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## Is Spanish as a Heritage Language in the US Endangered?

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### Abstract:

*Spanish in the United States is a heritage language spoken by the largest minority group. It finds itself in a permanent diglossia situation with the more dominant English language and plays a subordinate role in the linguistic landscape. In spite of a noticeable increase in enrollment in Spanish language classes in higher institutions of learning, as well as a growing interest in Hispanic language and culture, data reveal a gradual loss in Spanish retention in the third generation of US born young Latinos/Hispanics. The conclusion is that since Spanish in the United States is already confronted with the "three generation-pattern" or "three generation rule in the third generation of Latino/Hispanic children born in the U.S., it can be said that Spanish as a heritage language in the United States is endangered.*

**Keywords:** Spanish in the United States, heritage language, Spanish loss, three generation-pattern, language endangerment

### 1. Introduction

In recent times, illegal immigration is once again in the spotlight of politics in the United States. And just like in the early 1980s, the focus is on the wave of immigrants from Spanish speaking neighboring countries fleeing for the same reasons as in those years: poverty, crime and insecurity. While the pro and contra debates on illegal migration are raging, an unspoken aspect of the debate which borders on language, more specifically, whether immigration from Spanish-speaking countries threatens the English language's dominance (Carter 2018), is salient. This conceived threat and the effect of the ongoing discussions on illegal migration from Spanish speaking countries form the basis for this article which examines the possibility that Spanish as a heritage language in the United States is endangered. The paper goes into these issues as follows: it presents a brief history of Spanish and English in the United States. This is followed by a review of the literature on Spanish as a heritage language in the US and the situation of the Spanish heritage speaker. Thereafter, the concept of endangered languages and the different levels of language endangerment are discussed with the focus on where Spanish as a heritage language in the United States fits in the categorization of languages in the world that are endangered. Finally, the article concludes with reflections on the future of Spanish as a heritage language in the US.

### 2. Spanish and English in the United States: A Brief History

Although the United States is a linguistically and ethnically diverse nation, "the de facto lingua franca is English" (White 2012: 3). Regardless of the nonexistence of legislative backing to this effect (see Stewart, 1999; Pavlenko 2002; White 2012; Danping 2015: 32), the majority of Americans see English as the official United States language because of its prevalence in usage over other immigrant languages. Based on this language attitude, the pre-colonial historical fact that the indigenous American Indians had over 300 languages (Dicker 1996: 40) before the arrival and subsequent colonisation by the Spaniards and Anglo Saxons is usually overlooked.

Going back to history, Dorn ([https://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/fileadmin/salalmdocs/past\\_present\\_future.pdf](https://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/fileadmin/salalmdocs/past_present_future.pdf)) posits that the Spanish conquest of what is today the United States began in Florida by the Spanish explorer, Juan Ponce de León, who founded San Juan in Puerto Rico in 1508. He later became governor of the island from 1509-1511, and named the land (Pascua Florida), "Florida" having arrived in 1513 on an Easter Sunday. Subsequent Spanish conquerors occupied what would later become known as the Spanish Borderlands or territorios españoles fronterizos because the Spanish language gained prestige and continued to grow from the mid-seventeenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century (Silva-Corvalán 2000). An attitudinal change arose with the arrival of Anglo-Saxons in the formerly Spanish/Mexican territories who did not expect to see a largely mestizo (mixed race) population (Dorn [https://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/fileadmin/salalmdocs/past\\_present\\_future.pdf](https://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/fileadmin/salalmdocs/past_present_future.pdf)). Coupled with the disdain for everything Spanish, the replacement with Anglo-Saxon institutions and culture began (Weber 1992: 341), thereby entrenching in the Spanish borderland territories, the Hispanophobia prevalent in England and northern Europe (Dorn...). Inevitably, language also became a tool for gaining political power and dominance through the promulgation of a law which linked voting rights to the knowledge of English (Espinosa, 1975: 100; Azevedo, 2005: 377). Consequently, the Spanish language and the mostly Spanish speaking populace were marginalized.

