Linguistic assimilation across the generations: An analysis of home language among second- and third-generation children from contemporary immigrant groups

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The United States has a well-deserved reputation as a graveyard for immigrant languages. The European-American experience of linguistic assimilation has been distilled into the three-generation model of Anglicization, which ends in the loss of the mother tongue (Fishman, 1972; Veltman, 1983). However, the continued relevance of this model for the descendants of contemporary immigrants has been challenged, both by those who deplore the possibility of emerging cultural divides (Huntington, 2004) and by those who argue for a more multicultural American society (Portes, 2002). Thus, some commentators have envisioned speakers of other languages as seizing economic and political power in large regions of the United States and creating disadvantages for English-speaking Americans; this argument was made recently by the eminent Harvard political scientist, Samuel Huntington, in his book, *Who Are We?* Other observers have welcomed the possibilities of bilingualism and language pluralism because they could usher in a new era of true cultural pluralism, in which the hegemony of Anglo-American culture will be broken.

There is a widespread assumption that the older pattern of linguistic assimilation, evident among the descendants of the European immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, no longer holds because of globalization and multiculturalism. This earlier pattern, summarized as a three-generation shift to English monolingualism, entailed limited change for the first, or immigrant, generation, which typically arrived in the U.S. as young adults and learned just enough English to get by. Their children, the second generation, were raised in homes where parents and older adults spoke the mother tongue to them, but they preferred to speak English, not only on the streets and in schools, but even in responding to parents. When they were old enough to raise their own families, they spoke English with their children. Those children, the third generation, were thus the first generation to be monolingual in English, though they may have learned fragments of the mother tongue from their grandparents.

This pattern, which did characterize the experiences of many European groups, such as the Italians, is nevertheless a simplification. Not all European groups conformed to it: thus, German speakers in the Midwest were successful in maintaining their mother tongue across generations and founded many public school systems that were bilingual in English and German; such schools lasted until World War I (Kamphoefner, 1994). French Canadians in New England used bilingual and French-speaking parochial schools as an anchor for maintaining French, which was widely spoken until the 1950s (Gerstle, 1989).

Nevertheless, the contemporary immigration era is believed to involve less pressure to assimilate to the dominant U.S. pattern of English monolingualism. To test some of the causal dynamics undergirding this idea, we replicate with 2000 Census data the analysis

of children's home language conducted by Alba et al. (2002) with the 1990 Census. The 1990s were a decade of rapid growth in immigrant populations, which could be argued to have altered the incentives for linguistic assimilation and added to the viability of bilingualism in US-born generations (Linton, 2004). The focus of the analysis on children is appropriate because the roots of bilingualism typically lie in the language or languages spoken at home during childhood. Relatively few people fluently speak a language learned only in school or during adulthood.

In particular, we examine parental reports of the languages children speak at home and of their ability to speak English and distinguish primarily between children who are reported to speak only English and those who speak another language, perhaps in tandem with English. The analysis is specifically conducted with school-age children (ages 6-15), who are distinguished by national origin and by generation. Because of the growth of many immigrant populations, the analysis of 2000 Census data can consider a wider range of groups than did Alba et al. (2002): here we include 20 Asian and Latino groups in the descriptive analyses, nine of which (Asian Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Cubans, Domincans, Mexicans, and Puerto Ricans) have sufficient numbers in the second and the third and later generations to be included in the multivariate analyses. Generation is defined by combining data about the nativity of the children with that about their co-resident parents, so that the first generation consists of foreign-born children, the second of US-born children with one or both parents foreign born, and the third of US-born children whose parents are also US born.

Descriptive findings about intergenerational shift

In Table 1 and Figure 1, we present a three-generation depiction of children's home languages for specific Hispanic and Asian groups. These groups are currently immigrating to the U.S. in large numbers and account for roughly 80 percent of the total immigrant flow.

The descriptive analyses of the generations show that linguistic assimilation in the form of an intergeneration shift toward English monolingualism is still the dominant pattern, even among the Spanish-speaking groups. However, there is a significant minority of third and later-generation children, especially among the Latin American groups, that continue to speak a language other than English at home. Nevertheless, English proficiency in the form of the ability to speak English well is nearly universal among the US-born children and grandchildren of immigrants. In this sense, one could say that the acceptance of English is unavoidable.

