**The Sounds of Identity:
A Case Study on Mexican American College Students in Texas**

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Bio:

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Abstract:

This article discusses how language use reflects the identity of Mexican-American college students in Texas. Eight Texan college students were interviewed. The length of time students' families resided in the US was quite variable; the amount of Mexican heritage varied somewhat. These factors predicated neither the students' use and knowledge, nor their exposure to the range of the languages associated with youths of Mexican heritage living the US. The “Social Identity Theory” and “Language-Centered Perspective on Culture” (Johnson, 2000) approaches were used in the conceptualization of the role of language in identity construction and to analysis of the data. The results of this study show how Mexican-American college students use language to portray their identity and membership to social groups. I found that for some Mexican-American college students the use of Spanish was necessary for their portrayal of their Latino identity. This research has implications for future research that explores the language use and identities of Mexican-American college students from other areas in the U.S.

Introduction

Humans have always had to find a balance between membership in their larger society and their sense of themselves as individuals (Weigert, Teitge & Teitge, 1986). Because of the competing desire for a sense of uniqueness and the wish to be part of a group, identity persists to be an important aspect of human life. According to Giddens (1991) one's perception of one's self is always changing. Never stagnant, it is always being refined as one grows. Throughout life everyone constantly asks himself or herself 'who am I?' In the case of second and third-generation migrants around the world, the answer may be more complex than you might expect. According to Mleczko (2010) some members of migrant groups encounter issues of being so different that they never completely resolve their identity issues vis-à-vis their new homelands.

In the case of some Latino communities in the U.S., the scaffold of identity construction is on a shaky ground for a multitude of reasons. Several of the issues they face are due to the extensive historical context of their presence on 'U.S. territory.' Their history of residency and immigration has been the center of politically prominent social and cultural issues that appear in the media. Issues of 'what should we be called?', 'belonging,' nativism, population growth and language use causes prejudices against and within the community. Sayings like "This is America. Here we speak English" and legislation bills such as Arizona's Senate Bill 1070 have fueled uproars within communities and persuaded some to take a strong stand for their "Latinidad" and others to not teach their children their mother tongue.

These issues deeply involve and influence the individual/social identities and language use of U.S. born Latinas/os every day. Ilan Stavans (1995) describes this situation as "life in the hyphen" to signify the constant struggle between two identities,

American and ‘Hispanic’ (as cited in Johnson 2000, p.160). The purpose of this paper is to explore the salient aspects of language use and its reflection on how and why college students of Mexican heritage identify themselves. Specifically, I will examine communal and individual uses and choices of language alongside the social identities of college students of Mexican heritage.

I have developed an approach that draws from the fields of social psychology and linguistics. From the field of social psychology I used the “Social Identity Theory.” This theory asserts that as individuals, humans define themselves in reference to social group membership (national, ethnic, religious, etc.) based on attributes and characteristics that can be associated with a specific identity. These group attributes and characteristics are then used to create a value of identity within society (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Goar, 2007). Specifically, I used this theory with respect to language as a characteristic used for distinction in negotiating membership into social groups.

From the field of linguistics I used the “Language-Centered Perspective on Culture” theory coined by the sociolinguist Fern Johnson (2000). Johnson approaches the use of language in a holistic manner and asserts that “all communication bears cultural origins, conveys cultural meanings, and is interpreted through cultural frameworks” (Johnson, 2000, p. 58). Specifically, I extracted the idea that language and communication are keys to the creation, maintenance and change of human culture.

Using the theoretical approaches described above as a foundation, the following sections will address social identity construction, language and identity, the languages U.S. born Mexican-Americans use and how using Spanish and other dialects of English in the U.S. affect identity.

Background

The literature on the identity construction via language use is extensive. Below I will provide a brief summary of the pertinent literature on social identity construction, language and identity, and common languages U.S. born Mexican-Americans use. Before

moving on to my findings I conceptualize the use of Spanish and marginalized dialects of English in the U.S. and how it affects identity.

Social Identity Theory and Social Identity Construction

Based on the “Social Identity theory” social identity is defined as the membership in a socially constructed group or category (Kroskrity, 2000 as cited in Fuller, 2007). The groups that we belong to are created based on common attributes and characteristics that are collectively shared by others. According to Hogg and Abrams (1988) one’s membership and sense of belonging in a group has a significant effect on one’s personal individuality because the perception of who he/she is will be based on the defining characteristics of the group. These social groups have such a psychological impact on humans that they influence their behavior to such an extent that one’s valuing of their own group(s) sometimes causes the devaluing of other groups (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). The sense of pride and superiority derived from the valuing of one’s own social group can lead to prejudices, discrimination, and stereotyping of other groups. These attitudes and beliefs then play a large role in human interactions.

