

The Role of Languagelessness in the Construction of the Hispanic Identity Experience

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the role of language (and “languagelessness”) within the construction of the Hispanic identity utilizing elements of Bucholtz and Hall’s article “Identity and Interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach” as a framework of understanding how language experiences shape the construction of identity. As the American construction of identity does not often account for the adaptation of pre-existing or conflicting identity integration, the construction of the Hispanic identity is a process that is riddled with multitudes of socioeconomic differences and injustices that center on the language experience. Since the United States did not have a need to adopt bilingual or multilingual tolerance, individuals seeking to retain their native language of Spanish while embracing the American identity may suffer ridicule from both the Hispanic communities they attempt to preserve and the American communities they aim to emulate. By applying the concept of “languagelessness” (Rosa, 2016) within the framework of Bucholtz and Hall’s “5 Principles of Linguistic Interaction” this paper explores the impacts of languagelessness on not only the individual but whole cultures and societies at large. Through the analysis of interview responses, this paper attempts to provide an explicit connection between languagelessness and socioeconomic injustices experienced within the construction of the Hispanic identity. Overall, this paper seeks to explore and elucidate the role of language in the greater socioeconomic landscape of American inequalities of Hispanic identity construction and the resulting Hispanic experience in America.

Keywords: *generational shift; assimilation; identity; culture; linguistic experience; bilingualism*

Introduction:

The construction of identity has been a longstanding practice of the United States. This practice, unique to the American experience, is an extension of the values of freedom upon which this nation was founded. As such, the construction of identity is woven into the fabric of what it means to be an American, and the degree to which one is able to construct an “ideal” American identity often impacts future successes in the American landscape. As the United States is a nation of immigrants, identity construction often comes with associated sacrifices as individuals must navigate ways to integrate new American traditions, cultures, and norms into their own already existing identities. In particular, the Hispanic identity is subject to extreme conflicting pressures from within its own community where the need to assimilate, combined with the need to preserve culture, results in a layered value system that heavily influences not only what it means to be Hispanic, but also dictates the experiences Hispanic individuals may be able to experience in the American landscape.

For instance, in an examination of Hispanic culture and identity, Laura Guglani found that older generations and younger generations hold conflicting definitions as to what it means to be “Hispanic” (Guglani). Through interviews, Guglani discovered that though older generations’ definition of Hispanic includes the ability to speak Spanish, younger generations reported that the identity is less related to language and more tied to heritage (Guglani). This could be a result of the reduced number of Spanish speakers in younger generations as a result of generational shift.

In a study by A. Suresh Canagarajah, language and cultural identities are subject to devaluation as English valuation rises, creating tension and pressure for migrants to join the social mainstream. Canagarajah’s article applies Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale to illustrate how and why immigrant families have difficulties retaining their ancestral languages when confronted by a dominant culture. The study utilizes interview data from Tamil speakers located in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada in order to demonstrate how Tamil speakers lose their language over just a few generations. This degradation of language within Tamil groups is largely due to pressures to “join the social mainstream” (Canagaraja, 2008). Canagaraja argues that the social pressure to assimilate into areas of linguistic majority (in this case Tamil as the minority and English as the majority) “forego language maintenance goals” (2008). The aim of the article is to highlight and provide insight into how Tamil families process stress regarding language and heritage.

M. Paul Lewis and Gary F. Simons had similar findings in their study that elaborate on the Fishman theory of Graded Intergenerational transmission. They also attribute Fishman’s scale to “Language Maintenance” (Canagaraja 2008) as a “key role of the intergenerational transmission” (2009) but go into further detail of GIDS explaining that “social factors” create “social places” and within these social places the preferred language becomes solidified within sociolinguistic structures. Lewis and Simon go on to explain how immigrant parents continue

this trend of language degradation results in generational language loss as values shift and transmission of languages becomes unstable.

