New speakers of minority languages: proficiency, variation, and change
popular science abstract

All languages are constantly changing and evolving. Some languages evolve very slowly with little noticeable change in structures from one generation of speakers to the next. This is particularly true of languages with a homogeneous population and strong institutional support, such as schools and governing bodies that can effectively maintain a standard variety. Other languages with more heterogeneous speaker populations and less institutional support tend to change more rapidly – especially when many of the language's speakers have another language as their first language. This would seem to indicate that the process of language learning has a role in the way that languages evolve.

Linguists have long hypothesized that second-language learning is one of the processes that drives language change, but have yet to provide sufficient empirical evidence to illustrate exactly how it works. Part of the problem is that language change typically happens at such a slow rate that it usually has to be understood through a post-hoc analysis. Another issue is the assumption that a second-language learner's target is the variety spoken by proficient, native speakers; this means that structural variation produced by learners that does not meet the assumed target are considered "learner errors" and the possibility that such variants will affect long term change in the language is often dismissed. However, like languages themselves, the target variety for language learners as well as proficient users is in a constant state of flux.

As a theoretical point of departure, the proposed research will rely on the concept of *Linguistic Entrenchment*, which refers to a cognitive process whereby individuals constantly reorganize and adapt communicative knowledge. Thanks to cognitive entrenchment of linguistic structures, people are able to unconsciously, automatically, and quickly understand and produce the structures of language. Since the main means of entrenchment is *repetition and rehearsal* of linguistic input, it is clear that entrenchment is intimately linked with the learning process; it also continues throughout the lifetime of every individual. To illustrate how entrenchment operates on our language processing, consider the following grammatical sentence in English: *The old man the boat.* Most readers will reach the period without noticing that *man* is the verb in the sentence. This is because in pure frequency, the string token *old man* and type tokens in the form of ADJECTIVE NOUN are far more common than *man* as a verb. Similarly, consider the Polish example: *Auto uderzyło dziecko* [car hit child]. Due to case syncretism and relatively free word order, it is not unambiguous whether the *auto* or *dziecko* is the agent. Nevertheless, taken out of context, proficient Polish speakers would overwhelmingly interpret *auto* as the agent because of relatively high frequency of the structural type AGENT VERB PATIENT.

The working hypotheses of this project are that Linguistic Entrenchment (i.e. functional fluency) is the target of second language learning, and that entrenchment is measurable. Measuring entrenchment will allow us to understand whether variation in an individual's linguistic structures, which do not match pedagogical or native speaker-like assumed targets, are fluid (i.e. due to an ongoing learning process) or whether they are stable characteristics of that individual's idiolect.

These hypotheses will be tested by examining language use among New Speakers of two minority languages in Poland, Kashubian and Wymysorys, that are considered endangered and have both recently seen an upsurge in revitalization activities. Language data will be elicited from speakers of these languages in a highly structured and comparable way, multiple times with the same cohort of New Speakers. For the purpose of this project, individuals are considered New Speakers in the case when they take it upon themselves to learn and use a minority language, which was not the primary language of their socialization. New Speakers provide an interesting context for testing these hypotheses; since through the course of endangerment and revitalization, New Speakers have come to occupy a numerically and socially prominent role within the speech community(e.g. as language teachers, language rights activists, etc.). This means that stable idiosyncrasies of New Speakers are modeled to a larger proportion of the speech community than idiosyncarsies learners of large majority languages, providing input to the ongoing entrenchment process of New Speakers and non-New Speakers alike.

By testing the above-mentioned hypotheses within the theoretical framework of Linguistic Entrenchment in New Speaker contexts, this research will derive direct evidence for the relationship between language learning and the development of idiosyncratic language varieties, as well as the conventionalization variant structures found in idiosyncratic varieties across the speech community.