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## **A Comparison of Linguistic Obstacles to U.S. Immigration across Populations: Analysis of Oral Histories**

**Madeleine Albanese**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the degree to which reports of linguistic difficulty for immigrants to the U.S. has changed over time. It analyzes the oral histories of European immigrants from the 1920s and South Asian immigrants from the 1970s. It is hypothesized that the degree of linguistic difficulty for immigrants to the U.S. would have lessened over time. Data from narratives of two waves of immigrants support the hypothesis. Reasons for this change in the degree of linguistic difficulty for immigrants to the U.S. are explored.

### **Introduction**

This study concerns the linguistic difficulties of immigrants to the United States during different waves of immigration in the 1900s. It is already known that all groups of immigrants to the U.S. faced some degree of discrimination, even in terms of their admission into the country, which was often based on race and country of origin (Johnson, 1998). The new question posed in this research paper is whether the degree of difficulty has changed over time and, if so, why. The purpose of this study is to learn about people from various cultures and their experiences when coming to the U.S., in addition to analyzing linguistic obstacles that immigrants from different time periods and different regions report having faced.

In addition, this research paper seeks to understand the significance of English to the “new American” experience and why people value the language so highly, especially in connection to one’s native language. As Krashen (2003) stated, “...It is difficult in today’s world to be active and successful in international business, politics, scholarship, or science without considerable competence in English” (1).

Informants comprise immigrants sharing their stories in oral histories from two online sources. Oral history is growing as a field of study, due in great part to the rise of new forms of technology. As Kuhn (2013) stated, “... technological advances have certainly contributed to the growing popularity of oral history today.” The fieldwork of this study analyzes oral histories in a new way, with the purpose of learning about the immigrants’ different levels of linguistic hardship. To this end, oral histories from two points in U.S. migration (the 1920s and the 1970s) with two different populations (European immigrants and South Asian immigrants) are explored.

Through listening to oral histories, language is observed in the social and cultural context, and the way in which language affects people’s lives is explored. Inabilities to understand language in the context of certain situations, certainly, can pose difficulties for immigrants. Beyond a lack of language understanding, communication issues can also lead to social issues, which in turn can result in more subtle communication gaps and prejudice.

### **Hypothesis**

The hypothesis of this study is that the degree of linguistic hardship for immigrants to the U.S. would have lessened over time. Thus, it is postulated that more recent immigrants faced fewer linguistic difficulties and fewer social hardships than immigrants from earlier in the 20th century. It is hypothesized that South Asian immigrants from the 1970s will express having an easier assimilation experience than European immigrants from the 1920s. That is, the later population will cite fewer stories of linguistic obstacles than the earlier immigrants. There are two possible reasons for a difference: 1) knowledge of various cultures became increasingly common through education in school in the 20th Century and 2) there was more English language education among the more recent wave of immigrants.

### **Methodology/Informants**

The two populations studied are European immigrants from the 1920s and South Asian immigrants from the 1970s. Note that these populations differ in both time period and place of origin. Data and background information are acquired from the oral histories of immigrants found on the National Park Service website (Oral Histories for Your Classroom) and the University of Washington digital library collections (South Asian Oral History Project). Ten oral histories from the European immigrants from the 1920s and ten oral histories from the South Asian immigrants from the 1970s are analyzed in this study. Oral histories are considered part of the

analysis if they contain any mention of linguistic hardships relating to immigration to the U.S. Any narratives that do not mention linguistics are not used for this study. Each wave of oral history is placed into two categories, the latter with three subcategories. The first way in which the oral histories are categorized is based on whether or not they came from immigrants who report having learned English to some degree at school or at home before immigrating to the U.S. The second way in which the oral histories are categorized is by the quality of their assimilation experiences regarding language. In this group, the oral histories are subcategorized in three ways: as either recounting only "positive" linguistic memories, expressing only "negative" linguistic attitudes, or expressing a "mixed" linguistic experience. The parameters for determining what qualify as "positive" are that phrases or stories must contain recollections of pleasant emotions or memories that reflect an agreeable assimilation experience. An attitude is considered "negative" if the person uses phrases or shared stories that contain recollections of unpleasant emotions or memories that reflect a disagreeable assimilation experience. Because immigrants feasibly could have had a mixed linguistic experience, there is a separate category of those who recount both positive linguistic memories and express negative linguistic attitudes.