Consider first the picture for the ability to speak English well. Among foreign-born children being raised in the United States (the first generation, or sometimes described as the 1.5 generation), a lack of proficiency in English is relatively common, though in every group the great majority speak English well. Thus, among first-generation Mexican children, 21 percent do not speak English well; among first-generation Chinese children, the comparable figure is 12 percent. In other words, 79 percent of first-generation Mexican children and 88 percent of Chinese speak English well (or very well).

Among U.S.-born children with immigrant parents, the second generation, the levels of English proficiency increase further and, for many groups, become virtually universal. Among second-generation Cuban children, for instance, 97 percent speak English well. Among second-generation Chinese children, the figure is 96 percent. There are a few groups in which the lack of English proficiency remains relatively, but not absolutely, high. In general, these are groups where: 1) there is a high level of back-and-forth migration, suggesting that some second-generation children have spent time in their parents' home country; or 2) many immigrant families came as refugees, who in some cases have been unable to integrate economically and socially with the mainstream society. Mexicans are an example of the first type, though the percentage of second-generation children who do not speak English well is only 9 percent. The Hmong are an example of the second type: 13 percent of second-generation Hmong children do not speak English well.

For the second generation, the percentage of children who speak only English at home is higher than it is in the first generation, though it is usually not high in an absolute sense. In some cases, children may speak only English because one parent is not an immigrant. The Mexicans are a good example of the pattern among Hispanic groups: 11 percent of second-generation children speak only English at home, compared to 5 percent in the first generation. However, for Puerto Ricans and Cubans, two other large Hispanic groups, the second-generation percentages of English monolinguals are noticeably higher: 29 and 27 percent, respectively.

The levels of English monolingualism are notably higher among a few Asian groups, typically, those that come from countries where English is an official language or is widely used. In immigrant families from these countries, then, English, as well as another tongue, may be used by parents, thus favoring the conversion to English monolingualism among children: for instance, 76 percent of second-generation Filipino children speak only English at home, as do 40 percent of Indian children.

Much larger intergenerational changes are found in the shift to the third generation, whose parents are U.S.-born. The major change comes in the much higher percentages of children who are English monolinguals at home. In general, this pattern is characteristic of large majorities of the children in each group. For Hispanic groups, generally 60-70 percent of the third generation speaks only English at home: this is the case for 68 percent of third-generation Cubans, for instance; among Mexicans, the figure climbs to 71 percent. The only exception is found among Dominicans: 44 percent of their third generation is monolingual in English at home.

English monolingualism is, by a large margin, the prevalent pattern among Asian groups. In general, 90 percent or more of third-generation Asians speak only English at home: among the Chinese, the figure is 91 percent, and among Koreans, 93 percent. The only groups for which the level of English monolingualism is below 90 percent in the third generation are the Laotians, Pakistanis and Vietnamese. Nevertheless, for none of these three is the level is less than 75 percent.

Comparisons with the past

Any comparison of the linguistic assimilation of contemporary immigrants groups with that of past groups, who came primarily from Europe, must be approximate because we lack equivalent language data from the census for the high point of mass immigration in the past, which occurred a century ago. The best we can do is to rely on data from censuses taken after the end of European mass immigration in the 1920s because only they have usable questions on the languages spoken by children (see the data in Alba et al., 2002).

This comparison indicates that:

1) in the third generation, the language assimilation of contemporary Asian groups comes close to that of the Europeans. The levels of English monolingualism among the Europeans hovered, with a few exceptions, around 95 percent, while those of contemporary Asian groups are mostly in the 90-95 percent range.

2) bilingualism in the third generation is more common among Hispanic groups than it was among Europeans. However, less than 30 percent of third-generation Hispanic children today speak some Spanish at home, and almost all of them also speak English well. Though bilingualism persists more strongly across generations among Hispanics than it did for Europeans, the prevalent third-generation pattern for Hispanics is still English monolingualism. It should also be remembered in this context that not all European groups experienced the extinction of bilingualism by the third generation: Germans and French Canadians are two well-known counterexamples.