Relatively speaking these behaviors are the foundation for some of the issues pertaining to Latinas/os and their identity and language use within the United States. There exists prejudices against those who do not speak English or who speak English with an “accent” that is unfamiliar to others. There also exists stereotyping about skin complexion, professions, and origins. All these ideas about characteristics and attributes of the Latina/o community affect one’s perception of himself or herself and can cause people to fight for their group by demonstrating in public and/or rioting or choosing to identify themselves as something else that is more socially desirable.

Language and Identity

According to Lippi-Green (1997), “We exploit linguistic variation available to us in order to send complex series of messages about ourselves and the way we position ourselves in the world we live in. We perceive variation in the speech of others and we use it to structure our knowledge about that person” (p. 30).

Stated more succinctly, “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity-I am my language” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 59, as cited in Johnson 2000; p 177). Essentially the first sentence in this quote of Lippi-Green’s means that we, as human beings are not only users of a language but in some ways the language we speak is internalized into who we are. The reason for this is because language and communication are central to the creation, maintenance and change of culture (Johnson, 2000). Johnson’s (2000) “Language-Centered Perspective on Culture” theory asserts without language culture could not be expressed nor passed down through generations and so language, that is the rules and uses, is intertwined with our culture, which therefore, makes it intertwined with us. According to Gee (1992) language use often displays membership in a particular culture, social group or social network. In everyday speech we use our language to authenticate ourselves and delegitimize others (Shnek, 2007). A simple example of what I mean is the way professional jargon creates ingroups and outgroups.

Lippi-Green (1997) also asserts that language choice constructs our ideas about those with whom we interact. Johnson (2000) asserts that sounding “different” carries liabilities because within the larger society there are hegemonic ideas about specific patterns of speech. For example, Southern United States American English accents have been stereotyped as “dumb.” Johnson (2000) calls this “making nonlinguistic judgments about a person based on linguistic cues” (p 280). These ideas about language use and identity connect to the “Social Identity Theory” because here language use is being used as an attribute to create groups and distinguish others.

There are three important concepts to understand with language use and identity. First, it is not the mere use of a language that creates some of the differences within in groups. Instead, it is the rules of use that encode cultures and these particular unique rules of use convey different worldviews (Johnson, 2000). Second, most people today are members of more than one culture, that is they may be part of a religious culture, a sport culture, a home culture, and a job culture. Some people being biracial or multiracial may have different family cultures. These different roles in various cultures then offer the possibility for multiple identities or perhaps parts of identity which could then lead to different language uses (Johnson, 2000). Third, although people of a certain culture or ethnicity may speak a certain language/dialect, it is possible for someone to be immersed and part of a culture or ethnicity but not know how to speak the language (Eastman, 1994). We must remember that language use is not the only characteristic or attribute that differentiates people and groups.

In this paper my use of the “Social Identity Theory” and “Language-Centered Perspective on Culture” theory does not make the argument that there is always a direct connection between language and identity. Instead I believe that “all identities, including ethnic identity, are negotiable and variable, and there is no one-to-one correspondence between language and ethnic or national identity” (Fuller, 2007 p.106). There is the possibility that the use of a certain dialect does not directly connect an individual to a specific culture. For example in his paper, Igoudin (2011) reports on a group of Asian-American females who have incorporated African-American Vernacular (AAVE) in their every day speech. Igoudin (2011) finds that the reason why these women use AAVE is because of its function as a code for the cross-cultural subculture of hip-hop, not because they are Black or want to be Black (Igoudin, 2011). The “Social Identity Theory” and

“Language-Centered Perspective on Culture” theory only assert that language is an important factor to identity construction.

Description of U.S. born Mexican-American Language Use:

In the U.S. many people believe there are two languages that are used by the Mexican-American population, English and Spanish, but in reality there are far more (Fought, 2010). Below are some of the typical languages/dialects used by U.S. born Mexican-Americans, presented by Fought (2010).

Standard English- The concept of a ‘standard’ English is very difficult to define (cf. Bex & Watts, 1999; as cited in Fought, 2010; p 45). However we define it, middle-class Mexican-Americans will usually have access to a variety of this type. For example, this code is promoted by the school setting, so some children will use a different variety at school than they do at home.

Chicano English (CHE)- This is a non-standard (though linguistically rich) variety of English, which is spoken primarily by U.S. born speakers and shows the influence of Spanish, especially in the sound system. It emerged historically from a context in which English and Spanish were in constant contact, both across the community and within the competence of individuals.