From a demographic point of view, Lipski (2008) broadly recounts the history of the (varieties of) Spanish in the United States, explaining how migration and the consequent spread of Spanish did not always occur through illegal migration, a fact shared by Macías (2014: 51) that Spanish in the United States does not have a strictly immigrant status.

Lipski explains that in the case of Mexican Spanish, for example, the Texas war of independence of 1836 and the Mexican-American war of 1848 automatically made many Mexicans into American citizens without their needing to cross the border, because Mexico lost more than half of its territories after the war.

Actual migration from Mexico into other parts of the United States was prompted by job and economic opportunities, even though the latter in the course of time opened one of the pathways for illegal migration. In the case of Puerto Rican Spanish and Puerto Ricans, many arrived in the US before the Second World War in search of better economic opportunities, and unlike other Spanish speaking peoples, can migrate to and fro because they have dual citizenship. Cubans lived in colonies in the US before the Spanish-American war, but the Cuban Revolution of 1959 witnessed mass illegal migration of Cubans into the US which was experiencing a rise in anti-immigrant sentiments. In the 1970s and 1980s when general political unrest in Central America forced thousands of Latinos, mostly Salvadorans and Nicaraguans, to seek refuge in the United States, immigrants were already viewed as a threat. This forced many fleeing hunger, crime and insecurity to resort to illegal migration because of the US government's refusal to grant them refugee status.

In the course of the years, illegal migration appears to have become the last resort for most Spanish speaking people who were seeking a better future in the US because of stringent migration laws. It comes as no surprise also that language has become a political discourse, especially with the rise in the Latino population and predictions on the changing demographics in the United States. This discourse is reflected in the controversy over the Bilingual Act, which was approved in 1968 to ensure assistance to schools that served linguistic minorities. In 2018, the BBC reported on its online news (US and Canada) of two high profile incidents of Spanish speakers being challenged for not using English made the headlines: a border patrol officer demanded to see the identification of two US citizens simply because they "spoke Spanish in a predominantly English-speaking state" (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44201444>).

Reflecting on the anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments of the 1880s and 1890s (Pavlenko 2002:176), and it becomes clear that language does play a significant role in the ongoing debate. This is based on the fear that Latino immigration will help Spanish to sideline or even overtake the use of the English language in the United States (White 2012: 6). The fear borders on whether such a high number of Spanish speakers (especially those seeking refugee status as well as those entering the US illegally) will not threaten the English language's dominance. This widespread opinion appears to also be based on the fact that unlike other minority languages of immigrants to the US, Spanish has become the second and most dominant language after English in the United States (Carter 2018).

It brings to the fore the fact that politicization of language as a means of curbing illegal immigration is not new, but a part of U.S history (Zentella 1997; Pavlenko 2002; Schmitt 2001 as cited in Richmond 2001:70). This stance has found and still finds expression in "English-only initiatives and anti-accent activists" (White 2012:3), resonating in 31 states and hundreds of towns in the United States that have established local "English-only" or "official English" laws with subsequent budget cuts and outright closure of bilingual programmes. This 'fear' or threat on the part of a section of the American society can be looked at from the changing demographics in the United States which shows that when compared with other races/ethnic affiliations: blacks, whites and Asians, the Hispanic/Latino now make up the minority racial group with the highest population of those younger than 18 years of age as can be seen in Figure 1 below:

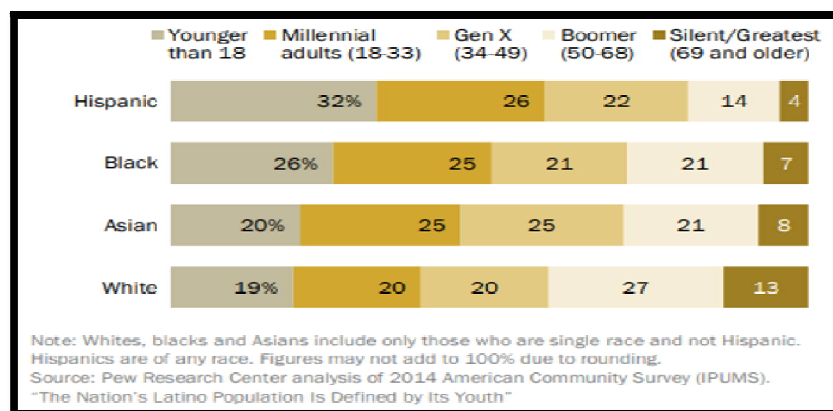


Figure 1: Nearly Six-in-Ten Millennials Are Hispanic or Younger

Figure 1 ([http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2016/04/PH\\_2016-04-20\\_LatinoYouthFinal.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2016/04/PH_2016-04-20_LatinoYouthFinal.pdf)) from the Pew Research Centre (2016), lists the racial groups in the US: Hispanic, Black, Asian, and White. It also gives data on the children born between the early 1980s to the mid-1990s (millennials), the previous generation (Generation X). The data show that of the entire US population, those who claim to be Hispanic and under 18 years of age make up 32% of the entire US population, Blacks make up 26%, Asians 20%, and Whites 19%. Thus, and as the title indicates, nearly six in every ten Latino is below 18 years of age. In addition, from the group of those born in the US between the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, the so called millennials, Hispanics, as can be seen from Figure 2 (below), make up 47%; while only 6% are born outside the United States:

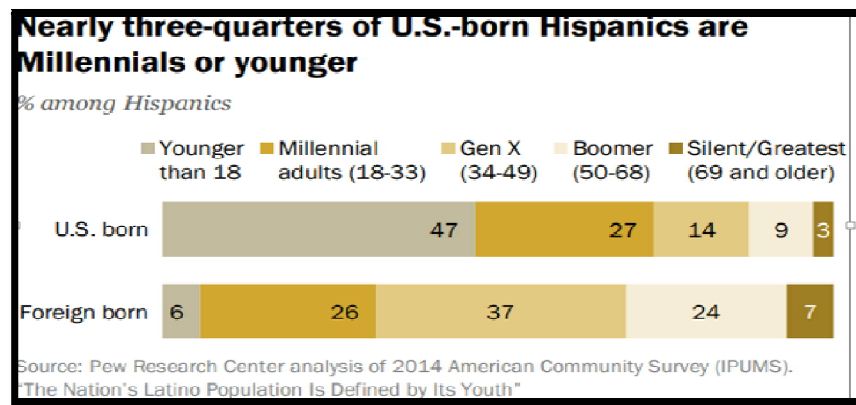


Figure 2: Nearly Three-Quarters of U.S.-Born Hispanics Are Millennials or Younger

The conclusion from Fig. 2 above, ([http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2016/04/PH\\_2016-04-20\\_LatinoYouth-Final.pdf](http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2016/04/PH_2016-04-20_LatinoYouth-Final.pdf)) is that few children come to the U.S. as immigrants, and young Hispanics are overwhelmingly born in the United States itself. This generation is the offspring from the immigration boom in 1980s and 1990s. It is interesting to note that while reliance on data on Hispanic population growth is the cause for fear of loss of English amongst a certain class of the US population, how this actually translates to the developing as well as future use of Spanish by the young Hispanic population is ignored. This gives credence to the fact that "the United States uniquely displays resistance to the permeation of languages other than English" (White 2012: 3). If this were not the case, then attention would also be paid to statistics from the Pew Research Centre (2015) in Fig. 3 below:

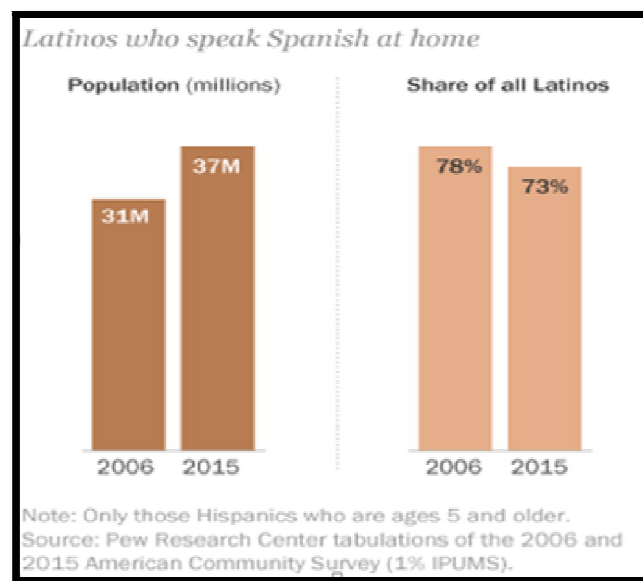


Figure 3: Use of Spanish Declines among Latinos in Major U.S. Metros

Figure 3 (<http://pewrsr.ch/2yiTFcV>) reveals that, in spite of a 6% Latino population growth from 2006 - 2015, there is a gradual decline in the use of Spanish in the younger generations of Latinos/Hispanics in the US. The research also illustrates the fact that from a population growth (31million to 37million) from 2006-2015, there is a simultaneous 6% reduction in the number of Spanish speakers (78% to 73%) in the same period. Hence, it is evident that although Spanish is spoken by 48.6 million people, and is the second most spoken language after English in the United States (Carter 2018), English still dominates.

Also, a survey of English-only issues in the American northeast by White (2012: 1-36) presents different views on using languages other than English in the US. These widespread opinions include: the notion that English is the language of prestige and success, English is a 'unifier' language/ essential bond of cohesion in a heterogeneous nation (Schlesinger 1992: 115), and that speaking English is proof of 'Americanness'. Hand in hand with this goes the assumptions that a lack of English is equivalent to being ignorant, and learning other languages than English is useful solely for academic purposes. In all, these biased opinions are common because "the American experience has never required of citizens fluency in more than one language" (White 2012:26). In the midst of these varying opinions, Spanish is bedeviled by the "three generation rule" (Boon and Polinsky 2014) or three generation pattern (Carter 2018). This concept, which has arisen from the experiences of other languages than English, best describes the fate of most immigrant languages in the United States.

### 3. The “Three Generation-Pattern”

The loss of Spanish in the second and third generation of Hispanic children born in the United States (see Mendieta 1999:89) is an example of the phenomenon known as the “three generation rule” (Boon and Polinsky 2014) or “three generation pattern” (Carter 2018). The summary of this phenomenon is that non-English languages in the US are lost by or in the third generation by all third generation of children of immigrants to the US (see also Alba et al 2002; Alba & Nee 2003; Van C. Tran 2010). This trend, according to Haugen (1953) and Fishman (1966) as cited in Boon and Polinsky (2014:3) occurs in stages as follows: the first generation is made up of Spanish speaking immigrants born in the home country who are naturally dominant in the mother tongue. The second generation are children born in the US of this first generation of immigrants. Though these children speak Spanish at home, they are nonetheless more dominant in the English language. The third group is made up of the grandchildren of the first, and the children of the second generation, who end up as mostly monolingual English speakers. The authors further add that while this third generation group may bear Spanish names and enjoy other aspects of Hispanic culture such as music, etc., their strongly restricted use or total lack of knowledge of Spanish assigns them to the class of heritage speakers of the language. Confirming this trend is the level of English proficiency in the third generation of Latinos as projected in Figure 4 below:

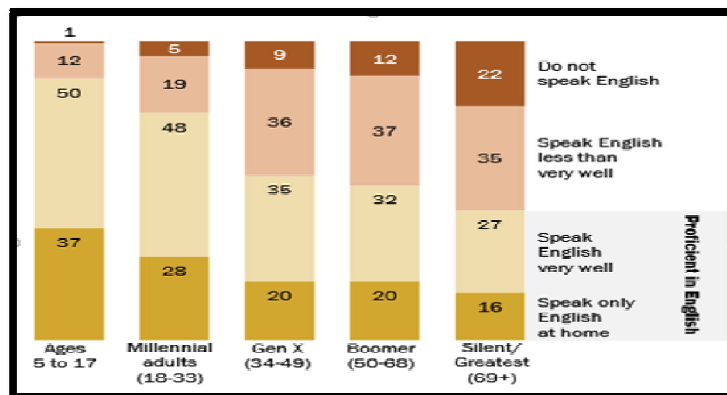


Figure 4: About Three-Quarters of Hispanic Millennials Are Proficient in English

The Pew Research Centre's analysis of American Community Survey (IPUMS) of 2014 reproduced in Figure 4 above, gives the percentage of English proficiency among Hispanics. According to the survey, respondents were asked if they speak a language alongside English at home. If their response was in the affirmative, they were then further asked how well they speak English. The figures may not add to 100% due to approximations undertaken. It can be observed that more and more young Hispanics speak English very well, while a negligible percentage do not speak English at all. This contradicts the fears expressed in some sections of the American society that speaking Spanish will lead to the loss of English especially among Latinos. The focus in Figure 4 is the increasing rate of young Latinos who speak English “very well” and the simultaneous increase in the percentage of those who now speak only English at home. The number of young Latinos who speak Spanish is on the decline while English use at home is on the rise.

It therefore appears that the “three generation pattern” has finally caught up with Spanish because the language seems to have become one of several heritage languages spoken in the US. Technically, it is evolving into an ethnic or immigrant minority language which is the weaker of a bilingual speaker's two languages (Boon and Polinsky 2014:3).

### 4. Spanish as a Heritage Language in the United States

The imminent loss of the ancestral language and culture in the future younger generation of Latinos/Hispanics in the US was probably foreseen by the first generation of immigrants due to the philosophy of Americanization (Zentella 1997: 266) and the lure of the American dream. Thus, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1930s, Chicano activists gradually began the discourse on language as a part of self-identity, gathering momentum in the 1960s. The efforts at teaching Spanish (as a heritage language) to Latino/Hispanic immigrant children in the US began in the mid-1970s (Kagan and Dillon 2008: 145) with the programme labelled Spanish for Native Speakers or SNS (see Valdés 2000). Experiences and further developments in the field later gave rise to a change in name, more specifically, to SHL or Spanish for Heritage Learners. Consequently, the Spanish for Heritage Learners Programme arose as a necessary measure to preserve and maintain the ancestral language for future generations (Valdés 1981; see also Roca, 1997; Said-Mohand, 2010, p. 89).

According to Montrul (2012), heritage language speakers are the children of immigrants born in the host country or immigrant who arrived in the host country some time in childhood (according to the strength of their knowledge of Spanish. Regardless of whether they are simultaneous or sequential bilinguals, what heritage speakers have in common is that by the time they reach adulthood the heritage language is their weaker language. If a heritage language is the “weaker of two languages” as Boon and Polinsky (2014) assert, this means that Spanish is the weaker of the two languages of the Spanish heritage speaker, who also speaks English. This also explains why terms such as “unbalanced bilinguals” (Montrul, 2012: 5), “semi-speakers” (Dorian: 1981) and “incomplete acquirers” (Montrul 2002; Polinsky 2006) are labels applied to

third generation Latino children of immigrants born in the United States simply because they have a better command of English than Spanish.

The investigations from the Pew Research Centre (2015; 2016) reveal the decline in the use of Spanish in the third generation of young Latinos/Hispanics in the US, especially in the homes, while at the same time there is a steady rise in their English proficiency. This is due in part because when heritage languages are not maintained because they are rarely developed, "language shift" occurs due to a lack of input (from the speakers) in the language (Krashen 2000). In the case of Spanish, this lack of input is traceable to a lack of home retention of the language in the third generation of mostly US born Hispanic children. Consequently, "language shift" from Spanish to English occurs, with the result that this generation is more fluent in English than in Spanish. This picture of the future of Spanish in the US thus appears to present a language that is compromised in spite of a growing population. Does this spell endangerment for the language?

