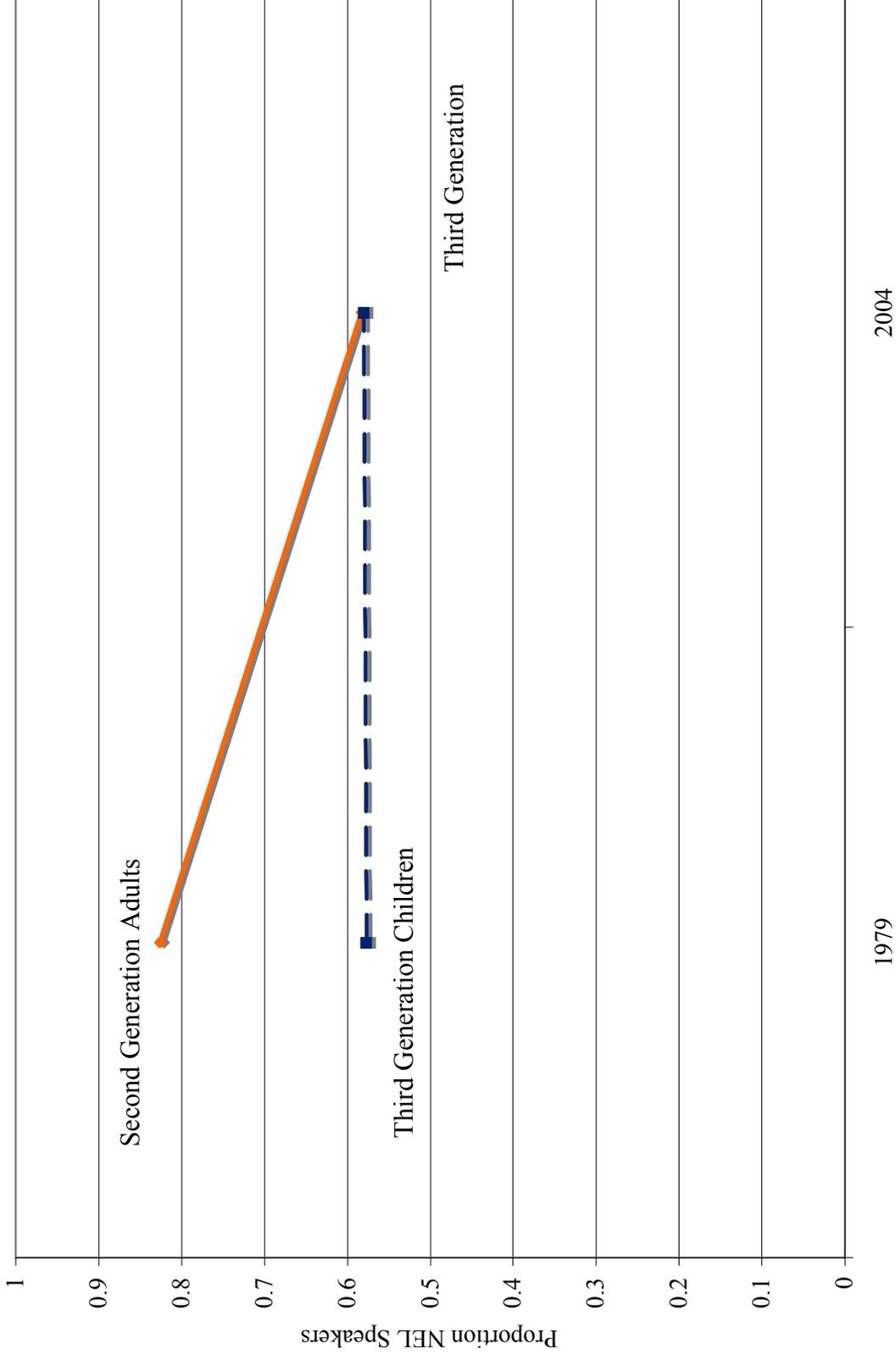
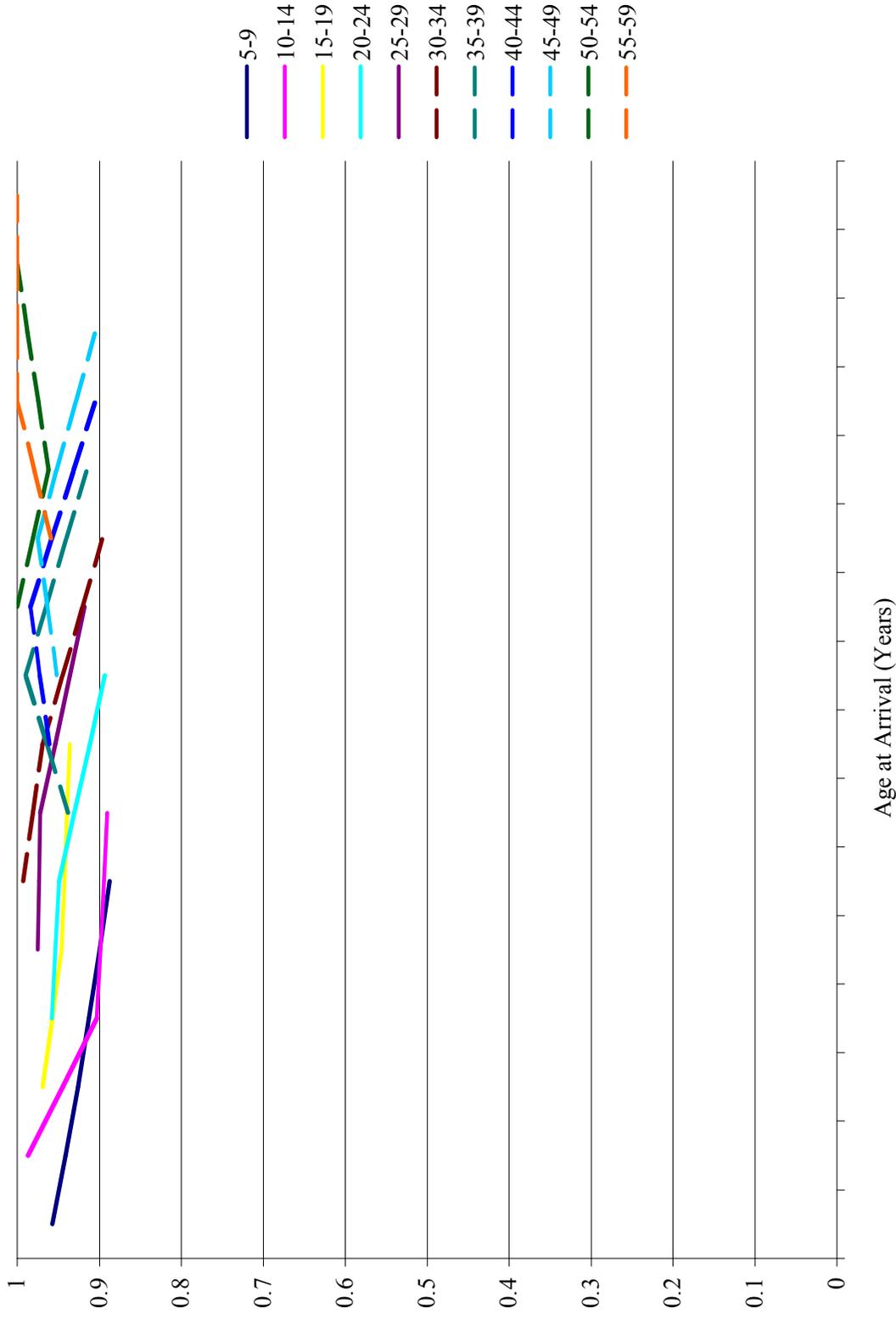
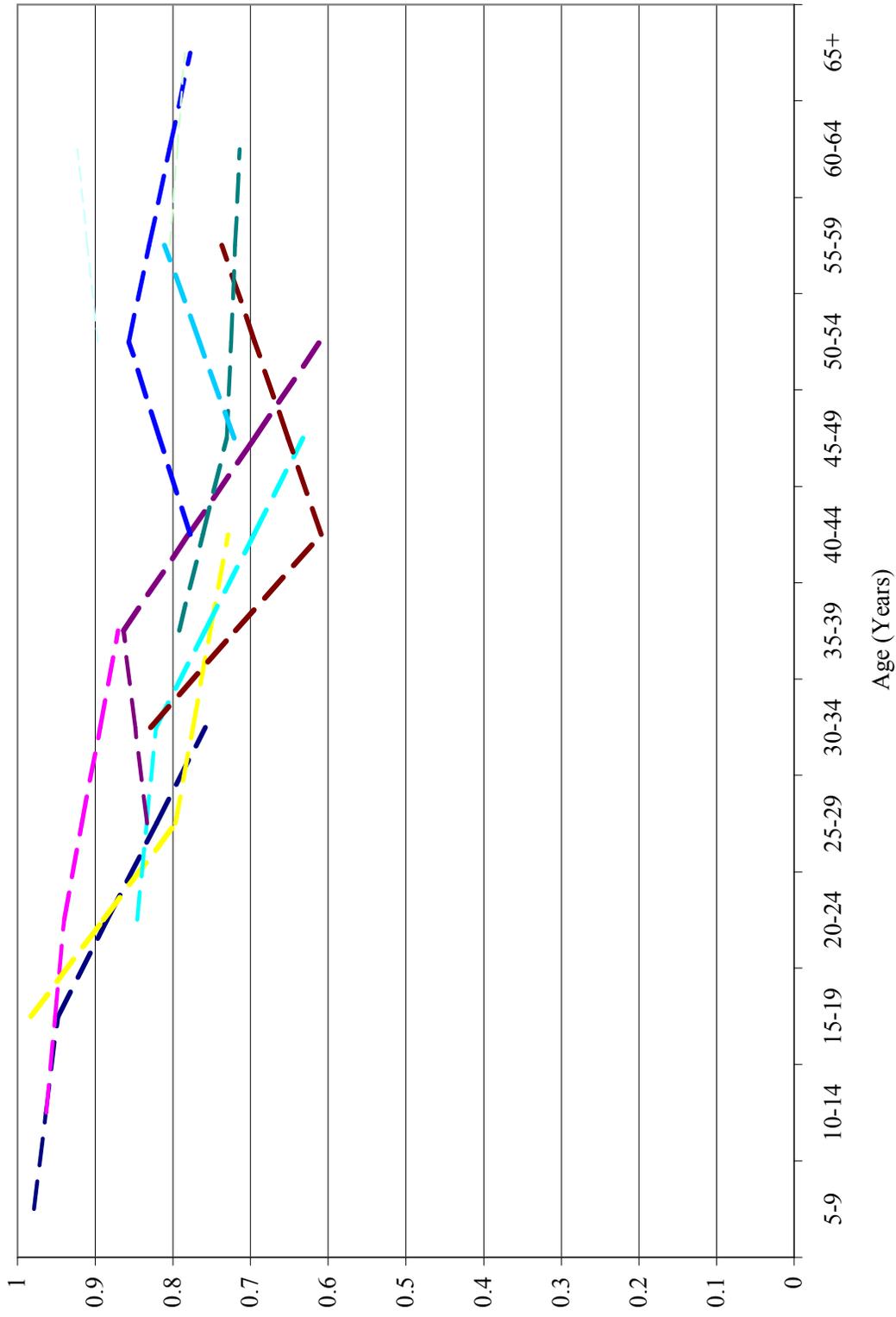


Figure 4. Intragenerational change in the proportion of the first generation speaking a language other than English at