Another kind of comparison to the past, in this case the recent past, is informative. A comparison of linguistic assimilation between the 1990 and 2000 censuses can reveal possible impacts of large-scale immigration, whose absolute level in the 1990s was higher than at any time in American history. Prior research has estimated the children's rates of English monolingualism by generation for several large Hispanic and Asian groups in 1990 census data (Alba et al., 2002). The comparison between these data and those from the 2000 census is shown in Figure 2.

Overall, this comparison indicates stability of language assimilation patterns, though there are some shifts for individual groups.

1) In the second generation, the levels of English monolingualism seem very similar for the major Hispanic immigrant groups (the Puerto Ricans, who are not an immigrant group, were not tabulated in 1990). Thus, 12 percent of second-generation Mexican children spoke only English at home in 1990, compared to 11 percent in 2000. In the case of Cubans, there seems to have been an increase over time in English monolingualism, which was reported for 19 percent of the second generation in 1990 and 27 percent in 2000.

For the second-generation Asian groups, there seems to be a pattern of small declines in English monolingualism over time. For the Chinese, for instance, speaking only English at home was indicated for 29 percent of children in 1990 and 26 percent in 2000. The magnitude of change is very similar for the Filipinos: 79 percent in 1990 and 76 percent in 2000. Koreans are the one group exhibiting a sharper decline: in 1990, 43 percent of the second generation spoke only English at home, but in 2000 the figure had dropped to 32 percent.

2) In the third generation, English monolingualism appears to have become stronger in the largest Hispanic group, Mexicans, but weaker among Cubans and Dominicans. In 1990, 64 percent of Mexican children with U.S.-born parents spoke only English at home, but in 2000, the figure had risen to 71 percent. In contrast, the level of English monolingualism dropped from 78 to 68 percent among Cubans. It also appears to have dropped among Dominicans, the one group that has a level of English monolingualism below 50 percent in the third generation; however, in 1990, the Dominican third generation was so small that the estimate is unreliable.

Multivariate analyses

The multivariate analyses focus on the family and community contexts that lead to mother-tongue maintenance, on the one hand, versus English-language monolingualism, on the other (Stevens, 1985, 1992). The family-context variables we consider include parental education, type of marriage (intermarried or not), and the presence of other relatives, such as grandparents, in the home. The community variables include characteristics of the PUMA, such as the percent of its population who speak the mother tongue and the percent who are recent immigrants. Logistic-regression analyses that contrast English-monolingualism (scored as 1) to the other alternatives (scored as 0) have been conducted separately by generational group for each immigrant-origin population.

The multivariate results demonstrate again that there is strong continuity in the determinants of home language between 1990 and 2000, another indicator that language assimilation patterns have not changed much because of the high volume of immigration. For purposes of presentation, we have chosen three groups, all of which have ample numbers in both 1990 and 2000 to give us confidence in the comparison of coefficients: Mexicans as the largest Spanish-speaking group; Cubans as a group that has been alleged to demonstrate a higher-than-ordinary degree of adherence to bilingualism, at least within the Miami enclave; and the Chinese as the largest Asian group.

Figure 3 shows the comparison of logistic-regression coefficients for the Mexicans. What stands out is the stability of the coefficients, suggesting that there has been little change to the processes leading to English monolingualism. For the second generation, the largest effect promoting English monolingualism is associated with having intermarried parents; even an intermarriage to someone from another Hispanic background has such an effect, though it is mild. The education of the parents also matters, with more educated parents more likely to rear children who speak only English (note that the coefficient is shown indicates the effect of a single year's increase in the

average education of parents). By contrast, the presence of other relatives, such as grandparents, in the home substantially increases the probability of bilingualism. Outside the home, the linguistic character of the communal environment also impacts the probability of bilingualism: growing up near the US-Mexican border and/or in an area (defined by the Census Bureau's PUMA geography) with many Spanish speakers enhances the prospects for bilingualism, although the protective effect of the border region declined between 1990 and 2000.

The factors that matter for the second generation also matter for the third; however, the relative weight has shifted somewhat. For the second generation, the family context seems to matter above all else, but in the third its dominance has lessened and the role of the larger community has grown. The coefficients then associated with growing up in the border region and/or in an area with many Spanish speakers are larger than they were for the second generation; they are also more stable between 1990 and 2000.

