

Researchers study second language loss in elderly

Imagine coming to Canada as a young adult from a country where English is not spoken. Over the years, you work hard to learn English and, using it every day of your life, end up speaking it well. As you become elderly, however, you begin to lose your ability to communicate in your second language and, often without noticing, find yourself speaking your native tongue. You might think you are speaking English, but those around you hear more and more elements of your first language coming through.

The phenomenon of language loss has caught the attention of two McMaster professors who are determined to explore how and why this occurs.

After observing second language loss in their own mothers who were native speakers of Italian and Polish, Dr. Vikki Cecchetto and Dr. Magda Strojnska of the Department of Linguistics and Languages are researching the occurrence of second language loss in the aging population. In other words, how non-native speakers who learned English and used it competently in adulthood, begin to lose elements of the language in their elderly years, reverting to their native tongue.

To study this process, Cecchetto and Strojnska plan to conduct informal interviews with individuals -- specifically, first generation Canadians who are native speakers of Italian or Polish -- living in healthcare facilities where English is spoken and residents have no choice but to use their second language.

Additionally, the researchers are interested in defining the communicative barriers that exist between immigrant patients and healthcare providers.

"This is the application of linguistics to urgent real-life problems," says Strojnska.

Stemming from their research in diasporas and language identity (looking at languages in exile and how speakers identify with language change), the preliminary stages of this project have been underway for the past few years.

Now Cecchetto and Strojnska are organizing a session to highlight their research at the 2008 Cultural Intersections Symposia: Beyond Diasporas. The conference is hosted by the European Research Centre at Kingston University, England.

The researchers welcome student involvement with this research endeavour. Since it is an interdisciplinary project, students from all programs are encouraged to assist, such as those in Linguistics, Communication Studies, Gerontology and Health Studies.

Students can be involved in all stages of the project, from transcription and data collection to final analysis. It may even be an opportunity for students to achieve credit for their work as part of an applied placement course in their program.

Since the study of language loss is a new focus that affects so many people, it is no wonder Cecchetto and Strojnska are determined to go further with their research.

"In a multicultural country with an aging immigrant population, understanding what is really being said by immigrants is becoming extremely important," says Cecchetto.

Source: McMaster University

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