## 5. Language Endangerment

Research on language endangerment reveals a lot of work on the subject from a wide range of perspectives. There is however, no uniform definition for the term, 'endangered languages' (Bamgbose 1993:19). Some studies focus on the classification of the phenomenon from various angles (Kincade 1991:160-163; Wurm 1998): those considered to be minority versus endangered (Adegbiya 1998; Schaefer and Egbokhare 1999; Igboanusi and Peter 2004); dependence on the number of speakers of classified endangered languages (Brezinger, Heine and Sommer 1991:25; Norris 1998:3; Yamamoto 1997:2; Crystal 2003:3); the reasons for endangerment (Bamgbose 1993; Dixon 1998; Crystal, 2000; Mufwene, 2003: 1-31); and finally, the end stage of every endangered language or the phenomenon of language death (Crystal 2015).

Crystal (2015) postulates physical, economic, political, and cultural dangers as four factors that lead to language death. The author further states that this occurs through cultural assimilation, which is a gradual process whereby the language loses out to its more dominant counterpart when its speakers adopt the dominant language and culture (see also Hale 1993:19).

On the other hand, the process of cultural assimilation itself occurs in three broad stages: the first of which is characterized by political, social, or economic pressure to speak the dominant language. When this pressure is 'top down', it usually takes the form of legislative laws/backing. The 'down top' equivalent is where the societal, fashionable and current trends come in, which make one obliged to abandon one's own language. The second stage in this development manifests in emerging bilingualism enabled through a gradual 'living in' the dominant language environment, with the consequence of less reliance and use of one's own language.

In the third phase, the younger generation becomes fluent and at home primarily in the dominant language, with apparently no need to learn the old, ancestral one. According to Kincade (1991) and Wurm (2003), a language undergoing this phase in its development is potentially endangered because the third, younger generation stage is crucial for language maintenance.

The levels of language endangerment as portrayed in UNESCO's Atlas of the World Languages in Danger (2010), make it difficult to place Spanish in the United States on a definite category. The stages of the world's languages described there as 'safe', 'vulnerable', 'definitely endangered', 'severely endangered', 'critically endangered' and 'extinct' are all related to actual language use. According to the Atlas, a language becomes 'vulnerable' when children use it only in familiar domains. The 'definitely endangered' language on the other hand, is no longer spoken by children at home; while a language that is 'severely endangered' is mostly spoken by the first generation made up of grandparents. In this scenario, the second generation understands the language but neither uses it as a means of communication amongst its own age group nor with its own children, while the 'critically endangered' language has only very old interlocutors who use it partially and infrequently.

As explained earlier, Spanish is a heritage language in the US, though an exception to other heritage languages because of its number of speakers and learners. However, from the point of endangerment, the language exhibits not one, but certain aspects of the varying stages of an endangered language: 'vulnerable', 'definitely endangered' or 'severely endangered' traits. Spanish in the US therefore, does not completely fit into a specific category on the scale of endangered languages as presented in the UNESCO Atlas. It must nevertheless be said that the categories of 'safe', 'critically endangered' and 'extinct' do not apply at all to Spanish in the United States because of the evolving "three generation pattern".

However, in the same context of this "three generation pattern", Spanish does appear to be 'vulnerably endangered' because of its restriction to home use in some predominantly Latino states in the US. For example, in El Paso, Texas, where 72.8% are Hispanic in a population of 600,000 inhabitants (see US Census 2010), English predominates in the homes. Therefore, Spanish in not being used in the familiar environment, comes under the category of a 'definitely endangered' language (Alba et al 2002; Alba & Nee 2003; Citrin et al 2007).

In all, Spanish in the US appears to be 'critically endangered' because the "three generation pattern" depicts a growing competence in English and a tendency to loss of Spanish in a generation of young Latinos born in the United States. These are the speakers crucial for language maintenance, but who are shifting from Spanish to English even in the familiar environment as confirmed from the Pew Research Center. Thus, even though the US is becoming more overtly multilingual, English is safe (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44201444>).

