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CROATIAN AS A HERITAGE LANGUAGE IN CANADA

Abstract

This paper examines some aspects of language contact in a Croatian-English bilingual speech community in Canada. The primary goal of the paper is to better understand language proficiency, language use, and attitudes of second-generation heritage speakers of Croatian. In officially multicultural Canada, the roles of Croatian and English are both complementary and distinct. Indeed, there is an obvious imbalance in the position and use of the two languages. Whereas English functions as a dominant or majority language (one of the two official languages), Croatian is a heritage or minority language. Although many studies have been conducted on different heritage languages, little attention has been paid to Croatian as an immigrant heritage language in Canada. Therefore, a closer examination of heritage language development and practices in this bilingual speech community is necessary. The research presented here is based on data from two sources: the Canadian census data and the data from a sociolinguistic survey conducted in the Croatian community in the greater Toronto area through a questionnaire. In order to describe linguistic practices in the community and create a linguistic profile of the second-generation heritage speaker of Croatian, the study focuses on the following issues: the acquisition of language skills in English and Croatian, the use of the two languages in everyday life, the learning of the heritage language, and attitudes towards maintenance of the heritage language.

Key words: language contact, heritage language, minority language, Croatian-English bilingualism, Croatian, Canada

1. Introduction

As people more extensively than ever migrate around the world for economic and other reasons, interest in the topic of language contact in the émigré context is growing steadily. Within this wider thematic frame, of particular and continuing relevance are the issues of heritage language use and maintenance. In general, the term *heritage language* refers to all languages other than the language(s) dominantly used in a society. According to Cummins and Danesi (1990), in the Canadian context, the definition of heritage languages includes all languages except for Aboriginal languages and the official languages of Canada, English and French. On the other hand, Fishman (2001), approaching the issue from a primarily U.S.

perspective, uses the term to refer to indigenous, colonial, and immigrant languages; hence, he considers any language other than English a heritage language. Clearly, the terminology is far from standardized and to add to the confusion a variety of other terms such as *minority language*, *community language*, *ancestral language*, *ethnic language*, *immigrant language*, *home language*, or *non-official language* may be used to refer to the same concept.

Some clarification is also needed in relation to the term *heritage language speaker* (or *background speaker* as used in Australia and *ethnic community speaker* as used in Europe (Montrul, 2008: 93)). According to Valdes (2001), the term *heritage language speaker* refers to an individual raised in a home where a heritage language was spoken and who can speak or understand the language, and is somewhat bilingual in that language and in English. Certainly, as Polinsky and Kagan (2007: 3) point out, this definition is “English-centered”; however, as they emphasize, in a different context English could be replaced by any other majority language. Although one of the central elements in defining a heritage language speaker is early bilingualism in the majority language and heritage language (Montrul, 2008), the level of linguistic competence in the two languages is not relevant for the definition. In other words, heritage language speakers could be both balanced and dominant bilinguals. However, it seems that heritage language speakers are usually dominant in the majority language (Montrul 2016: 18). Finally, in order to label someone as a heritage language speaker, personal relation to the language, motivation for heritage language learning, and positive attitudes towards the language and culture could be more important than the language ability itself (cf. Fishman 2001, Valdes 2001). The topic of heritage language use and maintenance has received significant attention in the linguistic literature. A number of factors have been identified that could promote either language maintenance or language shift in a community and various models have been proposed to explain or even predict the possible outcome of a language contact situation (see Clyne, 2003 for an overview). For instance, Fishman (1966) observed that in immigrant communities in North America the shift to the dominant language, and thus the loss of the heritage language, generally occurs over a three-generation period. In the three-generation language shift model, successfully applied in various settings, first-generation immigrants mostly use the heritage language. Their children are generally bilingual and speak the dominant language fluently while still using the heritage language at home, mostly when communicating with their parents and other first-generation immigrants in the community. However, when it comes to first-generation immigrants’ grandchildren, they are rarely bilingual and almost exclusively use the dominant language. The importance of family and the ethnic community for immigrant heritage language maintenance in the majority-speaking country is undisputable. Fishman (1991) points out that family is crucial in transmitting the language to the next generation. In the family environment, children receive the majority of input in the heritage language. Hence, in cases of reduced exposure to the language in the family, they tend to gradually lose ability in the heritage language (Montrul 2008: 162). Another element of great significance for the preservation of the heritage language is personal connection to the language and culture (Fishman, 2001). Personal experience is

