

Generational Differences and Language Shift in Contemporary Urban Settings: *A Sociolinguistic Analysis*

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between generational differences and language shift in contemporary urban environments, where rapid demographic mobility, multilingual contact, and digital communication have intensified intergenerational divergence in linguistic behaviour. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of language shift, the apparent-time construct, social network theory, and the ethnolinguistic vitality model, the study argues that the city functions as a primary engine of linguistic change because it concentrates speakers of differing ages, origins, and communicative repertoires in dense, fluid contact. The analysis surveys empirical evidence indicating that younger urban cohorts frequently lead in adopting prestige varieties, code-switching practices, and innovative features, while older cohorts often serve as custodians of heritage and minority languages. It further considers the mediating roles of attitudes, identity, education, and digital media, and reflects critically on the methodological challenges of distinguishing genuine generational change from age-grading. The paper concludes that generational stratification is not merely a by-product of urbanisation but a structural mechanism through which language maintenance, attrition, and shift are negotiated, with significant implications for language policy and minority-language preservation.

Keywords: language shift, generational variation, urban sociolinguistics, code-switching, language maintenance, apparent-time, ethnolinguistic vitality

1. Introduction

Language is not a static system but a dynamic social practice that varies systematically across speakers and over time. Among the social variables that condition linguistic variation—including class, gender, ethnicity, and region—age occupies a

particularly revealing position, since differences between younger and older speakers frequently signal change in progress within a community (Labov, 2001). Where the speech of successive generations diverges in regular and patterned ways, sociolinguists are afforded a window onto the

otherwise slow and largely invisible processes by which languages transform. In contemporary urban settings, where populations are increasingly mobile, multilingual, and digitally connected, these generational differences have become especially pronounced and consequential.

Cities concentrate diverse linguistic resources within compact geographical spaces, and this concentration accelerates both the spread of innovative forms and the displacement of inherited varieties (Britain, 2010). The urban environment intensifies the contact between speakers of different languages and dialects, weakens the dense local networks that traditionally enforced linguistic conformity, and exposes residents to a marketplace of competing linguistic norms in which some varieties carry far greater social and economic value than others. Under these conditions, the linguistic distance between a grandparent and a grandchild may exceed anything observable in more stable, rural, or monolingual communities.

The phenomenon of language shift—the gradual replacement of one language by another in the repertoire of a community—is frequently observed across generations within migrant and minority populations in urban centres (Fishman, 1991). The classic trajectory of three-generation shift, in which immigrant grandparents are monolingual in the heritage language, the second generation is bilingual, and the third generation is dominant in or monolingual in the host-society language, remains a powerful descriptive model for understanding urban linguistic change (Fishman, 1991; Veltman, 1983). Yet shift is not confined to migrant communities; indigenous and regional

minority languages, urban vernaculars, and even features of majority languages undergo generationally stratified change in the contemporary city.

This paper investigates how generational differences drive language shift in urban contexts, addressing both the social mechanisms involved and the consequences for linguistic diversity. It proceeds by establishing a theoretical framework, characterising the urban setting as a distinctive sociolinguistic environment, surveying the principal generational patterns attested in the literature, examining the mediating roles of attitude, identity, education, and digital media, and considering the methodological problems that attend the study of change in progress. The overarching argument is that generational difference is not a peripheral feature of urban language but the central locus at which the maintenance, attrition, and shift of languages are negotiated.

2. Theoretical Framework

Several interrelated theoretical constructs inform the present analysis: the concept of language shift and its counterpart, language maintenance; the apparent-time hypothesis; social network theory; and the model of ethnolinguistic vitality. Together these frameworks provide the conceptual apparatus for understanding why generational difference assumes such importance in urban linguistic change.

2.1 Language Shift and Maintenance

Language shift refers to the process whereby a speech community ceases to use one language in

favour of another, typically over the course of several generations (Fishman, 1991). The reverse process, language maintenance, occurs when a community retains its language despite pressures toward shift. The two are best understood as outcomes along a continuum, the position of any given community being determined by a constellation of demographic, economic, political, and attitudinal factors. Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale conceptualises the degree of threat to a language primarily in terms of whether it continues to be transmitted from parents to children, underscoring the centrality of generational transmission to language vitality.

The scale ranks the condition of a threatened language from relatively secure stages, at which the language is used in education, government, and the media, down to severely disrupted stages, at which only the oldest generation retains competence. The pivotal threshold, in Fishman's account, is the stage at which the language is transmitted in the home from one generation to the next; where intergenerational transmission breaks down, shift becomes effectively irreversible without deliberate and sustained intervention (Fishman, 1991; UNESCO, 2003). This emphasis on the family and the generational chain of transmission makes the relationship between age cohorts the decisive arena in which the fate of a language is determined.

