

**Patterns of cross-generational language change in heritage contexts:
The case of heritage Mandarin in Canada**

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Existing literature has shown that children learning Mandarin as a heritage language in an English speaking country tend to show different language patterns from monolinguals in China. For example, they might prefer to use the pronominal subject *ta* 'she/he/it' in sentences such as (1) where monolinguals would prefer to omit it (Chen & Lei, 2012):

- (1) nanhai diaojin shui li, (ta) feichang langbei.
Boy fall.into water inside, (he) very embarrassed.
'The boy fell into the water. **He** was very embarrassed.'

Less known is whether heritage children, being children of first generation immigrants, are exposed to a contact variety of Mandarin that is richer in overt pronominal subjects than the monolingual variety. Very few studies have explored patterns of language change across different generations in immigrant contexts (see e.g. Paradis & Navarro, 2004; Nagy 2014) and no study to our knowledge has explored the patterns of cross-generational language change of Mandarin as a heritage language.

To address this gap, we ran a small-scaled study in Edmonton. More precisely, we focused on subject realization in heritage Mandarin. Using a wordless picture book (*Frog, where are you?*) we elicited narratives from both children and their mothers. Two questions have been addressed:

- (i) Do Mandarin heritage children living in Edmonton differ than their monolingual peers living in mainland China in the production of overt pronominal subjects in Mandarin?
- (ii) Do the parents of Mandarin heritage children differ than the monolingual parents in the production of overt pronominal subjects in Mandarin?

Four groups of Mandarin speakers were recruited: (i) three school-aged Mandarin-English bilingual children residing in Edmonton (Mean age = 12;7), (ii) three age-matched Chinese-speaking monolingual children living in mainland China, and (iii) the mothers of each one of those groups.

Preliminary results showed that heritage children produced an increased number of overt pronominal subjects in contexts where their monolingual peers opted for subject omission. These results were in line with what Chen & Lei (2012) found, while contrary to Nagy's 2014 study of null subjects on conversational data. Significantly, the same contrast was observed between bilingual and monolingual parents. These results, in turn, if confirmed by a wider number of participants, suggest that at least some of the deviant patterns observed in the language of heritage children could be signs of intergenerational language change in immigrant contexts.

References

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