Other local varieties of English- It is important to remember that wherever Mexican-American communities may be located, there will be regional varieties of English available to the speakers. These local non-standard varieties may be described by terms that refer to the geographic region, such as Appalachian English or Southern California English. This category could also include African-American English (AAVE), which may be a particularly influential variety in areas where Mexican-American and African-American communities have

extended contact. (Fought, 2010, p. 45)

Inside the classroom, the language/dialect you speak is also very important.

Students who use CHE and/or AAVE and many other dialects are labeled as not “well spoken” which then can lead to the labeling of not being intelligent (Johnson, 2000).

Students who mix languages are labeled as not fluent in any language. A Massachusetts teacher of Puerto Rican students who commented on their language use stated:

These poor kids come to school speaking a hodge podge. They are all mixed up and don't know any language well. As a result, they can't even think clearly...It's our job to teach them language – to make up for their deficiency...It is “good” English which has to be the focus. (Zentella, 1996, p 8-9; as cited in Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 111)

Outside of the classroom everyday people judge others based on how they speak. As Lippi-Green (1997) stated in her book, we formalize our ideas about others through their language use and because of this some people are self-conscious about their language use. The strong emphasis put on “standard” English in the American society sometimes causes people to decide not to speak a dialect of English that is viewed as improper or Spanish. Instead, these people try to use only “standard” English. The effect of linguistic judgment goes as far as to influence some parents to decide not to teach their children their native tongue.

The role of these languages/dialects in the construction of identity for U.S. born Mexican-Americans is interesting. In her study Fought (2003) found that “In particular, like second-generation speakers in many other communities, Mexican-Americans often want to distinguish themselves linguistically, as well as in other ways, from first-generation Mexican immigrants” (Fought, 2010, p. 45). Fought (2003) asserts that one of

the reasons for this is because in some communities there exists conflicts between second-generation Mexicans and first-generations that fuel the desire to create distinctions.

Contextualizing the Use of Spanish and Marginalized Dialects of English in the U.S. and How It Affects Language Use and Identity

As stated earlier, because there are variations in languages and because we use language as a characteristic to distinguish ourselves stereotypes arise. In the US stereotypes about Latina/o language use and knowledge are imposed on the Latina/o community in everyday locations such as stores and schools. There are ideas that Latinas/os only speak Spanish or do not speak Spanish “properly”, only speak English or do not speak English “properly.” Specifically speaking, students of Mexican origin who are very capable of speaking English are labeled nonnative speakers and sometimes even remedial (Kells, 2006).

Within the Latina/o community the use of a certain language or even a dialect is sometimes viewed as a marker for ethnic authenticity or lack thereof. For some Latinas/os the Spanish language is their identity and to relinquish it literally or symbolically is to “relinquish a significant and powerful dimension of personal and social identity” (Johnson, 2000, p. 117). This philosophy then stimulates “rules” or “codes” in the community when someone doesn’t speak the native tongue. Zentella (2007) asserts that the “right to claim legitimate Puerto Rican or Mexican identity is based partly on the extent to which your Spanish is free from English” (p. 31). That is, Latinas/os who speak mainly English or mix their English with Spanish are likely to have their “cultural authenticity” challenged by those inside and outside their community (Zentella, 2007). In some U.S. Latina/o speech communities other languages or dialects besides Spanish

which are seen as authentic examples are Chicano English (CHE) and African-American English (AAVE).

According to Shenk (2007), “People who have hyphenated American identities (e.g. Mexican-American) must negotiate at least two ideologically polarized reference groups” (p. 200) when it comes to identifying themselves. The topic of speaking languages relates to this issue of identity because in one context there is the idea that speaking Spanish authenticates or legitimizes a person and in the other, the belief that it may hold them back in life. Gracia (2008) states “Latinos, by having Spanish as their native tongue, are at a disadvantage in American society. They are less able to participate in life of the nation, are less likely to hold good jobs, and so on” (p.144).

Methods

The data in this article is based on research conducted at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas during the summer of 2011.

Participants

I interviewed eight participants, 1 man and 7 women. I used a snowball sampling technique and attribute the resulting gender distribution to time constraints and the willingness of possible subjects to participate in an interview. Participant’s varied from the ages of 18 to 22. All participants were current enrolled college students of Mexican heritage. Their colleges, academic years, and academic majors varied. All participants spoke English. Their knowledge and use of Spanish varied.

