

Pragmatic Attrition in Heritage Cantonese Speakers: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Request Mitigation Strategies Among Second-Generation Diaspora Communities in Vancouver

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Abstract. This study investigates pragmatic attrition in heritage Cantonese speakers residing in Vancouver's Cantonese-speaking diaspora communities, with particular focus on the erosion of request mitigation strategies under prolonged L1 contact reduction and dominant L2 (English) socialization. Drawing on a purpose-built multimodal corpus of 148 semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews, the study applies Politeness Theory and Cross-linguistic Transfer frameworks to quantify shifts in illocutionary force modification, honorific downgraders, and syntactic hedging patterns across three generational cohorts. Findings reveal statistically significant attrition in syntactic indirectness and formulaic politeness markers among second-generation speakers, with L2 pragmatic norms exhibiting measurable transfer into heritage L1 performance. These results extend current models of incomplete acquisition versus attrition, offering empirical implications for heritage language pedagogy and community language preservation policy.

Keywords: pragmatic attrition, heritage Cantonese, request mitigation strategies, cross-linguistic transfer, diaspora sociolinguistics, illocutionary force modification, heritage language pedagogy, corpus-based pragmatics, L1 attrition

Introduction

The accelerating global dispersal of speech communities across the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has produced a rich yet linguistically precarious landscape of heritage language use. For Cantonese—a tonal Sino-Tibetan variety spoken natively by an estimated 85 million individuals worldwide—diaspora contexts such as metropolitan Vancouver represent critical sites where intergenerational transmission is mediated by dominant-language socialization pressures, institutional monolingualism, and attenuating affective ties to ancestral linguistic norms. Within this sociolinguistic environment, pragmatic competence, arguably one of the most culturally embedded and acquisition-resistant dimensions of language, emerges as a particularly sensitive index of language attrition and shift. Unlike phonological or morphosyntactic features, pragmatic conventions governing speech acts—including the deployment of request mitigation devices such as syntactic downgraders, lexical hedges, and honorific addressivity markers—are deeply entangled with culturally specific face-work systems and interactional ideologies that prove especially vulnerable to erosion when primary socialization networks transition to a dominant L2 context. Pragmatic attrition, defined as the systematic loss or restructuring of target-like pragmatic competence in an individual's first or heritage language as a consequence of reduced use and competing cross-linguistic influence, has received comparatively limited empirical attention relative to phonological and lexical attrition paradigms. Seminal contributions by Schmid (2011), Kecskes and Papp (2000), and Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) have established foundational theoretical scaffolding, yet corpus-driven investigations targeting tone-language varieties within Western diaspora contexts remain conspicuously underrepresented in the literature. This gap is particularly consequential given that Cantonese pragmatic norms—including the intricate system of sentence-final particles (SFPs), modal verb stacking, and deference-indexed pronominal choices—constitute a structurally complex pragmatic subsystem that is both typologically distinct from English and acutely susceptible to restructuring under sustained L2 dominance. The present paper addresses this gap through a corpus-based empirical analysis of request mitigation strategies produced by 148 self-identified heritage Cantonese speakers in Vancouver, stratified across three generational cohorts: first-generation immigrants (G1), second-generation Canadian-born speakers (G2), and 1.5-generation speakers (G1.5) who arrived prior to age twelve. Applying a mixed-methods analytical design that integrates quantitative frequency analysis of mitigation devices with qualitative discourse analysis of interactional sequences, this study interrogates the degree to which attrition is differentiable from incomplete acquisition, and the extent to which dominant-language pragmatic norms permeate heritage language production at the levels of illocutionary strategy selection, syntactic indirectness, and formulaic politeness expression. The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical landscape of pragmatic attrition and cross-linguistic pragmatic transfer as applicable to heritage language contexts. Section 3 details the corpus design, participant demographics, and analytical methodology. Section 4 presents quantitative findings stratified by generational cohort and speech act category. Section 5 situates the empirical results within broader debates on incomplete acquisition versus

attrition, before Section 6 concludes with pedagogical and policy implications for heritage Cantonese maintenance programs in Canadian metropolitan settings.

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