Influence of American English on second generation Lao immigrant speakers

VINCENT CHANETHOM

Exposure to English affects the language of Laotians in Texas across generations

Introduction

For many centuries, the United States has opened its doors to a variety of immigrants throughout the globe, engendering situations that Fishman (2004: 406) characterizes as 'pluralistic societal impact.' Upon coming to America, twentieth century immigrants found themselves immersed in a context in which not only their cultures clashed with that of the U.S., but also their mother tongues interacted with American English. The language patterns resulting from such interactions between immigrants' native languages and American English has been of great interest to the linguistic research community for the past several decades. For instance, research in the field of language contact has been particularly marked by the influential work undertaken by Thomason and Kaufman (1988) in which they developed a model to predict the nature of these contact-induced changes and to examine the mechanism by which these changes emerge.

In their model to account for the linguistic outcome of language contact, Thomason and Kaufman (1988) differentiate between two major processes: language shift and language maintenance. Language shift is defined as a community shifting from one language to another. Language attrition is a process often associated with language shift. Lambert and Freed (1984) define the process of language attrition as the 'loss of any language or any portion of language by an individual or speech community' (p.1). The definition of language attrition provided by Lambert and Freed (1984) encompasses not only the loss of an individual's L1 during L2 acquisition, but also the loss of a community's language as a result of language shift. Here, language attrition is inextricably tied to language shift. Clyne (1986), however, separates the notions of language attrition and language shift, arguing that language attrition may be defined as a loss at the structural level of the language, while language shift is a loss at the functional level, i.e., the replacement of one language with another with respect to language use. As Köpke (2004) notes, 'language change, shift and death typically take place in bilingual communities across generations, whereas the term "attrition" is used to refer to individual language loss

VINCENT CHANETHOM is a PhD candidate in Linguistics at New York University, where he is currently carrying out research in the field of child bilingual acquisition. He completed a Master's degree in English literature and civilization with a specialty in African-American history at the Université de Savoie, France, and a Master's degree in Linguistics at Syracuse University, New York, with an emphasis on language acquisition. He taught French as a foreign language in various institutions in France and in the US, and also leads yearly pedagogical workshops at Princeton University on the use of articulatory phonetics in teaching French. His research interests include cross-linguistic interactions in bilingual speech and language contact in Lao immigrant communities in the US. Email: vincent44@nyu.edu

doi:10.1017/S0266078410000179

and consequently takes place within one generation' (p. 3). In the current study, language attrition, viewed as a separate process to language shift, is considered internal to language shift. In other words, you cannot get language shift without language attrition.

Speakers of an immigrant community in the U.S., for example, may take a long time to shift. The speakers of such a community enter a bilingual stage, in which both their native language and American English is used, and may remain in that stage for several centuries. For so long as it remains in the bilingual stage, the immigrant speech community is said to have successfully maintained its native language. However, as mentioned by Dorian (2004), such situations are usually short-lived, and language shift, rather than language maintenance, is regarded as the norm (Fishman, 2004). Thomason and Kaufman (1988) claimed that this bilingual stage may vary according to a number of social factors, which include the relative population size of the speech community, the length of contact with the target language, and the degree of bilingualism attained by the group. For instance, Spanish-speaking communities in rural areas of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona successfully maintained their native language over six to eight generations because they were 'sufficiently independent economically and sufficiently isolated spatially' (Fishman, 2004: 409). In the great majority, however, the English language represents such a significant part of people's lives within immigrant communities that it is likely to take over as the primary linguistic tool for both intra- and inter-group communication, especially for second-generation speakers. Thus, it is not uncommon to hear immigrant parents mention their children's ungrammatical use of their native language, or the fact that they respond to them in English although they were spoken to in their native language.

The goal of the current study is twofold. First, it aims at determining whether or not children of immigrants are affected by their exposure to American English in a homogeneous way. If not, what are the possible factors at the origin of such variation among the post-first generation speakers? Second, the study also aims at expanding previous research on language contact to a far less studied speech community, namely the Lao immigrant community of Amarillo, Texas. Before discussing the methodology involved in the current study, a brief background description about the Lao American community is provided.

