Katrina Kore

Title: Influences on Latvian-American Heritage Language Use and Development

Abstract:

Research in heritage language studies has investigated factors that influence heritage language maintenance such as through intergenerational practice (Edwards 1997) literacy (He 2010) maintaining a strong sense of ethnic identity (Chow 2018) family heritage language use (Oriyama 2016) explicit language instruction (Wright 2004) and participation in heritage language communities (Tse 2001). Much has been studied on more commonly spoken heritage languages such as Spanish (Beaudrie 2016) and Asian languages in the United States (Chinen 2005).

This study aims to add to heritage language literature by investigating Latvian a language not commonly spoken in the U.S. Although approximately 80000 Latvians live in the U.S. there are only 16000 Latvian speakers in the U.S. (American Latvian Association 2017). The Latvian-American community is a diaspora community; a majority of immigrants came to the United States after World War Two. Consequently the Latvian-American community has reached its third generation of immigrants: the generation most likely to experience language loss (Fishman 1966). As a third-generation member of the Latvian-American community this study was motivated by my desire to better understand the language habits of the community the attitudes of community members towards the language and the community and to investigate possible barriers to Latvian language development and maintenance.

Using a mixed-methods design (N=104) this study provides insight into the adult Latvian-American heritage language community by exploring factors that previous literature has shown to impact heritage language maintenance. Language habits were measured through attendance rates at Latvian events exposure to Latvian and frequency of spoken Latvian. The relationship between proficiency and ethnic identity and language motivation was investigated. Barriers to language development were explored such as anxiety while speaking Latvian.

Results demonstrate a strong positive correlation between proficiency and users’ choice of using Latvian (as opposed to English) at Latvian-American community events. Proficiency is moderately correlated with exposure and attendance rates. Motivation and ethnic identity are moderately correlated with proficiency although American-Latvians of all proficiency levels have a strong sense of Latvian identity. Barriers to Latvian language development include anxiety while using the Latvian language lower participation levels at Latvian events and lack of community support and resources.

Common themes reflected by participants with higher proficiency were feelings of pride; maintaining their language is a way to pay homage to their grandparents and the Latvian diaspora community. Participants with lower proficiency reflected on feelings of guilt shame and fear of speaking incorrectly. The Latvian-American community lacks resources for adults to practice and maintain Latvian; while the community is viewed as a resource for proficient
speakers less proficient speakers feel as though because they do not speak Latvian well and are viewed as “less Latvian.” This research suggests that more opportunities need to be available to community members with lower proficiency levels and who wish to improve. The Latvian-American community needs to begin creating safe places for language development. While there are several Latvian community schools throughout the United States similar opportunities for adults are rare.