To ensure that the categorization of data into categories positive/negative/mixed is as objective as possible, an inter-rater reliability test was run. Three raters, one high school student and two adults, were consulted to give their opinions on what they considered "positive," "negative," and "mixed" linguistic experiences. They were shown excerpts from the oral histories already analyzed and asked to place the oral histories in those categories. The consultants' responses were mostly consistent with the original data, but a few changes were made to align with the majority of raters. For example, in the oral history from German immigrant Friedrich Pfeiffer, he says, "Naturally, we were called 'greenhorns,' of course, when you start. Well but there was an awful lot of Germans work in that part of the, of that shop and they were quite helpful, even though we had a foreman that also was of German descent and he more or less called me 'greenhorn.' And he didn't seem to want to help me much. But most of them were willing to show me or ask questions, when I ask questions to help me and so I sailed through that fairly good." This excerpt was originally interpreted as a negative experience, but was changed when the majority of the consultants considered this to be a mixed experience, due to Pfeiffer's description of how people in America helped him. In the South Asian immigrants, Dinesh A. Keskar from India, in response to the question, "...When you first arrived, did you know much about the U.S.?" says, "Not really, not at all. Zero. You know, it was a completely new land with new knowledge. And I didn't know anybody either. So, that's that's what was worrying my mother a lot because, you know, I was suddenly going so far away. And this is not the technology today when you can get on T.V., on internet and talk to your parents or whatever the case may be. And so it was quite difficult for her, which I realized later." This excerpt from the oral history was originally judged as being negative, but further analysis by the majority of the consultants of the following excerpt from the same informant led it to be placed in the mixed category: "But obviously, I came here and I got quite into the studies and everything and so I pretty much... It was not easy, certainly, anybody will tell you that. But at least I had purpose and I had a mission and vision to complete, you know, and that was it. So I was focused on that." In addition, in the South Asian immigrants from the 1970s, the oral history of Jafar Siddiqui was originally placed in the positive category, but was later moved to the mixed category when the consultants considered the following excerpt: "...I can't tell what a horrible sense of failure I felt. I was as close to a break-down as you can get. And they had the International Student Services at Schmitz Hall at that time. And there was a wonderful fellow called Ted Carpenter. He was the head of the International Services Office, or something like that...And he could see that I was just wrecked...So he calmed [me] down a little. He got me appointments with the counseling office, which was across the hall...And he did something for me that I remain grateful to this day. I told him that I could talk to my parents and tell them I'm leaving engineering. Because that's what I'm going to do-I am not going to be an aeronautical engineer. I was done with aeronautical engineering...And he picked up the phone and he dialed my parents' phone number, from the university. And he gave me the phone and he walked out of the office. I don't know how long I spoke, but he let me talk. And I tell you, that saved my life. Because I spoke to my parents and they finally, they said, "its okay. It's okay." And then the counseling office helped me decide that, "alright, you're not going to be an engineer. Don't worry about it."...So, I remain grateful to Ted to this day, he was just a wonderful man." Because Siddiqui described his hardships, yet also described how he overcame those hardships with the help of an American, the majority of the consultants considered this to be a mixed experience. All other original categorizations were supported by a majority of the raters as the same as the original rating.