The picture just sketched for Mexican-American children of the determinants of English monolingualism and of their changes during the 1990s largely holds also for Cuban-American children. In particular, one can see in Figure 4 the predominant role played for the second generation by the family context and especially by whether the parents are intermarried (once again, even an intermarriage with someone from another Hispanic background has a mild tendency to favor English monolingualism in the children). The effect of the parental marriage declines in magnitude for the third generation. Likewise, the role of the larger environment is secondary to the family factors in the second generation but grows relative to them for the third. One alteration to the pattern observed for Mexicans concerns the role of what is labeled the "border region," which refers here to the Miami area, a Cuban enclave. Its positive effect on bilingualism in the third generation was quite large in 1990 but has shrunk considerably in 2000. Another variation from the Mexican pattern concerns the impact of parental education on English monolingualism. This is smaller for the Cuban second generation than for the Mexican one and nonexistent for the Cuban third generation in 2000.

The determinants of English monolingualism for Chinese-American youngsters, shown in Figure 5, present some similarities but also a major contrast to what we have observed for the two Hispanic groups. The similarities concern the critical role of the family and household context, especially for the second generation. The effect of the parents' marriage type stands out for that generation, though it has declined between 1990 and 2000. As was the case for the Hispanic groups, that effect diminishes in the third generation, though the positive impact on bilingualism of the presence of other relatives in the household increases. The major difference between the Chinese pattern and those of the Hispanic groups has to do with the minor role played by the larger environment. The effects associated with Chinese enclaves and areas where Chinese speakers are small and inconsistent. The family and household, not the community, apparently determine the languages of Chinese-American children.

As was done by Alba et al. (2002), simulations using representative values of variables are used to summarize the impacts of the determinants, with the contrasts involving

generation, intermarried vs. endogamously married families, and ethnic vs. nonethnic communities.[1] For purposes of presentation, we again restrict ourselves to the three groups just discussed (in Figure 6).

The Chinese represent one pattern, where the transition from the second to the third generations brings about a sharp rise in the prevalence of English monolingualism regardless of the home and communal contexts. In both the second and third generations, however, the composition of the family, i.e., whether parents are intermarried or not, makes a substantial difference for whether children speak a language other than English. Consequently, the minority in the third generation who are bilingual at home are found in endogamous homes. Communal factors play a modest role in the second generation but none in the third.

The Cubans represent a different pattern. In this case, the effect of generation is muted: net of family and community variables, the third generation is only slightly more likely to be monolingual in English. The largest effects are associated with the composition of the family, but communal factors also play a role. Living in a region where Spanish is commonly spoken enhances the likelihood that a child speaks Spanish, and this is true in both the second and third generations.

The Mexicans stand in a sense in between these two patterns: as it true for the Cubans, communal factors are significant in both generations, though more so in the second. As is true for the Chinese, however, the transition from the second to the third (and later) generations is quite important, and this is especially the case for the children in endogamous homes, where we have already seen that the bilingual are concentrated.

Conclusion

It is fair to say that the United States today is no longer a language graveyard and to acknowledge that bilingualism can persist across generations. But if the language assimilation patterns of today are not precisely those of the early 20th century, which determine the canonical account of language assimilation, they are not radically different.

Bilingualism is more common today than in the past. Most children of immigrants speak to some extent in the mother tongue at home, especially if their parents have come from Latin America. However, if they are born and raised in the U.S., they are highly likely to speak English well or very well. Among second-generation Hispanic children, only 7 percent do not (and some of those probably belong to families that move back and forth between the U.S. and their countries of origin).

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[1] The simulations vary two key dimensions: the home environment and the community. In the endogamous home, we assume that the parents are endogamously married and that another relative lives in the home; for the exogamous home, we assume the opposite. For the ethnic-community condition, we assume that 33 percent of the PUMA residents speak the ethnic language and that 15 percent immigrated during the preceding 10 years. In the case of a non-ethnic, the values of these variables are set at 5 percent each.

By the third generation, English monolingualism is still the prevalent pattern; that is, parents report that their children speak only English at home. Among Asians, the dominance of English monolingualism in this generation is so high that any difference from the European-American pattern is faint and uncertain. Among Hispanics, a minority of children, about a third, still speak some Spanish at home. By the evidence of other studies, some of these children do not speak Spanish well and will grow up to be English dominant. Bilingualism, then, is very much a minority pattern by the third generation.