Taking into account the destabilized valuation of language, it is no wonder that those within the Hispanic culture have difficulties defining what it means to be Hispanic. Kate H. Choi's "Who is Hispanic? Hispanic Identity Among African Americans, Asian Americans, Other, and Whites" attempts to uncover correlations between different types of Hispanic racial identities. Choi concludes that black and Asian Hispanics are less likely to identify as such indicating that when paired with another racial identity, the Hispanic identity may be less prominent (Choi).

In the wake of the inability to agree upon what makes one Hispanic, studies focus instead on the Hispanic experience and resulting identity construction. In one such study, Sean Valentine uses data from a hierarchical regression model of 110 Hispanic American university students finding that those most subject to assimilation and acculturation were from the younger generations and often held lower self-esteem (Valentine). This finding implies that along the road to identity construction, sociological, emotional, and psychological development may play a large role in one's ability to identify as Hispanic. Whether or not the Hispanic identity is based on heritage or language, there is no denying that one's ability to communicate effectively plays a prominent role in the emotional and psychological development of an individual.

In a year-long study featuring an immersion class at a small in a predominantly black and brown area of Texas, Cervantes-Soon, Degollado and Nuñez highlight the way that language impacts this type of development as language, and the ability to use it fluently and be understood impacts an individual's agency (Cervantes-Soon et. al). This change in agency results in changes to an individual's psychological and emotional development, and in the case of a loss of agency, individuals often lose self-confidence and have similar negative effects on emotional and psychological states (Cervantes-Soon et al). Though the immersion model featured in Cervantes-Soon et al's research was an attempt to bring bilingualism to the forefront of American identity, it is apparent that this method does not work as intended as the teaching strategies historically favor the white majority and are "westernized" and the resulting curriculums do not change as they are heavily influenced by standardized testing and capitalism. As alternative learning strategies are often still interwoven into a "white" fabric and design, there is a continued struggle for students of any color to attain an immersive bilingual experience within the formalized educational institute, and in attempting to provide such a solution without thoughtful solutions to address cultural language differences, the Texas immersive model proved to have a negative impact on not only the Hispanic students, but all students appeared to have lowered self-esteem (Cervantes-Soon et al).

This is perhaps due to the history of bilingualism in the United States. In David Nieto's "A Brief History of Bilingualism in the United States", Nieto discusses the ways in which immigrants were stripped of their native languages as each new generation was taught to assimilate and language was seen as a major barrier for status (Nieto). This kind of language loss

occurred over the course of 3 generations as Mexican Native American and African American areas of the country were always given lower status by the US government leading to reduced access to resources and increased poverty due to cultural and language differences (Nieto). As such, new generations were taught to assimilate and abandon their culture either by force or shame (Nieto).

The biggest difference between the United States' attempts at introducing bilingualism and that of other nations is that the rise of bi- or multilingualism in other nations was a natural occurrence born of necessity. Virginie Mamadouh of the University of Amsterdam, Netherlands centre for urban studies explains that due to the history of trading, multilingualism was always accepted (Mamadouh). Additionally, free movement of the European Union has also increased the demand for multilingual speakers (Mamadouh). Though both The United States and the Netherlands were built by immigrants, there was a need to be multilingual in Amsterdam that was not apparent in the United States as there was already a majority language (English) spoken by a large population. Simply put, Amsterdam needed these languages to survive, and the US did not.

As the need to integrate multiple languages was not crucial to the survival of America, the tolerance and acceptance of foreign languages were also not necessary, and as such Americans do not seem to hold bilingualism in high esteem. This lack of regard for bilingualism, combined with the established prominence of English as the official language of the United States, makes it easier for English-speaking Americans to write off those who speak other languages, in this case, Spanish, as less worthy of their time. This coupled with a high desire to fit in and build a "better life" for future generations has aided in the shifting value of Spanish-speaking communities wherein speaking Spanish is devalued in favor of heritage-based Hispanic identity. It is this phenomenon that drives the dive into understanding the way that "languagelessness" plays a role in shaping the constructed identities of, and resulting successes of, Hispanic individuals.