Recruitment

I recruited participants through networking and announcements in classes. Latino campus organizations were contacted and professors and students were asked to contact students and friends. I introduced myself and explained my research to students in the library and dorm facilities. I asked these people whether or not they could help me with my research and put me into contact with their friends. Upon notifying and receiving

assurances from friends and students, professors and students provided me with contact information for those who were willing to participate in an interview. Once I received contact information for prospective participants I contacted participants through email and text message in English. I gave a brief description of who I was and the purpose of my study to each participant and then we scheduled an interview.

Data Collection

In order to ensure that questions and topics were appropriate, I practiced interviews with my cohort members and friends who are Mexican-American college students before conducting interviews with participants. I asked friends and cohorts to provide me with feedback on the interview. With the help of the practice interviewees I reorganized interview questions.

I conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with each participant. All interviews were conducted in English. The interview questions were targeted towards the education, culture, identity, language use, and experience of the participant. I decided to use semi-structured open-ended interviews because I desired to learn participants' individual perspectives. According to Berg (2009), "semi-standardized" interviews allow for the researcher to approach the subject matter from the participant's perspective.

Each interview took between thirty and seventy-five minutes. Interview locations and times were arranged at the convenience of the interviewee. Interviews took place in UNT libraries and academic buildings and others were executed using the video chat program Skype for video and Google Voice for audio. With the permission of each participant notes were taken throughout the interview and the interview was recorded. After each interview I created time for the participants to ask questions or make comments they did not make before the interview. These conversations were brief, lasting no more than ten minutes. The feedback from all participants was positive and many expressed interest in the research and pleasure from doing the interview.

All interview audio-files were transcribed using Expressscribe, a digital footpedal transcribing software and Microsoft Word. All raw field notes from interviews were expanded into field notes for personal use. All emails and text messages that were used as communication between the participant and myself were saved into text files and stored with the other data from the participant. Interview participants received a code name and all files including interview audio files, field notes and transcribed interviews were labeled with an assigned code name. All data was locked and stored electronically on my personal laptop.

Data Analysis

A qualitative approach was taken with the analysis of the data. All notes taken during interviews were transformed into field notes. Recorded interviews were transcribed. Both field notes and transcribed interviews were uploaded into TAMS Analyzer, a qualitative research-analyzing program. Files were coded and compared through TAMS Analyzer and Microsoft Word. During the transcribing and qualitative data analysis there were numerous occasions when segments of the participants' response to questions could not be identified into words. These incidents were marked with underscores. Findings, theories, and ideas were discussed with project mentors and compared to previous research from the field of sociolinguistics. Based on collected and analyzed data the following findings discuss the use of language and the identities of the participants.

The data in this research was collected through semi-structured open-ended interviews. With this method I had various disadvantages because I could only rely on the words of the participants rather than actually hear them speak to their family and friends. I believe that I missed important aspects of the participants' lives by only meeting with them once and asking them questions. Ideally more time with them and entry into their communities and homes would have provided me with more information.

Findings

When asked about her culture, Lynn, a petite woman with a gentle voice who grew up in the Corpus Christi area told me:

“I do not know Spanish, I know the culture and you know, I know how I grew up and I grew up around (it) and I feel as though I am apart of it” (Lynn, 2011).

In the quote above Lynn indirectly describes the use of Spanish as a characteristic of the Latina/o community/culture. In many ways she is presenting and arguing against the social rule that Zentella (2007) asserts about the ability to claim Latina/o authenticity based on language knowledge and use. First, by automatically discussing her knowledge of Spanish when asked about culture she exposes the belief that Spanish is a necessity when part of the Latina/o culture/community. But however, by still claiming her membership in the community although she does not know Spanish reveals her personal beliefs towards the topic of language use being a marker for a legitimate Latina/o identity.

Lynn is a prime example of how my participants described the use of Spanish and English as being a marker for a culture or group. There were participants who claimed the use of Spanish to a Mexican culture or Hispanic social identity. There were others who focused on physical attributes and blood lineage for membership into Mexican culture and ownership of a Hispanic identity. During the interviews I found that the participants were exploring their own identity and the identity of others around them. Norton (1997) states “every time language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (p 410). I believe Norton’s (1997) quote could be expanded further to not just language learners but also speakers in general.

Participants’ Acquisition and Use of Language

There was a variation in the acquisition and language use of all the participants. While all participants spoke English, the dialects of English they spoke such as AAVE, CHE and/or Southern American English, (SAE), were not addressed due to limited amount of time. The mixing of Spanish and English was discussed in interviews with

participants who spoke Spanish. Each participant had different terms for this mixing of languages. India, from Brownsville, TX calls it “Poncho”, Purple, from west Texas calls it “Tex-Mex” and Jenny, from McKinney, Texas calls it “Spanglish.” Not all the participants mixed English and Spanish. Below I describe the following: the participants’ first and second languages, the acquisition and use of Spanish and the languages used by and with family, community and friends.