The high migration level of the 1990s did not affect the fundamental shift towards English across the generations. Any changes in the intergenerational shifts in language were small and inconsistent in direction. Especially noteworthy is that English monolingualism in the third and later generations of Mexicans, the group that is numerically most important among recent immigrants, increased significantly, contrary to expectations that high immigration levels will sustain later-generation bilingualism. In addition, the determinants of English monolingualism remained quite stable between 1990 and 2000, testifying to the basic stability in the underlying processes of linguistic assimilation.

We conclude that both the anxieties about the place of English in an immigration society and the hopes for a multilingual society in which English is no longer hegemonic are misplaced. Other languages, especially Spanish, will be spoken in the U.S., even by the American born; but this is not a radical departure from the American experience. Yet the necessity of learning English well is accepted by virtually all children and grandchildren of immigrants.

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Table 1
Percent Distribution of Children's Home Language by Generation (Ages 6-15)

	1st Generation			2nd Generation			3rd Generation		
		Other Language			Other Language			Other Language	
	English only	English very well	English not well	English only	English very well	English not well	English only	English very well	English not well
Hispanics	6.1	74.5	19.4	14.6	77.7	7.7	71.7	25.4	2.9
Mexicans	4.9	73.8	21.3	10.5	80.4	9.1	70.5	26.5	3.0
Puerto Ricans	11.6	76.5	11.9	28.9	65.1	6.1	61.9	34.2	3.9
Cubans	5.5	75.9	18.6	26.5	70.0	3.4	67.9	29.6	2.5
Dominicans	5.6	79.8	14.6	9.7	85.2	5.1	43.7	52.1	4.2
Salvadorans	3.1	72.0	24.8	7.3	86.5	6.3	66.4	32.0	1.7
Colombians	4.0	78.9	17.1	17.2	79.7	3.1	61.1	37.3	1.6
Guatemalans	1.8	75.7	22.4	10.9	82.9	6.2	70.8	28.6	0.6
Ecuadorians	4.3	74.1	21.6	16.0	81.2	2.8	60.4	35.6	4.0
Peruvians	4.3	84.0	11.7	20.8	76.1	3.1	78.1	20.9	1.0
Hondurans	5.9	72.8	21.3	14.7	79.6	5.7	75.5	23.6	0.8
Asians	17.9	71.8	10.3	39.3	56.5	4.3	92.2	6.9	0.9
Chinese	7.8	80.1	12.1	26.0	69.8	4.2	91.0	8.0	1.0
Filipinos	39.9	56.0	4.1	76.3	21.9	1.9	93.6	5.6	0.8
Asian Indians	23.7	71.8	4.5	40.0	57.0	3.0	90.6	8.9	0.5
Koreans	16.9	67.2	15.9	31.9	63.1	5.0	93.3	5.5	1.2
Vietnamese	4.1	80.4	15.5	18.2	75.4	6.4	80.6	16.5	2.8
Japanese	14.8	61.0	24.3	64.5	32.4	3.1	95.2	4.2	0.6
Cambodians	9.5	79.6	10.9	17.0	74.4	8.6	n/a	n/a	n/a
Pakistanis	6.9	85.8	7.3	24.9	72.7	2.4	82.7	15.8	1.6
Laotians	6.9	87.2	5.8	15.3	77.5	7.2	77.0	23.0	0.0
Hmongs	2.8	81.0	16.2	5.9	81.2	13.0	n/a	n/a	n/a

Note: n/a = percentages are suppressed because the population is less than 1,000.