home, Hispanic Origin. November 1979, November 1989, and October 2004 CPS.^a



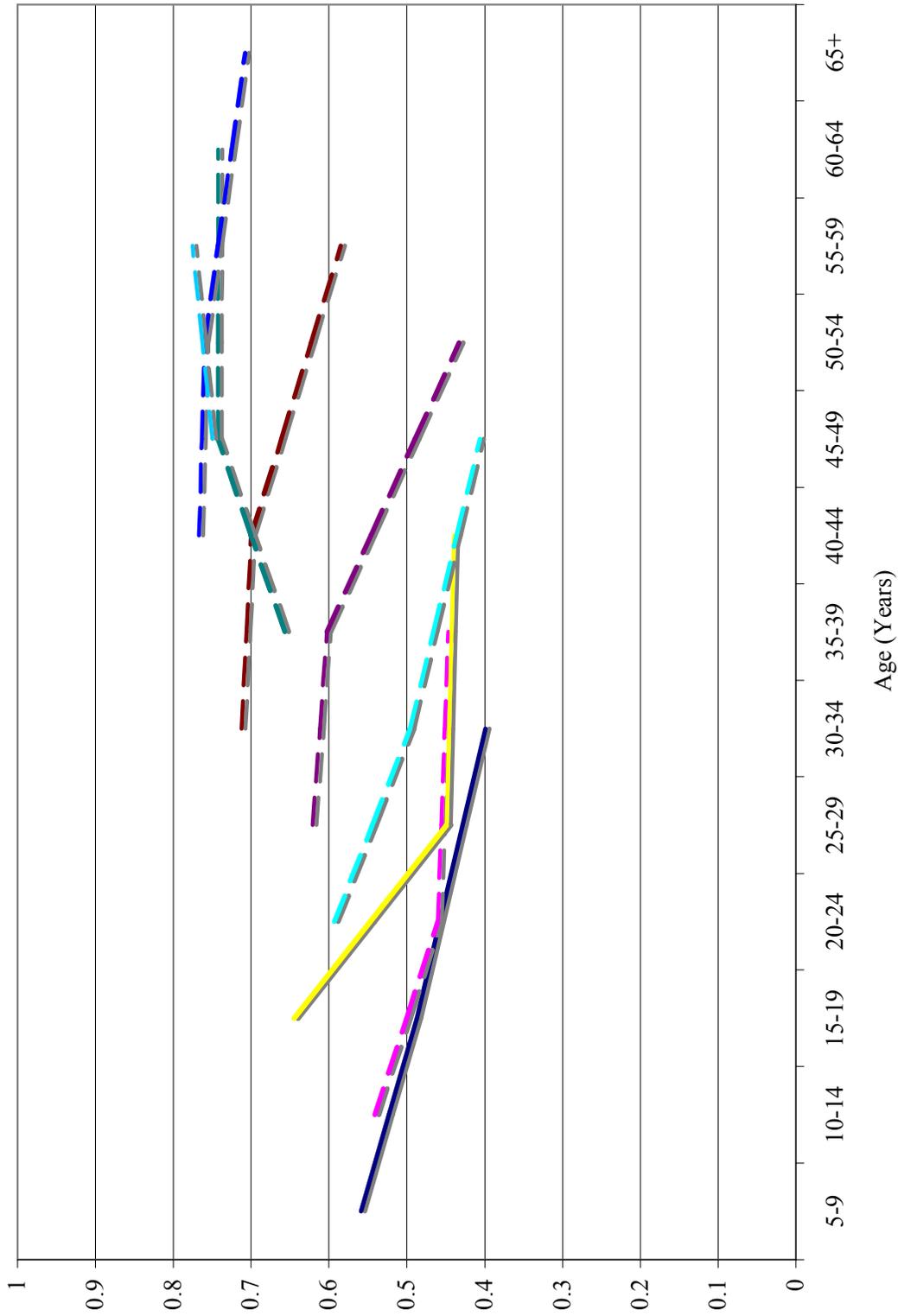
a. Dashed lines are based on small numbers of observations (n<100).

Figure 5. Intragenerational change in the proportion of the second generation speaking a language other than English at home, Hispanic Origin. November 1979, November 1989, and October 2004 CPS.^a



a. Dashed lines are based on small numbers of observations (n < 100).

Figure 6. Intragenerational change in the proportion of the third (and higher order) generation speaking a language other than English at home, Hispanic Origin. November 1979, November 1989, and October 2004 CPS.^a



a. Dashed lines are based on small numbers of observations (n<100).