The Lao immigrant community

The current research is concerned with the Lao immigrant community, an Asian American subgroup that has not received much attention in the literature. By immigrating to the United States, Lao native speakers became not only geographically but also linguistically disconnected from their native land Laos. Laotian Americans constitute one of the most recent immigrant populations in the United States. Along with Vietnamese and Cambodians, Laotians sought refuge in the United States in the 1970s and the 1980s as a consequence of the Vietnam War that ended in 1975. Due to its strategic border with Vietnam, Laos became a battleground between the U.S. and the North Vietnamese during the war. According to Tollefson (1989), the United States alone dropped 2,092,900 tons of bombs on Laos during that time period, which caused approximately 25% of the population to become refugees (Savada, 1994).

Kelly (1986) identified three waves of Laotian migration into the United States. The first refugees arrived in 1975 as part of an American-sponsored evacuation plan and were placed in refugee camps established directly on the U.S. mainland.[1] The second wave of refugees arrived within the two years following the end of the war after spending a considerable amount of time (from two to five years) in U.N.-sponsored refugee camps in Thailand. Both waves were composed of highly educated people from the urban areas of Laos who had been collaborating with the U.S. military. The third wave, on the other hand, arrived after 1978 and was in the great majority (but not exclusively) composed of people from rural areas including both the Hmong from the Highlands and the Lowland Lao. The majority of the people interviewed in the current study are Lowland Lao from the third wave.

In 2007, the U.S. Census Bureau recorded 221,420 Laotians[2] living in the United States. Among the total population of Laotian Americans reported during that year, 57.4% were born in Laos. In Amarillo, Texas, the Laotian community represents less than 1% of the city's population, which is estimated at 185,525 people (US Census Bureau, 2006).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Iowa Beef Processors (IBP), today part of Tyson Foods, built a plant in Amarillo in the 1970s, which drew the Lao refugees to the city, because the factory was known to hire many people with no prior U.S. education. Therefore, the opening of the IBP factory in Amarillo presented itself as a major access to economic stabilization for the Lao community. Lao refugees were, in the great majority, illiterate in English and were limited, therefore, with regard to the jobs they could acquire. Factory jobs in disassembly lines, like the ones offered in such meat packing plants, enabled the Laotian refugees to enter the labor market with very limited or no knowledge of English. For the most part, the Laotians clustered in the northeastern part of the city, at its very extremity, in the proximity of the meat packing plant.

The grouping of Laotian households in that part of the city enables not only the use of the Lao language beyond one's own family but also the practice of Lao culture. In response to the growing number of Laotian inhabitants in that neighborhood, a Lao Buddhist temple was built. Numerous Lao restaurants and grocery stores emerged and are still emerging within (as well as outside of) the community, which created new work opportunities other than the factory jobs offered at the IBP/Tyson Foods plant. In the current study, all participants live in Lao-speaking households. Outside of their respective homes, they also use Lao at the temple and in Laotian-owned grocery stores. At work, however, English is used as the main language for communication, unless the workplace is occupied by a majority of Laotian employees. As for the children, especially among the younger ones, it is fairly common to notice that Lao is used with the parents, while English or a mixed code is used between siblings.

With respect to the relative amount of contact someone in the Amarillo Lao immigrant community has with English, there is a clear pattern defined by the age of the person's arrival into the country. People who were born in Laos but arrived in the U.S. as adults entered the work force and held jobs that required only limited knowledge of English. Those who work at the IBP meat plant have much less exposure to English than those who hold jobs in restaurants, which were not exclusively within the community. On the other hand, people born in the U.S., or who came to the U.S. as children (under six years old), were able to attend school and, therefore, have much more exposure to English, which allows them access to higher-paying jobs. Finally, people who arrived in the U.S. when over the age of fifty are usually granted access into the country under the *Family Reunification Program* of the immigration service, which allows them to join their families already established in Amarillo. These people typically do not work and do not feel the need to learn English, as they are taken care of by their working relatives both linguistically and financially.