Gal's (1979) influential study of the shift from Hungarian to German in the Austrian town of Oberwart demonstrated empirically how language choice can become correlated with age and social orientation, as younger speakers associated German with modernity and economic opportunity while

Hungarian came to index a peasant identity they sought to escape. Such studies established that shift is rarely the product of coercion alone; it is frequently driven by the aspirations and self-positioning of younger speakers within a changing social order.

2.2 The Apparent-Time Construct

The apparent-time construct allows researchers to infer linguistic change by comparing the speech of different age groups at a single point in time (Labov, 1994). On the assumption that an individual's core linguistic system stabilises in late adolescence or early adulthood, differences between younger and older speakers recorded contemporaneously can be interpreted as reflecting change over real time, with the speech of the elderly approximating the norms of an earlier period and that of the young indexing more recent developments. This methodological device has proven indispensable to the study of generational variation, since it obviates the need for the decades of waiting that direct real-time observation would require.

The construct is not without difficulties. The principal confound is age-grading, whereby speakers modify their usage at different life stages in ways that recur in every generation and therefore do not constitute change in the language itself (Sankoff, 2006). Adolescents, for instance, often display the highest frequencies of non-standard and vernacular forms, moderating their usage as they enter the linguistic marketplace of adult employment. A purely apparent-time interpretation might mistake such recurrent life-stage patterning for a change in progress. The resolution of this

ambiguity requires, where possible, the supplementation of apparent-time data with real-time evidence from trend or panel studies, an issue to which the present paper returns in its discussion of methodology (Sankoff & Blondeau, 2007).

2.3 Social Network Theory

Social network theory explains linguistic variation in terms of the structure of speakers' interpersonal ties rather than their membership in predefined social categories (Milroy & Milroy, 1985). Dense networks, in which a speaker's contacts are also connected to one another, and multiplex networks, in which the same individuals are linked through multiple roles, tend to enforce linguistic norms and resist innovation, functioning as conservative forces. By contrast, the looser, more open networks characteristic of mobile urban populations facilitate the diffusion of innovation, since weak ties serve as bridges across which new forms travel between otherwise disconnected groups (Milroy, 2002).

This framework illuminates the generational dimension of urban change. Older residents of established neighbourhoods frequently participate in the dense, territorially based networks that sustain local vernaculars and heritage languages. Younger speakers, by contrast, typically move through more diffuse and geographically extended networks—of school, work, leisure, and digital communication—that expose them to a wider range of varieties and loosen the hold of local norms. They are thus structurally positioned to act as agents of linguistic change, introducing and propagating innovations that older, more locally embedded speakers resist (Milroy, 2002).

2.4 Ethnolinguistic Vitality

The ethnolinguistic vitality model offers a complementary perspective, characterising the capacity of a language community to maintain itself as a distinctive collective entity in terms of three clusters of factors: demographic strength, institutional support, and social status (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). A community with a large and concentrated population, robust representation in education, government, religion, and the media, and high prestige enjoys high vitality and is well placed to resist shift; a community lacking these resources is vulnerable. Subsequent work introduced the notion of subjective ethnolinguistic vitality, emphasising that speakers' own perceptions of their group's vitality may matter as much as objective conditions in shaping language behaviour (Bourhis, Giles, & Rosenthal, 1981). Because perceptions of status, opportunity, and group prospects frequently differ between generations, the vitality framework helps to explain why younger and older members of the same community may pursue divergent linguistic strategies.

3. Urban Settings as Engines of Change

The contemporary city is a distinctive sociolinguistic environment whose characteristic features actively generate and amplify generational difference. Urbanisation brings together speakers of varied geographical, social, and linguistic backgrounds, creating conditions of intense and sustained language contact (Kerswill, 2006). The demographic churn of cities—continual in- and out-migration, residential mobility, and the mixing of

populations in schools and workplaces—disrupts the transmission of stable local norms and creates the fluid contact situations in which new varieties arise.

3.1 Dialect Contact and Levelling

Where speakers of mutually intelligible but differing dialects come into sustained contact, the typical outcome over a generation or two is dialect levelling: the reduction or elimination of marked local features in favour of more widely shared variants (Kerswill, 2003). The mechanism is fundamentally generational. Adults bring their established dialects into contact, but it is their children, acquiring language amid this mixture and orienting toward their peers rather than their parents, who select among the available variants and forge a new, focused variety. The new town of Milton Keynes in England furnishes a well-documented case, in which the children of immigrants from diverse regional backgrounds developed a levelled variety distinct from that of any parental group (Kerswill & Williams, 2000).