**Results**

Table 1: The Experiences of European Immigrants from the 1920s

Experience	Percent

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Reported having learned English to some degree in school or at home before immigrating to the U.S.	0%
Expressed only positive linguistic attitudes or recounted only positive linguistic memories, rather than discussing linguistic hardships	40%
Expressed only negative linguistic attitudes or recounted only linguistic hardships	40%
Recounted mixed linguistic experiences and attitudes toward adjusting to life in America	20%

Results from the first population can be seen in Table 1. In European immigrants from the 1920s, 0% report having learned English to some degree at school or at home before immigrating to the U.S. in their oral histories. Note that these oral histories are selected based on the order in which they appear on the National Park Service website, so the fact that 0% of the immigrants speak English is not the result of a biased selection process. Forty percent express only positive attitudes toward their immigration experience or recount only positive memories, rather than discussing linguistic hardships. For example, immigrants like Helen Horvath Harbove from Hungary recall memories such as a parent “always whistling or singing” in their native language, rather than being discriminated against for speaking a foreign language. Forty percent of immigrants express only negative attitudes or recount only linguistic hardships. One piece of evidence to a negative experience involves naming practices. Many immigrants changed their names so that English speakers could pronounce them, an experience that many, including Gertrude (Gudrun) Hildebrant Moller from Germany, report being “not very happy with.” Twenty percent of immigrants recount mixed experiences regarding learning new languages and adjusting to life in the U.S. They were met with both prejudice and acceptance, such as Birgitta Hedman Fichter from Italy, who recalls not being able to communicate in the classroom as a student, but meeting a girl who stayed with her at recess despite the language barrier. In the immigrants from Europe in the 1920s, the majority is met with some level of linguistic hardship.

Table 2: The Experiences of South Asian Immigrants from the 1970s

<b>Experience</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Reported having learned English to some degree in school or at home before immigrating to the U.S.	100%
Expressed only positive linguistic attitudes or recounted only positive linguistic memories, rather than discussing linguistic hardships	50%
Expressed only negative linguistic attitudes or recounted only linguistic hardships	20%
Recounted mixed linguistic experiences and attitudes toward adjusting to life in America	30%

Data for the second population can be seen in Table 2. In the South Asian immigrants from the 1970s, the oral histories are different. One hundred percent of the oral histories from which data are gathered are from immigrants who report having learned English to some degree in school or at home before immigrating to the U.S. Note that these oral histories are also selected based on the order in which they appear on the University of Washington digital library collections website, so the fact that 100% of the informants spoke English is not the result of a biased selection process. While the fact that all of the informants spoke English is not representative of all South Asian immigrants to the U.S., it conveys the extent to which English knowledge is present among these immigrants. Immigrants such as Najma Rizvi from Bangladesh in her Intermediate Girl’s College took “English and other liberal arts subjects” before immigrating. Because of this prior knowledge of English, 50% of the immigrants describe their positive assimilation experiences in their oral histories. For example, many immigrants came to the U.S. as students, such as Zakir Parpia from India, and “wanted to [associate] with and learn from the Americans.” However, because many were students, they spent much of their time in school studying, rather than being with their peers, which made social assimilation difficult. The fact that many South Asian immigrants spent time studying rather than socializing is likely why 20% of the immigrants describe a negative assimilation experience. For example, Alok Mathur from India states that he

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"really didn't socialize with anyone" due to his educational responsibilities. Thirty percent express mixed attitudes toward their assimilation experiences, such as Rajinder Singh Manhas from India, who had trouble understanding the U.S. phone system and directories, but had people at the airport help him find his host family, who took him in while he was a student. In the 1970s, it appears that South Asian immigrants had more prior knowledge of English, and more people were willing to help them with linguistic and cultural difficulties than European immigrants from the 1920s.