First Language and Second Language Acquisition

For most participants English was their first language and Spanish was their second language. While there was some uniformity in first and second language acquisition in the group of students, there were two exceptions, Jenny and Lynn. Unlike any other participant, Jenny, a joyful woman from McKinney, TX area informed me that she learned both English and Spanish at the same time. Her acquisition of both languages made her unique because no other participant described learning both languages at the same time, instead English was their first. Lynn, the woman from Corpus Christi stated that she never learned Spanish; consequently, when asked about her second language she had no answer.

For an in depth description of each participant’s language acquisition and use please refer to Table 1 and Table 2.

Acquisition of Spanish

Three participants described learning Spanish at home but for two of them English was used more. Two participants explained that their parents did not teach them Spanish while growing up because they did not want their children to be hindered by the accents they would have if they learned Spanish first. Seven out of the eight participants took Spanish language courses in high school and or in college. Purposes for taking the courses varied; all of those who took Spanish language courses stated that language classes were mandatory for high school and college. When asked why they chose Spanish over other languages various answers arose. Answers ranged from ‘it would be easy

because I already know Spanish,’ ‘because I am Mexican I should know it,’ ‘for geographic purposes,’ that is because Mexico is very close to Texas and another ‘work purposes.’

Family

The main language of the family affected the language use of the participants. All participants’ immediate families spoke English. Seven participants described their parents as being fluent in Spanish but the fact that their parents spoke Spanish did not entail that they themselves knew Spanish. Participants such as Purple and Blue described a variation in language use and knowledge within their family based on ages. In both participants’ families the older generations could and would speak in Spanish were as the younger generations did not know much Spanish and would only speak in English.

While growing up all participants had exposure to the Spanish language either in their home, their grandparent’s home or their great grandparent’s home. The amount of exposure to Spanish varied and its effect on the speaker’s knowledge also varied. For most participants, seldom interactions with grandparents were not enough to teach them Spanish fluently. Only one participant expressed fluency in Spanish (in their own definition) through home exposure.

An interesting family scenario that appeared in the data was the story of Blue. Blue is a diminutive, indigenous like woman who grew up in the Dallas, Fort Worth area. In her interview she informed me that while growing up she did not learn Spanish as much as she wished. The reason for this was because her parents did want her and her siblings to neither have an accent nor endure any prejudices. She stated that they “wanted to make sure we didn’t get held back in any way, they didn’t want us to start off, they wanted us to start off speaking English and being able to educated ourselves in the best way possible and that was important to them” (Blue, 2011). Although Blue did not learn Spanish as her first language she is currently minoring in it here at UNT but feelings of embarrassment arise whenever she speaks it. She stated “I kind of wish they put in a little

more Spanish because I have taken a lot of Spanish classes and Spanish is my minor but I still do not feel comfortable speaking it usually like I can communicate when I have to, I am definitely not comfortable I get very nervous” (Blue, 2011). The foundation of her emotions towards speaking Spanish were not discussed in the interview but she went on to explain to how occasionally when her mother would speak to her in Spanish she would not respond to her mother in Spanish. Her decision not to speak Spanish to her mother perhaps connected to her insecurities about her Spanish and for her those insecurities followed her from outside the classroom to her home.

Communities

The communities in which the participants lived affected their exposure to and use of language. Participants came from the northern, southern, western and eastern parts of Texas. When asked to describe the demographics and cultures of their communities some participants responded with comments like “99.99% Mexican,” “All Black,” “All White,” “half Mexican half White.” The two participants who were immersed in mainly Mexican communities were exposed to Spanish in everyday interactions with peers, neighbors and store workers. Because of this, they found themselves occasionally using Spanish. Purple stated he needed to learn Spanish in order to communicate with others. Whereas, India stated that she would not speak Spanish because the people in her community would make fun of those who did not speak Spanish “properly.” Participants immersed into communities that did not have any Mexicans were not exposed to Spanish on a daily basis.

Friends

The language use between friends and participants seemed to not vary much throughout the participants. Three fourths of the participants, who all claimed to have Latina/o friends, explained that they and their friends speak English to each other. The other fourth of participants stated that they and their friends would speak Spanish and English but only Jenny and Purple described mixing both languages in a sentence.

Participant's Identities

“Like oh, I am Mexican, but it’s like no, I am Mexican-American I guess” (India, 2011)

India is a high-spirited woman from Brownsville, TX, who in the quote above expresses the complexity of her identity in terms of the ways she views and identifies herself. In the interview she expressed that in person she calls herself Mexican but the quote above shows that she encounters times when she needs to identify herself as Mexican-American.