The "three generation-pattern" is an off shoot of language shift. Language shift according to Carter (2018), is a consequence of cultural forces that pressure speakers to give up one language for the other. The author gives examples of language prohibition as a part of the restrictive forces, presenting the example of Farmers Branch in Texas, where official prohibition of Spanish use in education and the state government lasted for eleven years.

Pressure to give up one's language is also experienced by children in school, and since children of Spanish speaking immigrants attend predominantly English-only schools, the result is evident in these children's language shift from Spanish to English; and the subsequent danger in the future younger generation. Thus, schooling has also been classified as an ecological factor that promotes language endangerment as investigated by Voegelins & Schutz (1967) and cited in Mufwene (2003:13). The authors stressed the role this played in the endangerment of Native American languages in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whereby Native American children in boarding schools were forced to speak only English and punished for using their ancestral languages. Also Mufwene (2003: 12-13) claims that school as a restrictive factor accounts for the spread of English in Ireland at the expense of Gaelic.

The lasting effect of such pressure on the younger generation who have minority languages as mother tongues is the gradual suppression to outright non usage of the heritage language in the course of time; more so, if they also meet with negative attitudes when they speak. Therefore, "informal intergenerational transmission" (Fishman 1977) or "literacy in the language" Bamgbose (1998) may not be sufficient to prevent language loss where economic pressures (Dorian 2001) play a vital role. According to Mufwene (2003: 6), the Sutherland Scots fishermen gave up their language in favor of English, even though they were isolated from the mainstream of the British population due to economic pressures. In the United States, as more and more Latino parents equate academic success with English, and young Latinos attend English only schools, this older generation is instrumental in the evincing three generation pattern because they equate economic success with English.

Carter (2018) also reports on social pressure that drives language shift from Spanish to English in American life. Giving the example of Miami, the author reports that in spite of a 65% Hispanic population, the benefits of speaking English has resulted in a dearth of Spanish teachers in public schools. This means that acquiring Spanish is seen as less economically viable than becoming proficient in English.

## 6. Conclusion

The dominant and popular U.S. view is that the principal, if not exclusive, source of the linguistic diversity within the nation is immigration, and that this can be influenced or controlled primarily through immigration laws (Macías 2014:35). The presence of Spanish in the US is not due de facto to just immigration, and Spanish is not just another immigrant language. Instead, it is chronologically the first indo European language in North America (Marcos Marín 2017: 59). That is why Macías (2014) argues extensively that since English and Spanish have existed alongside each other in the history of the United States, and the language legacy of the British is today recognized; there should likewise be a recognition of the Spanish which was present in the additional territories acquired by the US post-independence (2014:42).

Meanwhile, the facts on the ground point to a growing loss on the part of the Spanish language in spite of its presence in the US before the advent of English; and in that very generation which is crucial for language maintenance. Restrictive measures in the form of pressures, both overt and covert through schooling, societal acceptance of foreign tongues added to the control of power through legislative laws places Spanish on the list of endangered languages in the US.

The prospects of a possible change in the future which may lead to Spanish retention and sustenance is its continued sustenance by this same third generation of young Latinos/Hispanics. This will lie in the retention of Hispanic cultural heritage in the arts, literature and modern media. Especially in the media, especially as even the recent trend toward English-language programming among the young, US born Hispanic-American population does not signify the end of Spanish-language networks in the US (Levine 2014). It is in this sense that Mufwene (2003: 12) speaks of using one language for socio-economic functions that require the prestigious variety (in this case, English), and socializing in the non-prestigious one (Spanish), with which they identify themselves and whose usage is typically considered more intimate and/or personable.

Therefore, it is practicality and necessity that bring about language attrition and loss among the affected populations, just the same economic reasons that often take underprivileged individuals far away from their families, as much as they would prefer not to part from them, hoping to return to them but often never making it back (Mufwene 2003:2). On the other hand, it may be the forecast of Spanish continuity in a predominantly Spanish-English bilingual linguistic landscape, because "in many places in the U.S., English and Spanish are in bed with each other, a contact that is both generative and exciting" (Romero 2017). As such, Spanish will continue to play its role as a heritage language in the United States of the future.

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