The main frameworks used to examine the relationship between language experience and identity are Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall's "5 Principles of Linguistic Interaction" which states that identity is a result of language and Johnathan Daniel Rosa's concept of "languagelessness" that highlights the importance of understanding the connection between race and language.

In Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, "Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach" Bucholtz and Hall focus on how language shapes the construction of identity using what they call the "5 Principles of Linguistic Interaction." This framework is built upon recognizing that identity is shaped by "local discourse" whereas previous theories centered more around the human mind and or "fixed social categories" (2006). The principles were designed for scholars to construct and evaluate language and identity through a wider lens. The *Emergence Principle* describes "identity [as] the product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices." This principle suggests that language and the human mind are reproduced in both spoken and written forms of communication. This theory also suggests that identity is

drawn from specific “linguistic interactions” (2006) and not the examination of signs and symbols during early stages of human language development. The *Indexicality Principle*, “encompass[es] macro-level demographic categories, temporary and interactionally specific stances...” or that language is associated with cultural “beliefs and values” (2005) constructed within a multitude of layers. The *Positionality Principle* proposes that “identities may be linguistically indexed through labels, implicatures, stances, styles, or linguistic structures and systems” (2005). This principle is mainly utilized when identifying roles within collectivist communities and different “social classes” (2005). The *Relationality Principle* indicates that “identities are relationally constructed through several, often overlapping, aspects of the relationship between self and other...” (2005). This theory argues identities are never formed by themselves and achieve significance when establishing communication with other parties during discourse. Bucholtz and Hall describe the *Partialness Principle* as identity being “part intentional, in part habitual and less than fully conscious, in part an outcome of interactional negotiation...” (2005). The Partialness Principle suggests that a person's identity is developed by interacting with others in linguistic discourse that are “relationally” connected. In this way, language and identity are indistinguishably linked in both micro and macro levels of conversational discourse and by using the 5 principles presented, I am better able to navigate social, ethnic, and cultural experiences of my subject while also examining personhood through recurring action and circumstances.

Jonathan Daniel Rosa's “*Standardization, Racialization, Languagelessness: Raciolinguistic Ideologies across Communicative Contexts*” focuses on the term “Languagelessness” (Rosa, 2016) and how it impacts self-worth and power within the hierarchical structures of society (more specifically within the Hispanic community). According to Rosa, there exists a “racialized relationship between ideologies of “language standardization” (2016). This relationship “call(s) into question...linguistic competen[cy] and... legitima[cy] of personhood” (Rosa, 2016). Because “Languagelessness” is a result of language standardization, languages can be considered a part of a hierarchical system. In the United States minority languages like Spanish are pushed down and out to the periphery and individuals who utilize these peripheral languages are subject to social isolation both by outside and inside influences (general public and familial communities). This suppression of identity often leads to a loss in communication between peers and family members which could contribute to instances where power is no longer applicable. Rosa continues the argument by claiming that the standardization of language largely contributes to a Hispanic person's inability to be recognized as both a proficient speaker of Spanish or English and therefore impacts their identity negatively excluding them from both communities (American and Hispanic identities). Rosa also notes that if one can overcome the “language barrier” (2016) then there would not be “issues of inequality in terms of education, employment, housing, health care, the criminal justice system, electoral politics, etc” (2016) to be false as other marginalized groups face similar instances of injustice and do not experience the same difficulties as the Hispanic community.

By adopting Bucholtz and Hall's framework and adding in Rosa's concept of languagelessness, I am equipped to examine the construction of my subject's identity and better understand her relationship and experience as a Hispanic American. In the following section, I describe my methods and provide a conclusion about the role of language in the construction of the Hispanic identity.

Methodology:

The study consisted of a single interview. The interview was conducted on the 24th of April 2021. The subject interviewed was a 20-year-old female who self-identifies as a first-generation American. Both of her parents were born in El Salvador. The interview lasted approximately 20 minutes and was conducted virtually through the video conferencing tool Zoom. 20 questions were prepared ahead of time and designed in alignment with Bucholtz and Hall's 5 principles of linguistic interaction." The following is an analysis of select questions and responses as they relate to the overarching study focus: In what ways does languagelessness impact the construction of the Hispanic identity and the resulting Hispanic experience in America?

