

Heritage language socialization in immigrant community churches of Montreal

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Montreal is characterized by a rich linguistic landscape which results from diverse immigration as well as its francophone and anglophone « double-majority » (Meintel 1993, Anctil 1984). Yet, like other metropolises around the world, Montreal's « superdiversity » (Silverstein 2015, Vertovec 2007) is continuously changing: in some minority immigrant communities, heritage language practices are decreasing due to the socialization of immigrants to the majority languages (Avineri et Kroskrity 2014, Morgan 2014). Public institutions that have established and promulgated the use of French and English widely contribute to linguistic shift processes. However, there are also social institutions such as churches founded by and for immigrant communities, promoting alternative modes of socialization into the wider community (Meintel 2018, Das 2008).

In fact, a great amount of churches in Montreal are composed of immigrant groups and reflect their specific social and cultural needs. In the course of my fieldwork, I have participated in numerous celebrations, language and catechism courses, as well as events organized by five community churches in Montreal, and encountered many of their members, most of whom represent different generations of migrants. Typically, these churches are considered as pivotal to their community lives (He 2011) and offer migrants favorable conditions for becoming anchored in their new environment (Grzymala-Kazłowska 2015, Bava 2011). All in all, it has been demonstrated that community churches not only play a positive role in the individual adaptation and settlement processes of migrants in the host society (Mossière 2012, Idir 2009), but they also reproduce and play out their cultural traits and identities (Woods 2004).

My research focuses on the linguistic production of these cultural identities, as “speakers produce and reproduce particular identities through their language use” (Bucholtz and Hall 2003: 369). Considering the fact that language is essentially a social practice (Errington 2003 and Milroy 1992, amongst others), I aim to highlight the language socialization practices examined during my fieldwork observations in the five churches and defined by the participants themselves. In this presentation, I also intend to offer some reflections on the impact these practices seem to have on heritage language maintenance and shift. Given the obvious social mission of these churches, do these community institutions generate settings propitious to the immigrants' socialization in and to their heritage languages?

The immigrant communities affiliated to the different churches are the Portuguese, the Italians, the Greeks, the “Latin Americans” (as they call themselves) and the Filipinos. These have been chosen for different reasons, the most decisive being the fact that they are considered as important immigrant groups in Montreal (in terms of their size), and the presence of acquaintances of mine in each of them, hence serving as gatekeepers.

I will investigate the different heritage language socialization patterns through distinct categories such as liturgical socialization to language, peer socialization to language, cultural socialization to language, etc. This will lead me to illustrate the great disparities between the different communities in terms of their heritage language dynamics, but also between the socialization contexts – whether they are religious or secular – and the distinct generations of immigrants. Above all, I intend to consider how the complex linguistic practices of these churches actually symbolize the multiple cultural and ethnical identities of their members (Fishman 1991, Trudgill 1974).