Figure 1
Percent of children who speak only English by generation and group

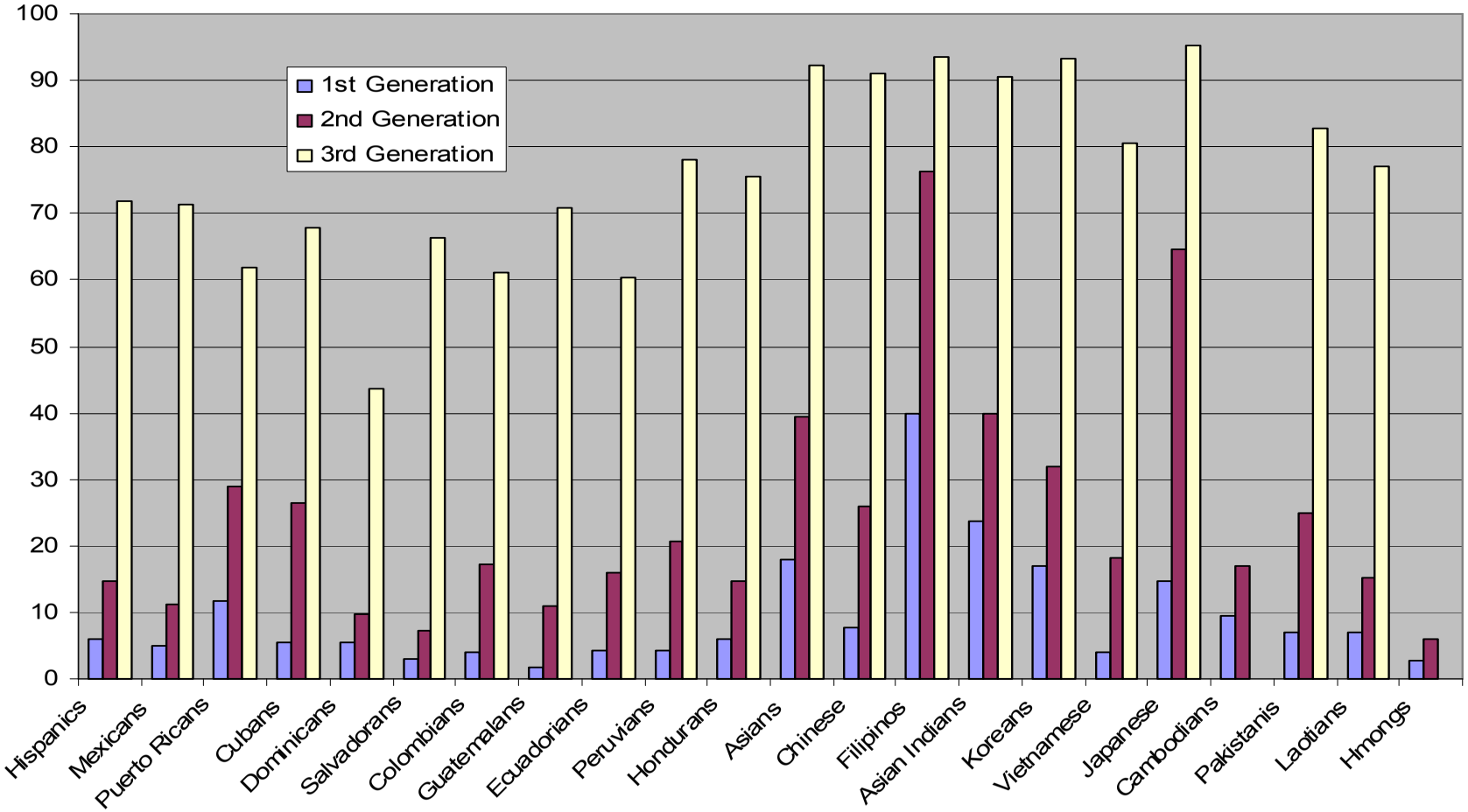

Figure 2
Percent of children speaking only English at home:
Comparison between 1990 and 2000

