

## Language interest is cyclical, expert says

JOAO FERREIRA, Standard-Times staff writer | Standard-Times

Portuguese shouldn't fear current trend ,

The first words Judite Fernandes' two children uttered were in Portuguese.

But as they grew up and attended public schools, their first language vanished. They could barely speak Portuguese by the time they graduated high school. Now 21 and 23, they hardly speak any Portuguese.

"They don't have too much interest in learning Portuguese," Mrs. Fernandes of New Bedford said.

"In high school my children took Spanish," she continued in Portuguese. "I don't know why. Maybe because their friends also took Spanish. Looking back, I feel a little guilty for not pushing my children."

Claudia Joaquim, 22, of New Bedford, also learned Portuguese before she learned English. But she never lost touch with her parents' language, even though she never took Portuguese in school.

The reason her parents, aunts and uncles couldn't really speak English.

"I never lost it. I still speak it to this day," Ms. Joaquim said. She also reads and writes with some fluency. "It's a big part of our heritage, it's a big part of who we are."

These two stories illustrate a conflict facing many immigrant parents and their children. While some children of immigrants keep up with the language, others lose interest or aren't encouraged to learn it.

At a time when Portuguese immigration has nearly halted, observers point out that with no incentive to keep the language alive, Portuguese-speakers will eventually

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Those concerns echo similar fears voiced by Madeira's Secretary of Education Francisco Vieira Fernandes, who said he found few people able to speak Portuguese during the recent Feast of the Blessed Sacrament.

"Of course, it's natural," said Miguel Moniz, an anthropology professor at UMass Dartmouth and Brown University. "Obviously, we have fewer immigrants."

However, he maintained that fears the number of Portuguese speakers is dwindling are "nonsense."

"People have been predicting for 100 years now the demise of the Portuguese language," he said.

It hasn't happened, he said. What has happened is that interest in the language and the heritage among the children of immigrants occurs in cycles. Today, contrary to some of the worries, there's a resurgence in interest, Mr. Moniz said.

"Portuguese identity is becoming important," he said. "There's more people at the PhD level studying these issues. All of a sudden it becomes important to be Portuguese."

The numbers seem to reflect Mr. Moniz's beliefs.

Nationally, the number of students studying Portuguese at the university level has risen by 21.6 percent since 1999, according to the Modern Language Association.

However, a Portuguese language option is not yet widely available in public school systems, despite laws requiring the teaching of heritage languages. When the language is available, not every child of every Portuguese immigrant takes advantage of it.

"Please don't do what I did; speak to them in Portuguese. When they go to school, have them learn Portuguese," Mrs. Fernandes cautioned.

"My friends, the ones that don't know how to speak Portuguese, they regret it," Ms. Joaquim said.

But there are those who argue that learning the heritage language is not as important as learning the culture.

from Fall River who doesn't speak Portuguese fluently. "The language, unfortunately, is always the first victim of integration."

In Ms. Gracia's case, learning the Portuguese culture has led to curiosity about the country's language. She now can read and speak some Portuguese.

"Once you learn the culture, it's an automatic step to the language," said Ric Oliveira, publisher of O Jornal, a bilingual publication in Fall River.

O Jornal has tried to prove that point.

Initially a Portuguese-only publication, it now runs its stories in English as well. That way, the paper also caters to those who don't know Portuguese but have an interest in the culture, ultimately enticing them to learn the language, Mr. Oliveira said.

Unlike when he was a child, Mr. Oliveira said, there are now more opportunities to learn Portuguese in the area than ever before.

"My first words, 'mummy and dad,' they were 'paizinho, maezinha,'" he said. "You go through the first 12 years (of schooling), you don't use it, you lose it. I spent pretty much the last 16 years relearning Portuguese.

"People no longer are separated from the culture by their language. Unfortunately, we had to take three steps back," he said.

Mr. Moniz said the argument for learning the language of one's immigrant parents, no matter what country they came from, is both philosophical and practical.

Today there's a sense of pride associated with one's heritage, whereas in the past it was the opposite, Mr. Moniz said. Knowing a second language could also lead to a job.

"Learning the language becomes one of the most fundamental ways of becoming part of the group," he said. "When learning language becomes a beneficial thing, people do it."

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area. It is the Americans who want to learn Portuguese to feel like they belong, he said.

"It becomes cool to be a person that speaks Portuguese," he concluded.

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