reflected in greater motivation for learning and maintaining the language. Apart from benefiting the individual who is a heritage language speaker, many recent studies have emphasized that heritage languages are a valuable and important resource for the wider community and society as a whole (Peyton, Ranard, McGinnis, 2001; Cummins, 2005). Consequently, Cummins (2005) argues that heritage language maintenance should be promoted on the national level and adequate language policies should be put in place, so as to allow heritage language speakers to further develop their language skills. It has been established that the development of bilingual language skills enhances general cognitive performance. Research has highlighted that bilingualism improves not just verbal but also non-verbal general cognitive abilities; bilingualism is also associated with slower cognitive decline and later onset of dementia (see Bialystok, Craik, and Luk, 2012). Evidently, there are cognitive as well as economic benefits to heritage language maintenance and more work should be invested in supporting heritage language development and research of immigrant heritage languages, such as Croatian in Canada.

2. A demographic profile of the Croatian community in Canada

The largest wave of Croatian immigrants arrived to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, Croatians migrated mostly for political and economic reasons and settled in the urban centers of Ontario (Rasporich, 1982). The most recent wave of migration to Canada happened in the 1990s, during the war in Croatia and in its aftermath.

The latest available Canadian census data (2016) show that 133,970 Canadian residents self-identified as being of Croatian ethnic origin, a growth of 14.2% since 2011 when 114,880 Canadians reported being of Croatian descent. In 2006 and 2001, the respective figures were 110,880 and 97,050, which represents an increase of 3.5% from 2006 to 2011, and an increase of 12.5% from 2001 to 2006. While in Canadian terms these numbers are not very high (population 35.15 million according to the 2016 census), in Croatian terms (population 4.28 million according to the 2011 census) they are sizeable. Of particular interest are census data on the single and multiple ethnic origin of people of Croatian descent living in Canada. The 2016 census data reveal that 41.5% (55,595) of Croatians living in Canada declared a single ethnic origin, whereas 58.5% (78,370) claimed multiple ethnic origins (they reported Croatian origin as well as some other ethnic origin). In 2011 the respective figures were 45.1% and 54.9%. As the census data show, between 2001 and 2016 the percentage of people of Croatian descent reporting a single ethnic origin declined by 18.5 percentage points; in 2001 there were 40% multiple-origin responses, compared to 49.1% in 2006, 54.9% in 2011, and 58.5% in 2016. Clearly, a growing number of Croatians living in Canada choose not to identify with a single ethnic group, but adopt multiple ethnic identities. Looking at the geographic concentration of the Croatian ethnic group, the most recent available census data (2016) show that the majority of all Canadians of Croatian descent (82,220) live in the province of Ontario, with the largest community being in Toronto area. Other Canadian cities with a considerable population of Croatian origin are Vancouver, Hamilton, Kitchener, Calgary, and Montreal.

Census data (2016) on the linguistic characteristics of Canadians of Croatian descent reveal that 52.1% (69,840) of them speak Croatian. In other words, almost one half of all people of Croatian descent living in Canada do not speak Croatian. In 2011, 55.2% of Canadians of Croatian descent reported speaking Croatian. In 2006 and 2001, the respective figures were 65.6% and 73.9%. It is evident that between 2001 and 2016 there was a significant drop of 21.8% in the percentage of people of Croatian ancestry who can speak Croatian. A decrease was also recorded in the percentage of Croatian-Canadians who use the heritage language at home most often. In 2006, 19.9% of all people of Croatian descent reported Croatian as the language spoken most often at home. Equivalent figures from previous censuses are 16.3% (2011) and 12.5% (2016), which amounts to a 7.4% drop over ten years.

The census data presented here indicate that the demographic structure of the Croatian population in Canada is changing. The majority of Croatian immigrants who arrived in Canada in the 1960s and 1970s, during the largest wave of Croatian migration to Canada, are retired or are approaching retirement. It is undoubtable that the community is aging and that its ethnic homogeneity is declining. Generally, it is the first generation of immigrants that mostly uses the heritage language. They are also crucial in transferring the language and culture to the next generation. The second generation of immigrants is usually bilingual, but majority-language dominant. Therefore, with the population of Croatian descent aging and a slowdown in immigration from Croatia, it is not surprising that the percentage of community members who can speak Croatian is in decline, creating major challenges for heritage language maintenance in the community.