The study

In order to investigate the extent to which speakers of the Amarillo Lao immigrant community are influenced by American English grammar, the current research focuses on the cross-linguistic differences by which particular noun phrases are constructed when counting items. In English, the numeral immediately precedes the noun when quantifying count nouns, as in 'two dogs.' However, when quantifying mass nouns, i.e. uncountable nouns such as 'furniture,' 'news,' or 'water,' an additional word occurs between the noun and the numeral, as illustrated by examples (1) and (2). Example (2) shows the ungrammatical construction of a noun phrase using a mass noun.

(1) John bought two pieces of furniture
(2) *John bought two furnitures

By contrast, in Standard Lao, this additional word is used in combination with numerals to quantify not only mass nouns as in American English, but also countable nouns. The use of this additional word, labeled as a 'numeral classifier' (CL) in the literature (Aikhenvald, 2000), is exemplified below.

(3) kuu suu paa song too[3]
1SG buy fish two CL
'I bought two fish' *Laotian* (Enfield, 2004: 118)

Enfield (2004) is the only study that provides a thorough analysis of the properties of numeral classifiers in Lao. Enfield claims that there are up to 100 numeral classifiers, and his study presents 'the standard pattern' (Enfield, 2004:118) in which they are used for enumerating countable entities (see Appendix A for a representative list of numeral classifiers in Lao). As also shown in Enfield's (2004) study, the classifier in Lao not only follows syntactic constraints, by which its presence is required when a numeral is used, it is also subject to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press

semantic constraints governed by the noun being counted. That noun imposes selection restrictions on what classifier to use. At a more general level, classifiers categorize the nouns they modify with respect to animacy or inanimacy. Animate objects are divided into human and non-human categories, while inanimate objects are further divided into categories based on their visual appearance: shape, size, and consistency (Burusphat, 2007). A semantic mismatch between the noun and the classifier leads to ungrammaticality, as exemplified in the following example.

(4) maa song too/*khon/*phuu[4]/*qong
dog two CL_{animal}/CL_{human}/ $CL_{human\text{-}singular}$/$CL_{religious\text{-}person}$
'Two dogs'

As shown in example (4), *maa* 'dog' is an animate object. Among the four possible classifiers that denote animacy, *too*, *khon*, *phuu*, and q*ong*, only *too* is possible in that quantifier phrase, because it specifically denotes a non-human living entity.

In the current study, speech samples were obtained from twenty native speakers of Lao from the Lao immigrant community of Amarillo, Texas, to see whether they were likely to implement the American English grammar rule when quantifying count nouns in their native language or whether they retained a Lao-based rule of noun phrase construction. It is hypothesized that if the American English rule were used when using Lao, the numeral classifier would be dropped. On the other hand, if the Lao rule were employed, the numeral classifier would be retained. Another alternative hypothesis would also be that even though speakers of that immigrant community employ numeral classifiers when quantifying nouns in Lao, their exposure to American English may influence them in such a way that they use a classifier variant that is not conventionally used for the noun being counted. For instance, instead of using the classifier for human beings *khon* to count children, they may use *too,* the classifier for animals, which would be semantically incongruent.

The twenty speakers were drawn from three different generations: first generation, 1.5 generation, and second generation. Eight people (four females and four males) constituted the first generation, in which all speakers were born in Laos and arrived in the U.S. as adults (age range: 44–88 years old). The 1.5 generation, on the other hand, was composed of four people (two females and two males) who were also born in Laos, but arrived in the U.S. as children under the age of 6 (age range: 24–32 years old). Finally, eight people (5 females and 3 males) constituted the second generation, in which the speakers were all born in the U.S. (age range: 12–26 years old).

The data for the study were elicited through sociolinguistic interviews, which took place in the participants' homes and were conducted in Lao. Each interview consisted of two sections. It began with casual conversation (about 30 to 45 minutes) and was followed by a picture-naming task (about 10 to 25 minutes). During the casual conversation, a number of topics including childhood, school experiences, friends, family and religion (among other topics) were initiated. Since this part of the interview was a free conversation, the interviewer (or interviewee) was free to initiate any topic at any time. The casual nature of the conversation allowed the elicitation of more spontaneous speech samples. The data were analyzed for statistical significance using the Goldvarb X program (version 3) developed by Sankoff, Tagliamonte, and Smith (2005).