3.2 Multiethnolects and New Urban Vernaculars

In multilingual immigrant-receiving cities, dialect levelling is accompanied by a further development: the emergence of so-called multiethnolects, contact varieties forged among young people of diverse heritage in multilingual neighbourhoods (Cheshire, Kerswill, Fox, & Torgersen, 2011). These varieties draw features from a range of source languages and from the local vernacular, recombining them into a distinctive code that marks a shared urban youth identity transcending particular ethnic origins. Multicultural London English has been documented as an

innovative variety driven predominantly by younger, ethnically diverse speakers in inner-city areas, exhibiting phonetic, grammatical, and discourse features absent from the speech of older Londoners (Cheshire et al., 2011).

Comparable phenomena have been observed across European cities—Kiezdeutsch in Berlin, Rinkeby Swedish in Stockholm, and *straattaal* in the Netherlands among them—suggesting that generationally stratified innovation is a general feature of multilingual urban environments rather than a local anomaly (Wiese, 2009). These varieties demonstrate that the urban young are not merely passive recipients of inherited norms but active producers of linguistic difference, generating forms that simultaneously distinguish them from their elders and express their belonging to a multiethnic urban peer culture. The feature pool created by intense multilingual contact provides the raw material from which successive cohorts of young speakers fashion new ways of speaking (Cheshire et al., 2011).

4. Generational Patterns in Language Shift

Generational differences in urban language behaviour manifest along several dimensions, including language choice, code-switching, the adoption of innovative variants, and the differential proficiency of successive cohorts in heritage and majority languages. These dimensions are examined in turn.

4.1 Language Choice and the Three-Generation Model

In immigrant and minority communities, the most visible generational pattern is the progressive

abandonment of the heritage language in favour of the dominant societal language. Research across diverse urban migrant populations confirms the broad applicability of the three-generation model, with measurable declines in heritage-language proficiency and use from the first to the third generation (Portes & Hao, 1998). The first generation tends to maintain the heritage language as its dominant medium, acquiring the host-society language with varying success; the second, raised and schooled in the host society, becomes functionally bilingual but increasingly dominant in the majority language; and the third often retains only passive, fragmentary, or symbolic competence in the ancestral tongue (Veltman, 1983).

The pace of shift varies with the social conditions of the receiving context. Large, concentrated communities with active institutions and continued immigration sustain heritage-language use longer than small, dispersed groups subject to strong assimilatory pressure (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Nevertheless, the underlying generational gradient is remarkably robust, and in many urban settings the shift to monolingualism in the majority language is complete within three to four generations even where attitudes toward the heritage language remain positive.

4.2 Code-Switching and Hybrid Practices

Younger urban speakers frequently engage in code-switching and the creation of hybrid linguistic practices that index their dual or multiple identities (Auer, 1998). Far from signalling linguistic deficiency or confusion, such practices represent a sophisticated and rule-governed deployment of multilingual repertoires, and they often mark a

transitional stage in the broader trajectory of shift. The alternation between codes can serve a wide range of discourse functions—marking quotation, shifting topic, signalling emphasis, or negotiating relationships—and it constitutes a resource for the construction of complex social identities (Zentella, 1997).

Zentella's (1997) longitudinal study of Puerto Rican children in New York demonstrated how young bilinguals deployed Spanish and English with great communicative subtlety, even as the community moved across generations toward greater English dominance. The capacity to move fluidly between codes is characteristically stronger among younger, urban-raised speakers than among the oldest generation, reflecting both their bilingual upbringing and their participation in mixed peer networks. Hybrid practices may thus coexist with, and indeed accompany, the larger movement of shift, serving as the medium through which a generation negotiates its position between an ancestral language it incompletely commands and a societal language in which it is increasingly dominant.

4.3 Leaders of Linguistic Innovation

Beyond the domain of heritage-language maintenance, younger urban speakers regularly lead in the adoption and diffusion of innovative variants within the majority language itself. Variationist research has repeatedly identified the young, and frequently young women, as the leaders of changes from below—changes that originate within the vernacular and spread before speakers become fully conscious of them (Labov, 2001). The apparent-time signature of such changes is a monotonic

increase in the frequency of the innovative variant as one moves from older to younger speakers, a pattern documented for sound changes, grammatical reanalyses, and discourse-pragmatic innovations alike.