3. Study methodology and profile of participants

The data for this study were collected in the Croatian community in the greater Toronto area through a sociolinguistic questionnaire. The data were collected in 2013. The questions were constructed to gather demographic information and to cover a range of linguistic topics such as the acquisition of language skills in English and Croatian, the use of the two languages in everyday life, the learning of the heritage language, and attitudes towards maintenance of the heritage language. The paper-based questionnaire contained 41 questions. Most questions were close-ended (demographic questions, rating scales, multiple-choice questions), however, in some cases open-ended questions were used to allow participants to offer their viewpoints on certain topics. The questionnaire was written in both English and Croatian to ensure it was understandable and easy for participants to use. Participants, who all took part in the study voluntarily, were instructed to respond in either language, according to their preference. The great majority responded in English. To be included in the study all participants had to meet the following conditions: both of their parents had to be first-generation Croatian immigrants to Canada; they themselves had to be Canadian born or had to have come to Canada as young children. They were recruited through personal contacts and snowball sampling. One hundred and ten (N=110) second-generation Croatian-Canadians participated in the study

(60 females and 50 males). The average age was 33.1 (age range 14-54). Of the 110 participants, 95 were born in Canada, 7 were born in Croatia, 5 were born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2 in Germany, and 1 in France. All non-Canadian-born participants came to Canada before they turned 6 and started formal schooling in Canada. At the time of the study, 24 participants indicated high school as the highest level of education obtained (8 of these were still enrolled in high-school), 25 had a college degree, 39 a bachelor's degree, 21 a master's degree, and 1 participant had a doctoral degree.

4. Study findings

4.1. First language

One of the initial questions in the linguistic section of the questionnaire invited participants to identify their first language, the language they know best. Not surprisingly, all participants (N=110) named English as their first language and Croatian as their second language. Although for many of them Croatian was the first language they acquired and very often the only language of their early childhood, from the very beginning they were educated in English and it later became their dominant language. This is in line with Montrul's (2016: 18) conclusion about heritage language speakers usually being dominant in the majority language. In itself, this is an indication of a potential problem for Croatian language maintenance in the community as fluent heritage language speakers are needed to transmit the language to the next generation.

4.2. Self-assessment of language skills

Subsequently, participants were asked to assess their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in English and Croatian on a four-point rating scale (1- *poor*, 2- *fair*, 3- *good*, 4- *excellent*). Participants' objective proficiency was not tested and the results presented here show only their subjective proficiency ratings.

Overall, the results reveal that self-ratings of proficiency in English are higher than self-ratings of proficiency in Croatian. Due to the fact that all participants named English as their first language and Croatian as their second language, these results are not surprising. What is surprising, however, is that participants were somewhat self-critical in terms of their language abilities in their first language. Even though they rated their own English proficiency highly (the mean for writing, reading, speaking, and listening ranging from 3.94 to 3.97), not all participants rated themselves the highest in all English language skills (see Table 1). Perhaps this indicates some kind of uncertainty about their general language proficiency. Of the four English language skills, listening scored the highest (3.97) and writing the lowest (3.94), with small variability in participants' self-assessments (lower standard deviation) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Self-rated proficiency in English (on a 4-point scale) with the mean (M) and the standard deviation (SD)

Skill		N	%
Listening M=3.97 SD=0.16	poor	0	0.0%
	fair	0	0.0%
	good	3	2.7%
	excellent	107	97.3%
Speaking M=3.95 SD=0.21	poor	0	0.0%
	fair	0	0.0%
	good	5	4.5%
	excellent	105	95.5%
Reading M=3.95 SD=0.21	poor	0	0.0%
	fair	0	0.0%
	good	5	4.5%
	excellent	105	95.5%
Writing M=3.94 SD=0.25	poor	0	0.0%
	fair	0	0.0%
	good	7	6.4%
	excellent	103	93.6%