Results and discussion

Overall, the analysis yields results that confirm a situation of language shift toward English. As indicated in table 1, while first generation immigrants strongly favor the use of standard classifiers when they are required (92.4%), speakers of later generations, namely their children, are more likely to employ alternatives such as using non-standard variants or dropping the classifier (62.5% standard classifier use for generation 1.5, and 37.3% standard classifier use for the second generation).[5] This result is not surprising given that children go to school and are more likely to receive more exposure to American English than their parents (see Table 1).

Most interestingly, however, the results also indicate that children of Lao immigrants do not exhibit similar patterns with respect to classifier use. First, those who were born in Laos and arrived in the U.S. as children (1.5 generation) use standard classifiers with higher frequency than those who were born in the U.S. (second generation). Another distinction between the two groups concerns the cases in which they do not use the standard classifier when required.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Table 1: Analysis of the contribution of generation to the probability of standard classifier use, non-standard classifier use and classifier dropping.

	standard classifier*		non-standard classifier**		classifier dropping***		N
	factor weight	%	factor weight	%	factor weight	%	
Generation 1	0.78	92.4%	0.15	0.7%	0.30	6.9%	145
Generation 1.5	0.32	62.5%	0.70	8.3%	0.71	29.2%	48
Generation 2	0.15	37.3%	0.92	31.3%	0.73	31.3%	83
Total							276

*Overall frequency: 70.7%; Input probability: 0.78; Log likelihood: –125.540

**Overall frequency: 11.2%; Input probability: 0.037; Log likelihood: –71.341

*** Overall frequency: 18.1%; Input probability: 0.15; Log likelihood: –116.962

Speakers in the 1.5 generation and the second generation do not differ in the extent to which they drop the classifier when one is needed. However, when a classifier is being used, second generation speakers are far more likely than those of the 1.5 generation to use a non-standard variant, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The reasons for such differences among the children in the Lao immigrant community are yet to be defined. Contrary to speakers of the second generation, who were born in the U.S., those of the 1.5 generation (in this study) were born in Laos, but arrived in the U.S. between three and four years old. They arrived in the U.S. at such a young age that one would not expect them to be any different from those who were born in the U.S. In his discussion of bilingual families, Hazen (2001) addresses this linguistic difference among the children of immigrants. He argued that older siblings may be more socially connected to the parents, while younger ones may be more socially integrated to the dominant speech community. This effect of age among the immigrant children population is especially strong in families of recent immigration. Following his argument, since 1.5 generation speakers are most likely to be the oldest siblings in the Lao family, they may be more connected to their parents, i.e., first generation immigrants. This is reflected through their rates in standard classifier use. On the other hand, second generation speakers are usually the youngest siblings in the family, and therefore, may have a stronger social connection with the dominant group, which is reflected through the high rates of non-standard classifier use.

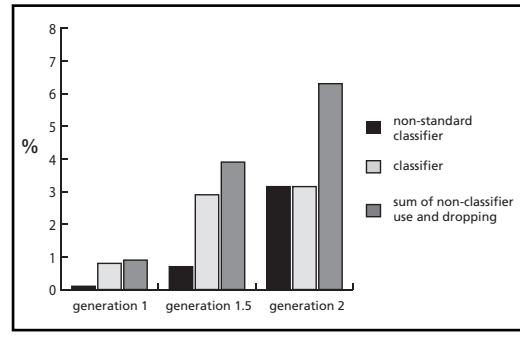

Figure 1: Frequencies in non-standard classifier use and classifier dropping by generation

Finally, the results of the current study also showed another distinction between the two groups with respect to gender. While the gender-based difference among the second generation speakers was not meaningful, the analysis revealed a sharp difference between the female and male speakers in generation 1.5.[6] Female speakers of that generation pattern like first generation speakers with high frequencies of standard classifier use. By contrast, the classifier use pattern for male speakers of that generation resembles that of second generation speakers with relatively low rates of standard classifier use. This pattern is illustrated in figure 2, below.