The rise of new quotative forms, of innovative intensifiers, and of discourse markers among adolescents and young adults illustrates the speed with which the young can introduce and propagate change in the urban speech community (Tagliamonte, 2016). These innovations frequently carry covert prestige within youth culture even as they attract overt censure from older speakers, and the resulting tension between the generations is itself a recurrent feature of the urban linguistic landscape.

4.4 Older Speakers as Custodians

If younger speakers lead in innovation and shift, older speakers correspondingly function as custodians of linguistic continuity. In minority and heritage communities, the oldest generation frequently retains the fullest command of the ancestral language and serves as the principal repository of traditional registers, idioms, and verbal art (Fishman, 1991). The concentration of competence in the elderly is, however, a double-edged indicator: it testifies to maintenance in the past but signals endangerment in the present, since a language spoken fluently only by the old stands on the threshold of the irreversible stages of shift (UNESCO, 2003). The role of older speakers in revitalisation efforts as teachers, as sources of documentation, and as models of fluent usage—is correspondingly vital.

5. Mediating Factors in Generational Shift

The generational patterns surveyed above are not the automatic outcome of urbanisation but are mediated by a set of social and psychological factors that vary across communities and cohorts. Chief among these are language attitudes and identity, education and the linguistic marketplace, and the increasingly significant influence of digital communication.

5.1 Attitudes and Identity

Language attitudes—the evaluative orientations that speakers hold toward varieties and their users—are powerful determinants of language choice and, through choice, of shift (Garrett, 2010). Where a heritage or minority language is associated with low status, rurality, or limited opportunity, and the majority language with prestige, modernity, and mobility, younger speakers attuned to the social hierarchy frequently orient toward the dominant variety. Gal's (1979) Oberwart study and many subsequent investigations have shown that such attitudinal alignments, often differing sharply between generations, can drive shift even in the absence of overt discrimination.

Identity considerations cut in more than one direction. While the desire for integration and advancement may pull younger speakers toward the majority language, the assertion of distinctive ethnic, regional, or local identity may pull them toward heritage varieties or toward the new urban vernaculars discussed above. The same adolescent who abandons a grandparent's language for everyday communication may nonetheless mobilise fragments of it as emblems of identity, and may

invest heavily in a multiethnolect that marks belonging to an urban peer culture. Language choice is thus best understood as an ongoing act of identity work, conducted differently by each generation in light of its particular social predicament (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985).

5.2 Education and the Linguistic Marketplace

Formal education exerts a profound influence on the generational dynamics of shift. Schooling conducted in the majority language accelerates the acquisition of that language by the second generation while frequently offering no support for the heritage language, thereby reinforcing the generational gradient of shift (Baker & Wright, 2017). The concept of the linguistic marketplace captures the way in which the economic and social value attached to particular varieties shapes the choices speakers make: where access to employment, higher education, and social advancement is mediated by command of the standard majority language, families face strong incentives to ensure their children's proficiency in it, sometimes at the expense of the heritage language (Bourdieu, 1991).

Conversely, where educational systems provide bilingual or mother-tongue instruction and where minority languages are accorded official status and institutional support, the pressures toward shift may be substantially mitigated. The contrasting fortunes of minority languages under supportive and unsupportive language-in-education policies underline that the generational transmission of a language is not fixed by demographic destiny

but is responsive to deliberate institutional design (Hornberger, 2008).

5.3 Digital Communication and Media

Digital and social media have introduced a further dimension to generational divergence. Younger speakers, as the primary users of networked communication, propagate lexical, orthographic, and stylistic innovations at unprecedented speed, widening the perceived gap between their usage and that of older generations (Tagliamonte, 2016). The conventions of texting, messaging, and social platforms—abbreviation, non-standard spelling, emoji, and rapidly cycling slang—constitute a domain of practice in which the young enjoy near-exclusive authority and from which many older speakers are partly excluded.

The implications of digital media for language maintenance are complex and not uniformly negative. On one hand, the dominance of a few global languages online intensifies the prestige and reach of those languages, potentially accelerating shift away from minority tongues. On the other hand, digital platforms have furnished minority-language communities with new and inexpensive means of producing and circulating content, sustaining networks of speakers dispersed across the city and beyond, and according their languages a visibility in the digital public sphere that they may lack in traditional broadcast media. The net effect on any given language depends on how its community takes up these tools, and constitutes an important and still-evolving area of inquiry.

