Language and Identity: 
The Construction of “Latino” in the United States

Mara Krilanovich

Sociology of Language
Dr. Sedique Popal
April 14, 2007
Spanish speakers are one of the fastest growing populations in California. This population shift has created a significant political movement in relation to bilingual education and the use of Spanish in the K-12 educational setting. Many proponents of bilingual education, including me, argue that the use of Spanish in the classroom is critical to the development of a healthy self-esteem and the development of a positive identity (Huang, 1992; Nieto, 2002).

Identity is a fluid construct related to race and culture and becomes salient during adolescence. A positive racial or ethnic identity is a critical component of developing a healthy and positive self-esteem. We all possess an identity, and we developed throughout our youth it in a variety of ways across time (Hubbard, 2003). We develop our own sense of identity from our parents, grandparents, our cousins, neighbors, coworkers, and even from strangers. Some identities are constructed when they are tied to a nation-state with an accompanying national language. For example, Colombians in Colombia readily identify themselves and are unified through one language: Spanish. Colombians, as do all immigrants from Latin America, reconstruct their identity when leave their homeland and move to the United States. At that point, they become part of a larger group of what are termed in the United States as Latinos. In this instance, the construction of identify is more difficult to incorporate into ones self-image, particularly for the person who is labeled as “other”.

Reifying the identity of a group as large and diverse as “Latino” is a virtually impossible challenge. Attempting to classify the overlapping cultural
aspects of the diverse range of cultures encapsulated by the term Latino is a task not taken up by many, and not taken lightly. What does it mean to be Latino? Does it mean that you can trace your ‘race’ to some heritage that spoke Spanish, and perhaps still does, somewhere in Latin America or Spain?

The development of a single notion of identity for those who we, as Americans, term Latinos is a complex matter and is one bound up in language. In one study, Ono (2002) provided fifteen different ethnic identifications for Latino students to choose from, these included “Mexican, Mexicano/a, Mexican American, Chicano/a, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Nuyorican/Neorican, Hispanic, Latino/a, Spanish, Spanish American, Raza, American, Hispano, and Other.” (p. 732). She found that identity was largely symbolic in nature, indicating that one is something other than ‘American’ (Ono, 2002). This symbolic identity is largely influenced by the surrounding network of others who share the same, or similar, ethnic origins (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004).

One important factor for groups of color is the use of a language that links individuals to each other to create a sort of bond. This, too, can add a layer of complexity. Arana (2001), when writing about identity, states, “imagine an African American, a Native American, and an Arab American all defining themselves as the same ethnic group because they grew up speaking the English. Imagine them calling themselves “Anglos” (p. 8). The use of Spanish, as opposed to English, is an important marker of identification with the Latino identity. Conversely, English use, is associated with a lower chance of
identification with an ethnic label (Ono, 2002). Baez (2002), when writing about his own linguistic and cultural experiences in relation to schooling, states that “[language] gives meaning to identity and culture (e.g., Puerto Rican or American), and to discrimination and oppression (e.g., exclusion, derision). Language regulates social existence” (p. 129). The idea that cultural identity is wrapped up in language can be traced back to Epicurious who posited that “members of different nationalities and ethnicities differ in their feelings and even their sensory perception of the world around them, and that these feelings and impressions are what produced their particular languages (Joseph, 2004, p. 43).

Saussure’s notion of signs and signifiers is relevant here as the process of understanding the concept of identity “in terms of names or signifiers on the one hand, and their associated meanings or signifieds on the other... the entire phenomenon of identity can be understood as a linguistic one” (Joseph, 2004, p. 12). Saussure considered language a social fact and that language, parole, or the language of the people as individuals within their community, as a differentiating factor between groups (Joseph, 2004, p. 49). This concept can be extended to language differences as a defining characteristic for a community.

Bourdieu takes this notion a step further in his analysis of identity, particularly ethnic identity, as a mental representation that is socially constructed using signs with associated meanings. He states:

“But on a deeper level, the quest for the ‘objective’ criteria of ‘regional’ or ‘ethnic’ identity should not make one forget that, in social practice, these
criteria (for example, language, dialect and accent) are the object of *mental representations*, that is, of acts of perception and appreciation, of cognition and recognition, in which agents invest their interests and the presuppositions, and of *objectified representations*, in things (emblems, flags, badges, etc.) or acts, self-interested strategies of symbolic manipulation which aim at determining the (mental) representation that other people may form of these properties and their bearers” (p. 220-221).