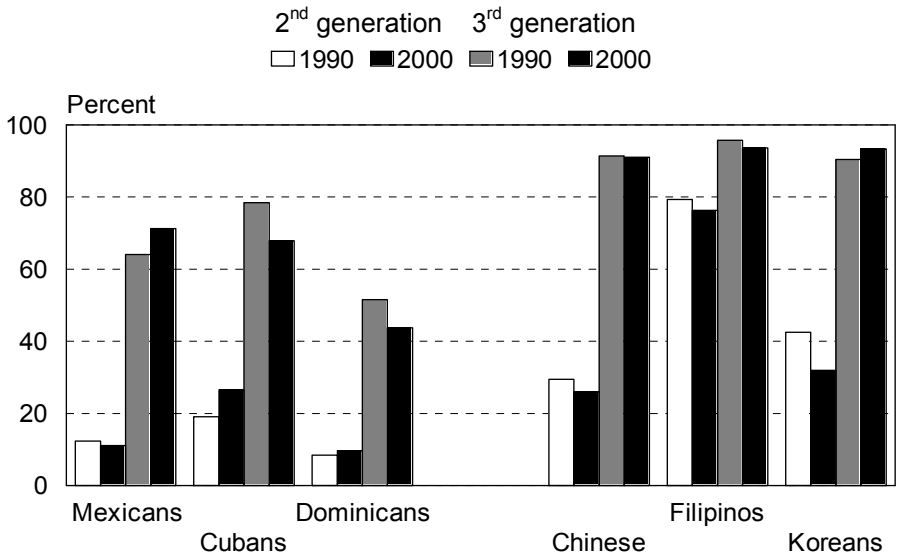

Figure 3
Major determinants of linguistic assimilation of Mexican-American children

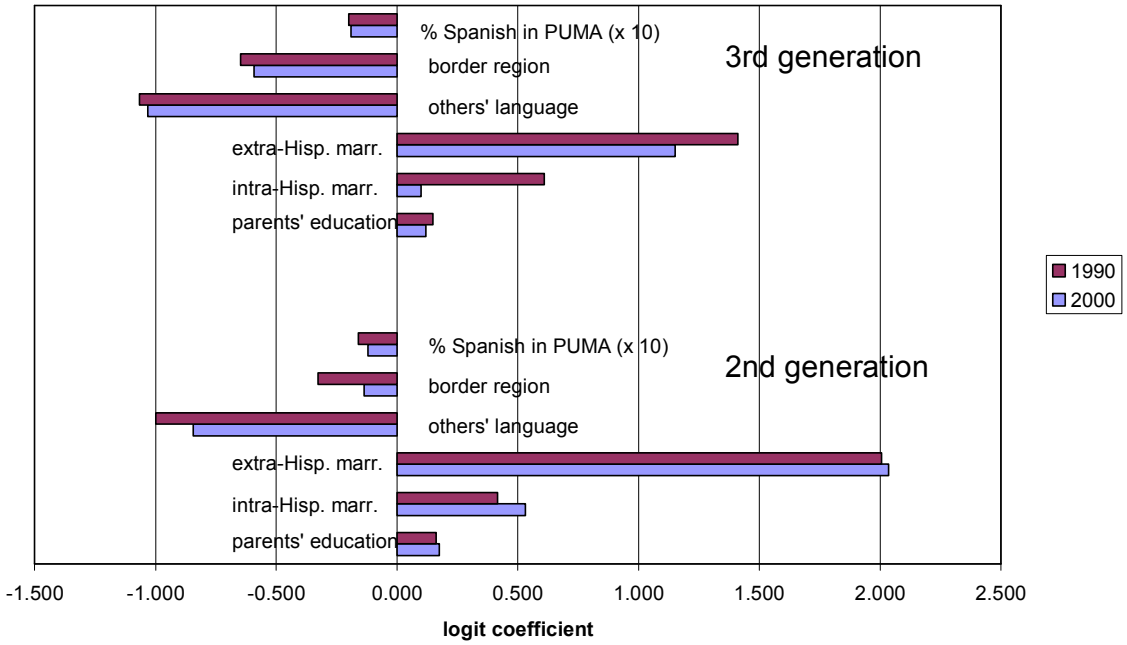

Figure 4
Major determinants of linguistic assimilation of Cuban-American children