Analysis:

The responses of the subject confirmed the findings of previous studies. In many cases, the subject indicated that language had in many ways defined her identity and that in turn had impacted her experiences in a larger social context. For example, the subject was asked to describe a time when she had identified as "White" as opposed to "Hispanic". The subject indicated that she had in fact done so while in Elementary school. She reported that "when people asked where I was from I would say Maryland knowing what they really meant was where is your family from." This response illustrates the way that identity can be partially disclosed dependent upon situation or circumstance confirming a fractured identity that is relational and contextual (partialness principle) (Bucholtz and Hall). This indicates that the ability to pass and identify as "White" was more desirable to the subject than was to preserve her "Hispanic" identity. Again this aligns with theories that suggest language valuation results in cultural loss over time (Canagarajah). The subject continues to explain that there were times when speaking Spanish received negative reactions. She recalls being at a soccer tournament and being shushed while speaking Spanish, but having no similar experience when switching to English and speaking at the same volume levels. When describing the experience she recalled that "it was the way they were looking at us". This othering due to language difference is an illustration of languagelessness wherein the Spanish language has been marginalized and therefore pushed to the periphery of the standardized hierarchical language system. In doing this, the subject, and presumably other Hispanic Spanish speakers, are cast aside not only in situations

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of communication but also in human valuation (Rosa).

The subject then was asked about her relationship with Spanish and whether or not there was a time she had stopped using it altogether. After confirming that she had stopped speaking Spanish and explaining that she had done so because she “thought [her] accent was strange and [she] wasn’t pronouncing words correctly. It was really frustrating...[and] it just made it easier” she continued to describe the problems that arose from her choice to speak in only English. Within her community, she was ostracized and even her own parents felt she was abandoning her heritage. Though her decision was influenced by frustration and embarrassment over her Spanish accent when speaking English, she later experienced embarrassment when speaking Spanish due to a lack of accent. She also indicated that by giving up her language, she felt like she had given up a piece of her identity.

In each response given and many of the described experiences of the subject, the 5 principles intersect with the concept of languagelessness to further confirm the notion that the Hispanic experience and construction of identity is largely influenced by language experience. In all cases, Spanish only, fully bilingual, or English only language usage, Hispanic individuals must account for their language use and proficiency before they can begin to construct identity.

Discussion:

Hispanic identity construction in America, though complex and multifaceted, appears to hinge on the ability to overcome language inconsistencies between the inherited identity and language (in this case Spanish) and the adopted one (English). When able to “pass”, language experience still appears to impact “personhood” as acceptance or rejection of legitimacy is often a result of the ability to speak and communicate fluently, including dialect and accent. In order to access agency and power, therefore, it seems that language plays a large role in providing equity especially to those individuals in Hispanic communities who must overcome issues of self-confidence and emotional/psychological/social development. These internalized messages are shaped by the messages of valuation placed upon the Spanish language in regards to the English language and in this way, language valuation and the languagelessness associated with Spanish speaking Hispanic communities plays a role in perpetuating injustices as devaluing a language encourages the abandonment of said language and an eventual devaluing a culture at large.

Conclusion:

If the study were expanded to include multiple subjects, and the results continued to align with the finding that Hispanic languagelessness shapes not only the Hispanic identity, but the result experiences of discrimination and injustice, there would be sufficient evidence to indicate that the United States does have a necessity to adopt a multilingual tolerance. If language plays

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such a large role in the development of identity, and the construction of identity is such a highly valued American tradition, it stands to reason that the inclusion of language identity would also be so valued. As that is not the case, perhaps with further research into how language relates to identity construction and resulting experiences of discrimination there may come a day where valuation-based injustices may be addressed.

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