Throughout the interviews there was the reoccurring theme of ‘what I put on an application’ vs. ‘what I say in person.’ These two separate situations seemed to be important for my participants and how they determined what terms to use to define themselves.

Application Selection

When asked, “What do you select as your race on an application?” Six out of the eight participants informed me that they select “Latina/o,” “Hispanic,” “Mexican,” and “Mexican-American.” The other two informed me they selected “White.” (one of which did not often identify herself as Hispanic) One participant went further to state that for ethnicity she selected “Hispanic” but for race she selected “White” and her reasoning for this was because “Hispanic is not a race.” She was the only participant who identified as Hispanic and claimed to be White. All the other participants made clear distinctions between themselves and people of “White/Caucasian” descent with sayings like “I refuse to put down White.”

When I asked participants why they selected a certain ethnicity or race on an application there was a variation of reasons. Participants such as Susie and Lynn stated they “have to” select certain things on applications because that is what they have been told to do. Susie, a mocha complexioned woman from Longview, TX stated “I have to pick Latino because my last name is Martinez” (Susie, 2011). Later she explained that

when she was young her grandmother told her she was supposed to select “Hispanic” because that was what her father was but that was not necessarily what she felt she was.

In Person

One third of the participants expressed that when having a conversation with someone they prefer to say something else besides “Latina” alone. Participants stated that they would tell people they are mixed, half and half, half White half Mexican, half Black half Mexican, and more Spanish than Mexican.

The reasons why the participants preferred to call themselves other things than what they put down on an application varied. For Cheryl, an olive complexioned woman from Alito, TX, changing the way she identified herself in person benefited her on a social level. When asked how she defined herself racially, Cheryl stated “When people ask what I am, I say Hispanic, if they say “What kind?” I say I am Spanish and I have some Mexican in me, even though in reality it is the other way around. I am Mexican with some Spanish in me.” She explained that she would state more Spanish than Mexican in person because of the prejudices held against Mexicans in the South. These prejudices she described not only related to skin color but also English accents.

Identity Negotiation through Language

“Tex-Mex for me would be, somebody, a man in a car, a broken down car driving with a cowboy hat, cowboy boots, jeans (and) belt listening to Tejano music and speaking Spanish eating Mexican food” (India, 2011). Participants’ methods of using language to negotiate their identity varied. In the quote above India provides an example of how she identifies others based on various attributes including language. Throughout the interview she made several comments about how certain people spoke in her community and how she herself does not speak like them. Another example of how participants would make language distinction is Purple; he made distinctions between how he and his friends speak and how Mexicans from Mexico speak. He made comments like “we have our own dialect and emphasis” and “here we say...” (Purple 2011). India and Purple are prime

examples of how some participants would make explicit connections between membership into social/cultural groups with language as an attribute and how others described the language use of others to show distinctions and their lack of membership into those groups.

Use of Spanish as a Marker for “Latinidad”

Half of the participants used some type of Spanish when speaking to me about their heritage, culture, community and language use. I saw this use of Spanish as a marker for their Latina/o culture and identity. Two participants showed me that they owned the Spanish language as a part of their identity by giving me examples of how they would switch in and out of Spanish and saying ‘we say this, this way’, ‘we do this’ and “If I come across someone that speaks the same language [Spanish] I feel comfortable using it. We will go back and forth we will use Spanglish or even when we text in Spanish and in English.” Within this group one participant stated that she started speaking Spanish more because she wanted to embrace her “Hispanicness,” which meant for her, loving that she was Hispanic, colored, dark, and beautiful.

Participants Lynn and Susie expressed the opinion that they “should” know Spanish because they are Latina/o. Lynn stated “I will speak fluent Spanish before I die, it’s something I will do, make myself” (Lynn, 2011) and when I asked her whether or not that was something important to her she said yes it was. Similarly, Susie stated that the reason why she took Spanish language courses was because she was Mexican and she should know it. Later on she made an interesting connection between language use and “Latinidad” when she claimed that the reason she did not attempt to join a Latina sorority at UNT was because “they probably speak Spanish and I don’t know that and that’s Spanish culture I don’t know anything about that” (Susie, 2011). Instead, Susie knows Black culture because that is what she grew up around and that is what she feels a part of.