The social construction of identity tied to a language is not a recent development in our human history. Haarmann (1999) illustrates this historical link between language and identity in his illustration of the notion of “barbarian” in ancient Greek society. “The main criterion of a barbarian was his language, because the greek word barbaros means “a person who speaks inarticulately” (that is, a person who does not know Greek and speaks an unintellibile language)” (Haarmann, p. 65, 1999). That concept that language differences define who will, or will not, participate in the dominant society is certainly relevant in today’s American culture. It is this notion of language as a differentiator that makes it such a salient part of identity. The loss of language and culture, also known as assimilation, is generally not a desired goal for people of color in the United States.

If a positive ethnic identity is an important component of self-esteem, then the maintenance of language as an important symbolic element of cultural identity (Ferdman, 1990; Zimmerman, 2000) and is an important goal of culturally relevant pedagogy. Teachers must struggle with the fact that minority groups’ languages exist in a subordinate position to English which is related to notions of power and hegemony in the United States society (Garcia Bedolla,
The challenge is to value the language of the learner, because it is important for their social and psychological development.

The concept of assimilability into the white middle-class mainstream culture is also important when discussing Latino identity development and a differentiating factor when comparing Latino immigrants with earlier waves of European immigrants. Latinos are sometimes considered unassimilable (Ono, 2002) which is partially attributed to the fact that “most Latino subgroups in the United States are not isolated from their countries of origin...regular travel back to countries of origin when political conditions permit...migrants to take advantage of technological advances to maintain contact” (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004, p. 560). This regular contact with the countries of origin permits Latinos to maintain their ethnic identity, of which language is a critical part, once established, rather than completely conform to the values and cultural practices of the mainstream culture.

Interestingly, individuals may conform in certain situations, yet not in others based on their “perceptions regarding the instrumentality of particular behaviors in different contexts” (Ferdman, 1990, p. 191) thereby making the concept of assimilation a difficult one to define. Giles, in his research, found that the way that one speaks is a source of judgment for those who meet him (Joseph, 2004). This finding reinforces the stereotypes of Latinos who retain Spanish as a preferred language for communication and further marginalizes those Latinos who speak with accents as unassimilable.
The perceived lack of assimilation on the part of Latinos in the United States is not entirely one of choice, however, because “generations of exclusion and discrimination, full integration into mainstream society has been barred to them, making issues of ethnicity and identity highly salient” (Ontai-Grzebik & Raffaelli, 2004, p. 560). Ono (2002) posits that this feature of discrimination is the most important features of ethnic identity development. Trueba (2002) looks at this as a positive stating that “oppression and abuse can also generate precisely the opposite – resilience and cultural capital to succeed – which often creates the psychological flexibility necessary to pass for or assume different identities for the sake of survival” (p. 20).

The ideal of assimilation is reflected in our education system, which, in California, is built on the premise that an English-only curriculum is best. That ideal of speaking only English in order to conform to the ideals of the American society embodies the notions of what is considered subtractive (Valenzuela, 1999), rather than additive, bilingual education. In contrast, an additive approach to bilingual education, focuses on language maintenance. This assimilationist approach strips Latinos of their ethnic identity which is clearly wrapped-up in language.

While several states, including California, Massachusetts and Arizona, have mandated English-only programs, little or no evidence exists that those policies are pedagogically sound. In fact, there is much stronger evidence to the contrary. As a result, ill-informed legislation in California, Massachusetts and
Arizona enforce a sheltered English approach that leaves students behind academically and their self-esteem damaged (Combs, et. al, 2005). A meta-analysis of data on literacy programs demonstrated that bilingual programs which promote literacy and academic skills in two languages (often Spanish and English) are more successful than early-exit, sheltered instruction or English-only programs (Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005). It is these programs that have been essentially dismantled in California, Massachusetts and Arizona. These are also states where the fastest growing populations are non-native English speaking minorities. As a result, this legislation has created an educational crisis that is fraught with political and social overtones. Macedo (2000) cogently states, “simply put, proponents of the English-only movement work primarily to preserve the structures of a colonial system... [and] refuse to transform or even address the ugliness of human misery, social injustices, and inequalities” (p. 66). Ironically, bilingualism and biliteracy are valuable skills outside of the school environment (Nieto, 2002).

A shift to English, thus indicating a loss of the home language on the part of the student, also causes a disruption in the relationships between generations and can create a loss of intimacy between parents and their children (Combs, et. al, 2005). Forced monolingualism in these cases can have a lasting negative impact on the social and emotional development of minority youth, thus adding another compelling reason to foster biliteracy and bilingualism. Fortunately, there are institutions and programs that do just that. It is important then, as
educators, that we continue to support bilingual education and programs that support biliteracy, as they are critical to the educational and social success of our Latino youth.