The self-assessment of skills in Croatian (Table 2) shows that participants rated themselves highest in listening (the mean being 3.48) and lowest in writing (the mean being 2.53) (see Hlavac, 2003: 19 for comparison). This is not especially surprising given that Croatian was the language they were mainly exposed to in early childhood and the first language learned for most of them. Out of 110 participants, 61 rated their Croatian listening ability as excellent, and, what is more, not a single participant rated their Croatian listening ability as poor (see Table 2). On the other hand, only 13 participants rated their Croatian writing ability as excellent, whereas 14 of them rated it as poor (see Table 2). Also, the self-assessment of listening proficiency was higher than the self-assessments of other skills. The difference in rating between writing, reading, and speaking was rather small with the mean ranging from 2.53 to 2.87 (see Table 2). The results also show higher standard deviation scores for proficiency in Croatian compared to standard deviation scores for proficiency in English, indicating greater variance in the self-assessment of Croatian language skills. Again, it has to be pointed out that these are only participants' own impressions of their ability, and not the results of language testing.

Table 2. Self-rated proficiency in Croatian (on a 4-point scale) with the mean (M) and the standard deviation (SD)

<i>Skill</i>		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Listening M=3.48 SD=0.63	poor	0	0.0%
	fair	8	7.3%
	good	41	37.3%
	excellent	61	55.5%
Speaking M=2.87 SD=0.72	poor	2	1.8%
	fair	30	27.3%
	good	58	52.7%
	excellent	20	18.2%
Reading M=2.68 SD=0.94	poor	13	11.8%
	fair	32	29.1%
	good	42	38.2%
	excellent	23	20.9%
Writing M=2.53 SD=0.86	poor	14	12.7%
	fair	37	33.6%
	good	46	41.8%
	excellent	13	11.8%

4.3. Heritage language use

The subsequent set of questions in the linguistic section of the questionnaire attempted to outline the use of the heritage language in everyday communication. Participants reported that they used English 77.9% of the time and Croatian 22.1% of the time. In this respect, it could be argued that the community exhibits the classic pattern of language shift, with the second-generation shifting towards the majority language. Speaking generally, we could say that the two languages (English and Croatian) are used in different domains: Croatian is the language commonly used in the family domain and English is the language used in the work and school domains. However, participants reported that they also used English in the family domain, for communication with the younger generation, their siblings, cousins, and friends who are bilingual, but mostly English-dominant. On the other hand, when communicating with older members of the community, who are generally Croatian-dominant, they reported that they tended to start the conversation in Croatian and use more Croatian words. These results are consistent with Hlavac's (2003) findings. In his study of the speech of second-generation Croatian-Australians he observed that English was the language his informants predominantly used with their own generation, their siblings and relatives, whereas Croatian was the language they used with their parents, and older relatives.

As previously mentioned, first-generation immigrants have a central role in passing the heritage language on to the second generation. They mostly focus their efforts on using the heritage language regularly, and often exclusively, at home. In this sense, first-generation Croatian immigrants to Canada conform to the norm, seeing that the great majority of participants (95.5%; N=105) reported Croatian as the language

primarily spoken at home when they were children (see Table 3). These results strongly indicate that first-generation Croatian-Canadians were concerned about preserving the heritage language and that, through parental input and positive attitudes towards heritage language maintenance, they were actively supporting the intergenerational transmission of Croatian.

Table 3. Language use in childhood

Which language was primarily used at home when you were a child?		
	N	%
Croatian	105	95.5%
English	5	4.5%

4.4. Heritage language learning

Several questions in the questionnaire attempted to identify participants' involvement in heritage language learning and various community organizations and activities that promote Croatian language and culture. In immigrant communities ethnic language is often seen as a key element of cultural identity. That was one of the reasons why it was very important for first-generation Croatians to transfer their language and their culture to the next generation. At first, the Croatian language was primarily maintained at home, by the family. In the 1960s and 1970s, the first language schools were established in many communities across Canada, with the goal of promoting and cultivating Croatian language and culture among the new generation (Sopta, 2012). Croatian language classes were usually held on Saturdays in churches and community centers. At present, many school boards in Canada offer Croatian language instruction as part of their heritage language programs (also known as international language programs) in elementary and secondary schools. Likewise, post-secondary Croatian heritage language programs are available at several universities across the country.