6. Methodological Considerations

The study of generational difference and language shift in urban settings raises distinctive methodological challenges that bear on the interpretation of the patterns surveyed above. The foremost of these is the already-noted ambiguity of apparent-time data, which may reflect either change in progress or recurrent age-grading (Sankoff, 2006). The strongest research designs combine apparent-time analysis with real-time evidence, whether through trend studies that resample a community at intervals or panel studies that re-record the same individuals over time; such designs have shown that while many apparent-time patterns do correspond to genuine change, individuals can and do continue to modify aspects of their speech across the lifespan (Sankoff & Blondeau, 2007).

Further challenges attend the measurement of language shift itself. Self-reported proficiency and use, on which large-scale surveys frequently rely, may diverge from actual competence and behaviour, and the categories employed—“speaks the language,” “uses it at home”—may obscure the gradient and domain-specific character of bilingual competence (Baker & Wright, 2017). The dense multilingualism of contemporary cities, in which individuals command partial competences in several languages and deploy them in fluid combinations, further strains analytical categories developed for more clearly bounded language communities, prompting some scholars to advocate a focus on repertoires and practices rather than discrete named languages (Blommaert, 2010).

Finally, the rapid demographic flux of urban populations complicates the very definition of the speech community whose change is to be studied.

The community sampled at one point may differ substantially in composition from that sampled a generation later, so that apparent generational change may partly reflect population replacement rather than change within a stable population. Careful attention to migration histories, length of residence, and generational status is therefore essential to sound interpretation (Kerswill, 2006).

7. Implications for Language Policy and Diversity

The generational dynamics described above carry significant consequences for linguistic diversity and for the policies designed to sustain it. Where intergenerational transmission of minority and heritage languages weakens, the cumulative result is language endangerment and, ultimately, language death (UNESCO, 2003). Because the city concentrates the very conditions that accelerate shift—mobility, contact, educational pressure toward the majority language, and the prestige of dominant varieties—urban minority communities are often at heightened risk, even as cities simultaneously generate new varieties and sustain large multilingual populations (Fishman, 1991).

At the same time, the agency of older generations as custodians of heritage languages, and the increasing engagement of some younger speakers in revitalisation movements, indicate that shift is not inevitable. Reversing language shift, in Fishman's (1991) influential formulation, depends above all on restoring the intergenerational transmission of the language in the home and the immediate community, since policies confined to the higher domains of education and government cannot by themselves secure a language whose

everyday familial transmission has lapsed. Language policy aimed at supporting such transmission—through mother-tongue and bilingual education, community institutions, religious and cultural organisations, and media provision in minority languages—can meaningfully alter trajectories of shift (Hornberger, 2008).

Effective intervention requires recognition that generational difference is the principal locus at which the fate of a language is determined. Measures that engage the young—validating the hybrid and innovative practices through which they construct urban identities, providing them with reasons and opportunities to use heritage languages, and harnessing the digital media in which they are fluent—are likely to prove more effective than those that treat the heritage language solely as a relic to be preserved by the old. The objective of policy, on this view, is not to arrest linguistic change, which is neither possible nor desirable, but to widen the range of viable choices available to each generation and to ensure that the loss of inherited languages is not the unintended price of urban participation.

8. Conclusion

Generational differences are not a peripheral feature of urban language but the central mechanism through which language shift unfolds. The concentration of diverse speakers in mobile, loosely networked urban environments positions younger generations as leaders of linguistic innovation and, frequently, as agents of shift away from heritage varieties, while older generations function as anchors of linguistic continuity and as custodians of endangered tongues. The theoretical

frameworks of language shift, apparent time, social network theory, and ethnolinguistic vitality converge in identifying the relationship between age cohorts as the decisive arena of urban linguistic change, and the empirical literature on dialect levelling, multiethnolects, three-generation shift, code-switching, and innovation diffusion bears out this centrality across a wide range of settings.

The processes involved are mediated by attitudes and identity, by education and the linguistic marketplace, and by the rapidly evolving domain of digital communication, each of which can either accelerate or retard the movement toward shift. Understanding the structural relationship between age, urbanisation, and language change is therefore essential both to sociolinguistic theory and to the practical task of preserving linguistic diversity. Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs capable of distinguishing genuine generational change from age-grading, from comparative work across cities of differing demographic and policy composition, and from sustained attention to the consequences of digital media for the intergenerational transmission of minority languages. Above all, it would benefit from recognising that the city's young are not the passive end-point of linguistic decline but active makers of linguistic futures, whose choices, suitably supported, may sustain diversity as readily as they may erode it.

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