Use of English as a Marker for American

The topic of English and its relation to an American identity did not appear that often in the interviews. Only Blue explicitly stated that she was American because of language use, she stated “I would say I identify with American culture because I grew up speaking English, I listen to music in English, I primarily speak in English, I watch TV in English (and) I read in English” (Blue, 2011). Although Blue made this claim about being American she still identifies with her Mexican culture. She described her membership into this culture by stating that she listens to music in Spanish “(I) love music in Spanish and I love dancing to music in Spanish so I understand that culture”(Blue, 2011). What is interesting is that all the participants do similar things that Blue listed as “American” but in the interviews they never stated they were part of an American culture.

Blue and Lynn, two participants who learned English first, stated that the reason why they did not learn Spanish first was because their parents did not want them growing up with an accent in English. I viewed the decisions of the parents as a desire for their children to own “real” membership into the ‘American Society.’ The parents obviously did not want their children to face any stereotyping or prejudices, the same behaviors Hogg and Abrams (1988) stated are created when social/cultural groups are formed. Blue explained that her parents grew up having accents and were teased for that. Her parents’ experiences make sense of the “Social Identity Theory” because here they were in some ways denied memberships into certain groups because of their language use. The parents did not want the same things to occur to their children and so in some ways the parents of Blue and Cheryl were negotiating the identities of their children through the language they taught them. Teaching them English first could help the students deal with stereotyping.

Discussion

The data show a complex pattern of language knowledge and choice made by these eight college students. While participants explicitly made connections between the language uses of certain ethnic, racial and/or social group not all of them aligned themselves with any particular group because of their language use.

Selecting Latina/o vs. Actually Being a Part of the Latina/o Community

What was interesting is that although a person may select or say “Latina/o,” “Hispanic,” or “Mexican-American” that does not necessarily mean they personally feel as though they are part of that community. In this study I found that the mere utterance or selection of a term does not always signify the social identity of a person. Instead the feeling of membership in specific groups takes a lot more. Therefore, the speech habits of people may not directly relate to the term they use to identify themselves. For some participants stating “I am Mexican-American” did not do them justice because they felt more aligned with another culture such as White culture, Black culture or just a mix and one of the reasons for this was because of their communities. Participant Cheryl would be a prime example of this situation. Although on applications and in person she would use a term such as “Latina” to identify herself, she personally identified with White culture. One of the reasons for this was because most of the communities she grew up in were all White. Despite the fact that her family is mainly of Mexican heritage, she never had exposure to a Hispanic culture and so when she was faced with the opportunity to intermingle with other Latina/o students in high school she “shied away and stuck more with your suburban white kids” because she did not know how to interact with the Latina/o kids (Cheryl, 2011). She saw herself as a member of White culture because of her socio-economic background, religion and family traditions, she stated “I identify myself as White as far as culture goes because I am not you know my family is not Catholic we don’t do the big traditional get together we are not super close to our

extended family” (Cheryl, 2011). While Cheryl’s story is only one example, participants Ana and Susie described similar sentiments towards belonging to another culture.

Language and Identity

For most participants English is their main language and so there was no variation in how and when they used language that appeared in my data. Only Jenny described using Spanish at home very often. For the others there was no constant need to speak Spanish. Participants Jenny and Purple described mixing Spanish and English (Spanglish) together as one of the practices they used with friends and family. They seemed to own these practices by describing them as something “we do.” These two participants used Spanish and Spanglish as a means to communicate, connect, and identify themselves as part of the Latina/o community. Fought (2010) asserts “By codeswitching, Mexican-Americans born in the U.S. are able to index simultaneously their Mexican heritage (through Spanish) and their claim to a specifically U.S. identity (through English)” (p.104).

In the interviews with the other participants some described the language use of other people in their communities. I saw this as a distinguishing method, that is, “this is what they do, but that’s not what I do.” For certain participants this seemed necessary because the language patterns they were describing were of those who were “less educated” and spoke “weird” or used “slang.” By positioning themselves as non-speakers of those languages/dialects they were constructing their own identity. An identity that perhaps has membership in some other social group.

In many ways, the methods in which the participants distinguished themselves relates to the social identity theory; first, they are differentiating themselves from certain people in their community due to social desirability reasons and; second, they are using language as a characteristic to negotiate their membership into other social/cultural groups. An example of social desirability was India who spoke about people who mixed English and Spanish together when speaking. She stated they were often less educated

and made fun off, coincidentally, she herself did not mix English and Spanish together nor did she speak Spanish often in order to avoid laughter from her community members.