With respect to the gender-based difference among the Lao speakers of the 1.5 generation, a comparable gender-based distinction may be found in Zentella's (1997) study of Puerto Rican children in New York. Although Zentella's investigation differs greatly from the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press

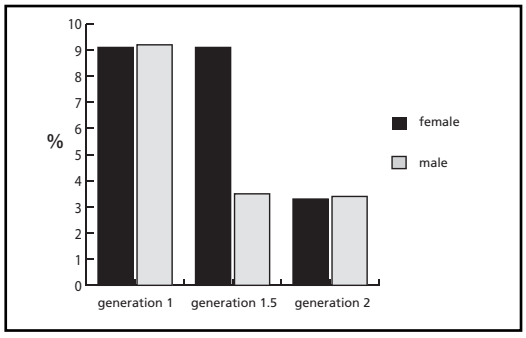

Figure 2: Rates of classifier use by gender and generation

current study, because it reports on whether children acquire Puerto Rican Spanish in general while the current study focuses on a specific characteristic of the Lao language, her argument for a gender-based network difference to account for distinct general language behaviors among heritage speakers seems to be applicable for the distinct behaviors in Lao classifier use of the current study as well. Zentella argued that female and male Puerto Rican children in New York grow up in distinct networks, which has a great effect on the amount of Spanish they use.

Similar to Zentella's Puerto Rican girls, Lao girls are not only expected to participate in household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of younger children, but are also more expected to attend religious services than the boys. All these activities not only enable girls to have more exposure to the Lao language than boys, but they also make them candidates for the transfer of the Lao culture and traditions. This claim is in line with Piller and Pavlenko (2004: 499) who argued that 'images of ideal femininity place women firmly inside the community, making them the transmitters of the home language, and of cultural, ethnic, and religious traditions.' However, in the current study, the group of 1.5 generation speakers was composed of only four people. This limits the conclusions that one can draw regarding the gender differences found in the results.

Representative list of some common classifiers discussed in Enfield (2004)

*Classifier**	*Meaning as noun*	*Semantics and example referents*
koon	lump	lumps of mass which naturally occur (e.g. pieces of ice, rocks)
sen	line	ribbon/strip/cord-shaped things (e.g. roads, cables)
khon	person	people, excluding monks (e.g. teachers, children, men)
too	body	non-human entities with 'bodies' (e.g. dogs, snakes, shirts)
ton	plant	living plants (e.g. bushes, shrubs, trees)
toon	piece, hunk	lumps of soft mass which are hewn (e.g. pieces of meat)
nuaj	unit	round things, assembled things (e.g. apples, chairs, mountains)
phuun	soft sheet	cloths and similar objects (e.g. tablecloths, skirts, tarpaulins)
pheen	stiff sheet	stiff/hard flat things (e.g. sheets of dried noodle, LP records)
khan	handle	things with handles, operated by hand (e.g. vehicles, umbrellas)
met	grain	very small grains (e.g. seeds, specks)
lam	—	very large cylindrical things (e.g. tree-trunks, boats, airplanes)
lang	back	houses, certain fish traps
hua	head	books, non-fruit bulbous vegetables
qan	—	small things which can be held in hand
daang	square fish net for dipping	any net with evenly spaced holes (fish nets, mosquito nets)
lem	—	teeth, candles
qong	—	monks
taa	eye	rice seedling-beds
maan	ear of grain	corn cobs, rice 'ears'

*Lexical tones are not represented

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current study is an attempt to analyze the effect of exposure to American English on the speakers of the Lao immigrant community of Amarillo, Texas, which is an understudied subgroup within the Asian American community in the United States. Using the cross-linguistic differences by which the two languages construct noun phrases when counting nouns, the results show that the Lao immigrant community is no exception in the case of language shift. The children of immigrants did not show the same pattern of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press

classifier use as their parents. Unsurprisingly, post-first generation speakers showed greater influence of American English grammar rules in the way they quantify nouns in Lao than their parents, which was indicated by their great likelihood to either drop the numeral classifier or use non-standard variants. Most interestingly, the results of the current study revealed that post-first generation speakers may pattern in a heterogeneous way on the basis of where they were born (in Laos or in the United States), and on the basis of gender. However, the study calls for more data to fully support the hypothesis that the differences found between the first generation and later generation speakers, and the differences among the post-first generation speakers of the Amarillo Lao immigrant community, are indeed due to language contact with American English. There is a serious need of more investigation to better understand the dynamics of language contact that takes place within that immigrant community. ■