During the research phase, many participants expressed that they were quite unhappy about going to Croatian school on Saturdays when they were children and that they attended Croatian language classes only at their parents' insistence. It needs to be noted that their parents' resolution to transmit the heritage language to the next generation is also reflected in the very high attendance rates in Croatian language schools as the great majority of participants (92.7%; N=102) reported that they attended Croatian language classes (Table 4).

Table 4. Participants' enrollment into Croatian language classes

Did you attend Croatian language classes?		
	N	%
Yes	102	92.7%
No	8	7.3%

Although very unenthusiastic about learning Croatian in their childhood years, many participants now feel grateful to have had the opportunity to improve their heritage language skills and to have stayed in contact with Croatian language and culture. Not

only did heritage language class help with their proficiency in Croatian, it also gave them an opportunity to build ties with other members of the Croatian community and expand their ethnic network. Closer affiliation with the ethnic group could also be established via membership in various ethnic organizations, thus creating another setting in which to use and maintain the heritage language. In order to understand participants' involvement in various community activities that promote Croatian language and culture, they were asked if they belonged to any Croatian organization(s) in Canada. The results show that about half of the participants (52.7%; N=58) belonged to one or more Croatian ethnic organizations (see Table 5). This finding appears to be an indication of their dedication and commitment to creating connections with other community members, thus strengthening their ethnic identity.

Table 5. Participants' membership in Croatian ethnic organizations

Are you are a member of any Croatian organization(s) in Canada?	N	%
Yes	58	52.7%
No	52	47.3%

For many immigrants, travelling to their country of origin is another important way to improve their heritage language skills and strengthen ties to the homeland. Despite the great geographical distance between Canada and Croatia, and significant travel expenses, the majority of participants (80%; N=88) reported that they had visited Croatia more than once (see Table 6). Out of 110 participants, only 3 reported to never have visited their parents' country of origin.

Table 6. Number of times travelled to Croatia

Have you ever visited Croatia?	N	%
Never	3	2.7%
Once	19	17.3%
Many times	88	80.0%

Not only did the great majority of participants report having travelled to Croatia (97.3%; N=107), all of them (N=110) reported that they planned to visit Croatia again in the future (see Table 7), thereby potentially creating opportunities to enhance their knowledge of the heritage language.

Table 7. Future travel to Croatia

Do you plan to visit Croatia (again)?	N	%
Yes	110	100.0%
No	0	0.0%

4.5. Attitudes towards Croatian heritage language maintenance

One of the numerous factors that contribute to either language maintenance or shift in an ethnic community is the attitude a group has towards its language. In order

to better understand all aspects of heritage language maintenance in the Croatian community in Canada, attitudes of second-generation Croatians towards the maintenance of their heritage language were also investigated. Participants were asked about the importance of Croatian language maintenance and about passing the language on to the next (i.e. third) generation. Although data show that the knowledge of Croatian among participants is somewhat limited (based on their own assessments), and that the use of Croatian in everyday life is relatively low (again, based on participants' own assessment), a remarkable number of participants (99.1%; N=109) declared that it was very important for Croatians in Canada to preserve the Croatian language (Table 8).

Table 8. Attitudes toward the maintenance of Croatian

Do you think it is important for Croatians in Canada to maintain their language?		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes		109	99.1%
No		1	0.9%

What is more, an equally surprising number (95.5%; N=105) expressed their willingness to transmit the language to their own children (Table 9). What emerges from these results is that their personal connection to the language is strong and that they have very positive attitudes about its preservation, both generally regarded as some of the key factors for heritage language maintenance.

Table 9. Attitudes about transmitting Croatian to the next generation

Will you encourage your children to learn Croatian (if you have any now or in the future)?		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Yes		105	95.5%
No		5	4.5%

5. Conclusions

The present study focused on Croatian as an immigrant heritage language in Canada. The aim was to investigate linguistic practices in the Croatian-English bilingual speech community in Toronto and to create a linguistic profile of the second-generation heritage speaker of Croatian. In order to achieve these study goals, emphasis was placed on the following topics: self-assessment of language dominance, self-assessment of language skills in English and Croatian, use of the two languages in everyday life, learning the heritage language, and attitudes towards maintenance of the heritage language. The study combined the analysis of Canadian census data pertaining to ethnicity and language with a sociolinguistic survey conducted in the Croatian community in the Toronto area.