## Conclusion and Discussion

The data support the hypothesis that the degree of linguistic difficulty for immigrants to the U.S. lessened over time, from the 1920s to the 1970s. The oral histories of South Asian immigrants from the 1970s reflect fewer reports of linguistic hardships than those of Europeans from the 1920s. There are several possible reasons for these findings. First, such a difference could be due to the changes in the levels of English language education that these different waves of immigrants received prior to their immigration. The European immigrants could have faced more linguistic hardships and therefore more discrimination because many of them had no knowledge of English before they immigrated. Many of the South Asian immigrants in the oral histories did have knowledge of English prior to their immigration, and many were even fluent in English. Educational standards change over time and vary in different parts of the world. In India in the 1970s, it was commonplace for students to learn English in school or for children to speak English at home; English and Hindi are the two national languages of India ("South Asia"). Based on the oral histories and knowledge of Indian history, the practice of children learning English was likely due to India's former status as a British colony (Daniel, 1999-2000). Indians and other South Asians saw education in subjects such as English as a gateway to success both at home and abroad.

The second reason for the change in the degree of linguistic difficulty for immigrants to the U.S. could be due to the fact that, in contrast to the South Asian immigrants, many of the European immigrants in this study came to the U.S. in their twenties or later and were not exposed to English until they were past their critical period for language acquisition. These adult immigrants had more trouble assimilating into U.S. culture, as "informational observation irrefutably shows children to be more successful than adults in mastering a second language" (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1999, 176). The fact that children are better than adults at learning a second language could be a reason why the South Asian immigrants in this study faced fewer hardships in terms of linguistics, as they had learned English from an early age in their native countries.

The third possible reason for the change in the degree of linguistic difficulty for immigrants to the U.S. could be that in the 1970s, U.S. attitudes toward immigration were more accepting than in the 1920s, when xenophobia was present due to events such as the Red Scare (Jackson). Over time, Americans increasingly began to feel that those who come to the U.S. should become United States citizens (Spalding, 2011). They began to feel this way because the belief was that the "policy of assimilation, throughout American history, has been a strengthening of [the] social capital, the continuing expansion of [the] economy, and the constant renewal of [the] national purpose" (Spalding, 2011). Americans in the 1970s could have been more welcoming to immigrants than in the 1920s and wanted to make them part of U.S. society. Furthermore, U.S. schools began to teach about multicultural issues in multicultural classrooms more frequently in the second half of the twentieth century (Garcia).

That is not to say that South Asian immigrants did not face difficulties. In fact, in the 1970s, when many South Asians were immigrating to the U.S., the English-Only movement gained momentum. In 1981, Senator Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa from California proposed "the bill to make English the official language of the United States" (White, 2012, 6). The English-Only movement proved to be an issue for speakers of all foreign languages from Europe, South Asia, and all other parts of the world.

Despite the many hardships that these immigrants faced, there were still Americans during both time periods willing to help them in their new country. The European immigrants describe how their classmates and co-workers helped them and made them feel at home in America. The South Asian immigrants go further, describing how host families even took the immigrants into their homes when they were students. Through fieldwork and research, it becomes apparent that the more recent wave of immigrants from the 1970s had a lesser degree of linguistic and social difficulty when immigrating to the U.S. than the wave of immigrants from the 1920s.

There are several limitations that hinder this research plan. The fact that the immigrants are from two different points in time and two different populations means that two variables have to be taken into account. Discrimination by race was more likely a factor for the second wave of South Asian immigrants than for the white Europeans. Furthermore, linguistic hardships might have been experienced by informants but not discussed. The European immigrants also might have had some degree of English knowledge before immigrating to the U.S. and not reported it. In addition, some information that the people in the oral histories

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give is not clear and definite. It is sometimes difficult to discern whether an immigrant is discussing an ease with language use or a non-linguistic issue. Finally, not every oral history on the websites discusses linguistics and therefore not included in the research.

Despite these limitations, it becomes apparent that language plays an enormous role in how people view each other, a tenet of sociolinguistics (Behrens & Sperling 2010). As language and its use change over time, so do relations between people. This study allows for close examination of this pattern through the analysis of two groups of immigrants that are representative of language and its changing effects on human interactions. As society changes language, language changes society. We see this in the role of language in the phenomenon of assimilation.

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