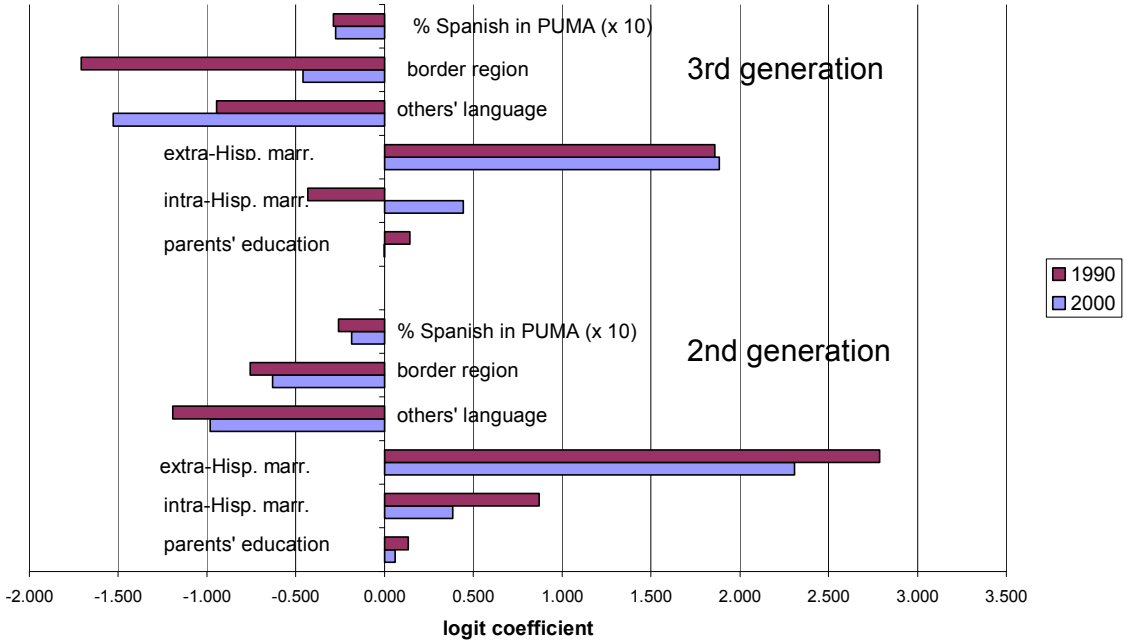

Figure 5
Major determinants of linguistic assimilation of Chinese-American children

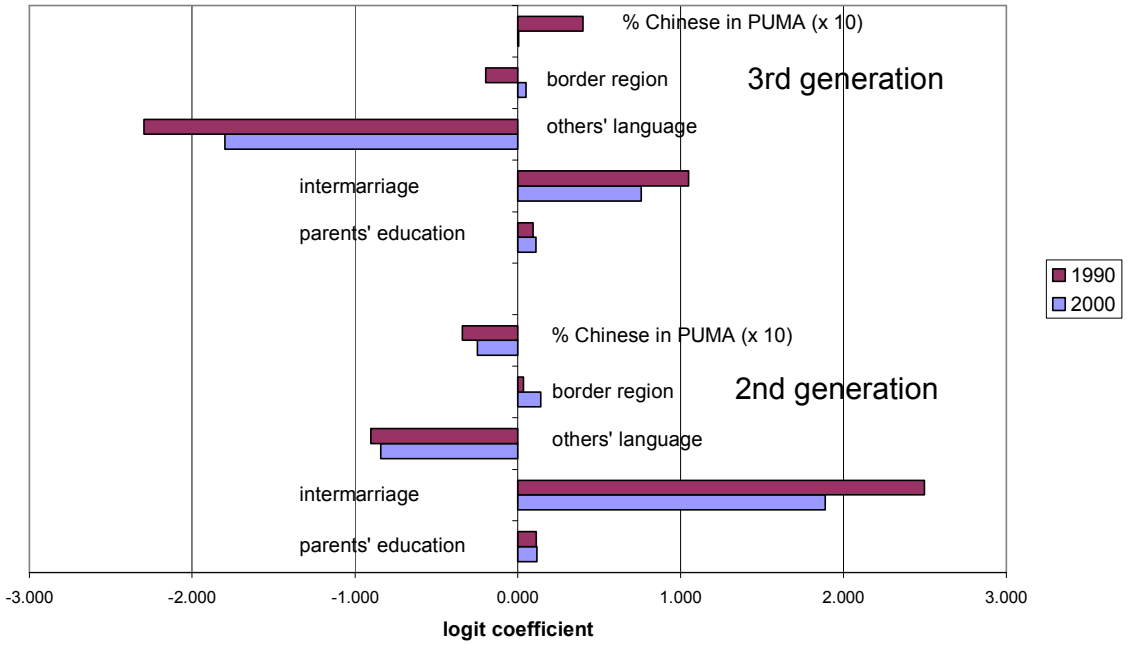

Figure 6
Probability that children speak only English at home, by ethnicity, generation, and home and community contexts, 2000.