The analysis of Canadian demographic census data shows that the number of people who declare Croatian descent has been growing over the years. However, the percentage of Croatian-Canadians who declare a single-ethnic origin has been steadily declining as an increasing number of ethnic Croatians also report some

other ethnic origin. What is more, as the linguistic census data further reveal, the percentage of Canadians of Croatian ancestry who can speak Croatian has also been declining in recent decades as well as the percentage of those who use Croatian at home most often. Fluent heritage language speakers have a pivotal role in transferring the language to the next generation. Therefore, both the decline in the percentage of Croatian-Canadians who can speak Croatian and those who use it at home most often could likely negatively impact the maintenance of the language. Altogether, the census data presented here strongly suggest that the community is aging and, as a result, heritage language maintenance represents a major challenge. The analysis of the sociolinguistic questionnaire data shows that second-generation heritage speakers of Croatian are English-dominant bilinguals who, in everyday communication, mostly use the English language. However, they declare Croatian as the language primarily used when they were children, indicating that it is possible that their language dominance changed over time. All participants surveyed name English as the language they know best, hence it is not at all surprising that they rate their English proficiency higher than their Croatian proficiency. The majority of them consider their listening ability in Croatian as excellent whereas speaking, reading, and writing abilities in Croatian are not rated as highly. Overall, the results reveal that listening is rated as the strongest skill and writing as the weakest skill in both English and Croatian.

The analysis of sociolinguistic questionnaire data further reveals that the Croatian language is generally used in the family domain, especially in communication with parents and older relatives. It also shows that the overwhelming majority of participants regularly attended Croatian language classes when they were children, therefore demonstrating that first-generation Croatian immigrants to Canada were concerned about the preservation of Croatian language and culture and that they actively supported their children in heritage language learning and development. However, it appears that the majority language is slowly entering the family domain as most second-generation Croatians tend to use English to communicate with their own generation, even in the family setting.

As previously noted, research has proven that there are many benefits to heritage language maintenance both for the individual and society. Croatian heritage language maintenance is crucial for Croatian ethnic identity maintenance. Thus, it is encouraging that a remarkable number of second-generation Croatian-Canadians have positive attitudes about the preservation of the Croatian language and are willing to pass the language on to the next generation. However, as the study results suggest, the ageing population of Croatian descent, the lack of fluent speakers of Croatian, and the decline in the use of Croatian in the family setting will present a challenge both to individuals and to the ethnic community in reaching that goal.

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Tables

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HRVATSKI KAO NASLJEDNI JEZIK U KANADI

Sažetak

Ovaj rad bavi se proučavanjem jezičnih dodira u hrvatsko-engleskoj dvojezičnoj govornoj zajednici u Kanadi. Osnovni cilj rada je bolje razumijevanje poznavanja i upotrebe hrvatskog jezika te stavova o hrvatskom jeziku kod druge generacije nasljednih govornika. Kanada je multikulturalna država na službenoj razini, a uloge hrvatskog i engleskog jezika jasno su odijeljene te postoji izražena neravnoteža u položaju dvaju jezika i u njihovoj upotrebi. Dok je engleski dominantan ili većinski jezik (jedan od dvaju službenih jezika Kanade), hrvatski je nasljedni ili manjinski jezik. Premda postoje mnoge studije o različitim nasljednim jezicima, o hrvatskom kao nasljednom jeziku u Kanadi malo se zna zbog čega je nužno pobliže ispitati razvoj hrvatskoga kao nasljednog jezika i opisati jezične prakse. Podatci na kojima se temelji ova studija potječu iz dvaju izvora: popisa stanovništva Kanade i sociolingvističkog istraživanja upitnikom u hrvatskoj zajednici na širem području grada Toronta. Kako bi se opisale jezične prakse u zajednici i stvorio lingvistički profil nasljednoga govornika hrvatskoga, studija se usredotočuje na sljedeće teme: stjecanje jezičnih vještina na engleskom i hrvatskom, upotreba dvaju jezika u svakodnevnom životu, učenje nasljednog jezika i stavove o očuvanju nasljednog jezika.

Ključne riječi: jezični kontakt, jezični dodir, nasljedni jezik, hrvatsko-engleska dvojezičnost, hrvatski jezik, Kanada