Notes

1 Resettlement of first wave Lao refugees was done in the proximity of the four holding centers on the U.S. mainland located in Pennsylvania, Florida, California, and Arkansas (Kelly, 1986).
2 This number does not include the Hmong people who migrated from the Highlands of Laos. A total of 183,265 Hmong were reported in the 2005 American Community Service report issued by the U.S. Census Bureau.
3 However, Enfield (2004) also reported some very rare exceptions where the classifier is omitted. Enfield could not offer an explanation as to why some speakers dropped the classifier in those rare cases.
4 Both *khon* and *phuu* are classifiers used for nouns denoting human beings. The difference between the two classifiers is that *phuu* can only be used as a modifier classifier, while *khon* can be used as both a modifier or numeral classifier (see Enfield, 2004, for more details on modifier classifiers)
5 In addition to frequencies, Goldvarb factor weights are given in Table 1. Factor weight values greater than 0.5 indicate favoring by a constraint and values less than 0.5 indicate a disfavoring effect (0.5 is neutral).
6 Due to the low number of tokens for each generation, a Goldvarb analysis of gender by generation was not carried out.

References

Aikhenvald, A. 2000. *Classifiers: A Typology of Noun Categorization Devices*. Oxford: University Press.

Burusphat, S. 2007. 'Animate classifiers in Tai languages.' *International Journal of the Sociology of Language,* 186, 109–24.

Clyne, M. 1967. *Transference and Triggering.* The Hague: Nijhoff.

Dorian, N. 2004. 'Minority and endangered languages.' In T. Bhatia & W. Ritchie (eds.), *The Handbook of Bilingualism.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 437–59.

Enfield, N. 2004. 'Nominal Classification in Lao: A Sketch.' *Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung*, 57(2–3), 117–43.

Fishman, J. 2004. 'Language maintenance, language shift, and reversing language shift.' In T. Bhatia and W. Ritchie (eds.), *The Handbook of Bilingualism.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 406–36.

Hazen, K. 2001. 'The family.' In J. Chambers, P. Trudgill, & N. Schilling-Estes (eds.), *The Handbook of Language Variation and Change*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, pp. 500–25.

Kelly, G. 1986. 'Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s.' *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* 487, 138–49.

Köpke, B. 2004. 'Neurolinguistic aspects of attrition.' *Journal of Neurolinguistics* 17, 3–30.

Lambert, R. & Freed, B. 1984. 'The loss of language skills.' *American Anthropologist, New Series,* 86(1), March, 159–60.

Piller, I. & Pavelenko, A. 2004. 'Bilingualism and gender.' In T. Bhatia and W. Ritchie (eds.), *The Handbook of Bilingualism.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 489–511.

Sankoff, D., Tagliamonte, S., & Smith, E. 2005. *Goldvarb X: A Variable Rule Application for Macintosh and Windows.* Department of Linguistics, University of Toronto. Online at <http://individual.utoronto.ca/tagliamonte/Goldvarb/GV_index.htm> (Accessed February 4, 2009)

Savada, A. 1994. *A Country Study: Laos.* Online at <http://memory.loc.gov/frd/cs/latoc.html> (Accessed June 9, 2009)

Thomason, S. & Kaufman T. 1988. *Language Contact, Creolization, and Genetic Linguistics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tollefson, J. 1989. *Alien Winds: The Reeducation of America's Indochinese Refugees.* New York: Praeger.

U.S. Census Bureau. 2006. 'American Community Survey: Amarillo City, Texas.' Online at <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ADPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=16000US4803000&-qr_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_DP3YR5&-ds_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_&-_lang=en&-_sse=on> (Accessed July 10, 2009)

—. 2007. 'American Community Survey: Laotian alone or in any combination.' Online at <http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPCharIterationServlet?_lang=en&_ts=294007753390> (Accessed July 10, 2009)

Zentella, A. C. 1997. *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York.* Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078410000179 Published online by Cambridge University Press