The concept of speaking “weird” or using “slang” relates to how different social/cultural groups view themselves as superior to other groups. Through valuing their own practices, social/cultural groups often label the characteristics of other groups as “weird” and describe their language/dialect as “slang” because in their culture their own language is proper. A prime example of this superior vs. inferior dichotomy is the relation between the use of African-American vernacular English and “standard” English. In certain settings (e.g. school and office) the use of African-American vernacular is frowned upon and called “slang,” “Ebonics,” and occasionally labeled “ungrammatical” by those of other cultures (e.g. White) within the U.S. These labels stick with AAVE and its speakers (e.g. African-Americans) and affect the perception of others and how they view people who use it. Those who are often labeling AAVE as “slang” are those who believe they speak an educated form of English and through making distinctions with words like “Ebonics” and “standard” a superior vs. inferior relationship is created that transcends through language use into other aspects of life.

Although Spanish is not a dialect of English, its use in the U.S. has some similar repercussions as AAVE in the sense that some people are denied jobs because of their accents. These repercussions can be so extensive that some Latina/o heritage parents only teach their children English and take pride in it. In an interview Zentella stated that some parents say, “Look at my wonderful daughter, she only speaks English, isn’t that wonderful?” because the English language is viewed as superior in the U.S. (Alpert, 2009). Perhaps some of the repercussions for using Spanish in the U.S. are the foundations for why some of my participants stated that they were not interested in continuing to learn and use Spanish. For them there was no benefit in speaking Spanish because of the dominance of English and the stereotypes that are tacked on Spanish speakers.

While there were participants who used mixed Spanish and English together to communicate with friends and family there was one participant who spoke about using Spanish and English in separate situations. Participant Jenny spoke of variation in her use of Spanish and English. She stated that at home with her family she will have conversations that start in English and end in Spanish or vice versa, whereas when she is in the public she prefers to speak English. The reason why she prefers to speak English in the public is because she does not want people to feel uncomfortable around her due to the belief that she may be talking about them. Another reason why she uses English is because she does not want people to think she is acting like she does not understand them. The reasons Jenny decides to use English and Spanish show a segment of how she negotiates her identity at home and in the public. At home she uses Spanish to show she is part of her Latina/o culture and in the public she uses English to not draw attention to herself.

In her article, Zentella (2007) states that the right to claim Mexican authenticity is partly based on specific language uses, while in my study no one stated that people questioned their “Latinidad” because of their type of or lack of Spanish, two participants did show insecurities about their language use because people would make fun of them or correct them constantly. These two participants live in mainly Mexican communities where there are recent Mexican immigrants. Jiménez (2010) found that U.S. born Mexican-Americans’ contact with Mexican immigrants in public spaces strengthens their ability to speak Spanish but my study shows a different outcome. Those who have interactions with recent Mexican immigrants found their personal perspective on their Spanish was low, they either felt embarrassed to speak it or they felt the need to improve it because Mexican immigrants would laugh at them or correct them.

While Fought (2010) found that second-generation Mexican-Americans desire to distinguish themselves from first-generation Mexicans, the majority of my participants did not express this desire. Only Cheryl stated that although she is mainly of Mexican

heritage she will state she is more Spanish than Mexican. Her reasoning for doing this is because she does not want to be associated with the negative stereotypes that exist in the U.S. about Mexicans. When asked some of the other participants stated they identified as “Mexican” and when asked about the term “Mexican-American” they said “no just Mexican.”

The data collected in the research only describes a small aspect of language and identity. My interviews and conversations with participants show that the “Social Identity Theory” and “Language-Centered Perspective on Culture” theory are relative to how we use language and function in society. Specifically, participants drew lines between American culture/identity and Latino culture/identity with language as a pillar. They expressed opinions on when it is appropriate to use English and/or Spanish, what languages people should be speaking here in the U.S., and they described experiences about being outcast based on their own language use. While all participants made distinctions between both languages and cultures there does not exist a direct connection between the Spanish language and Latina/o culture and the English language and American culture and vice versa because language use varies and reflects many cultures. The lives of the participants are complex and there are various other variables that should be considered in order to explain their language use and identities. Because our identities are always changing perhaps the language use/choice of the participants will change based on future experiences. Some participants may decide to speak Spanish more and others may not, some may enter different social settings where they will have to adapt to new cultures and others’ perceptions and use of language may remain the same. What would be interesting is to view how the participants use language to identify themselves and what languages they prefer for their children to speak ten to fifteen years from now.

Future Research

I plan to extend this research to other locations around the U.S. where there is a high population of people of Mexican descent. I hope to gather more information on

college students of Mexican descent to further understand their language use and identity.

If possible the future research will involve more participants and an ethnographer's perspective on the topic.

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Table 1. Summary Table on Language Acquisition and Language Choice

Participants	1 st language	2 nd language	Language w/ Family	Language w/ Friends
India	English	Spanish	Mostly English*	Mostly English
Purple	English	Spanish	Mostly English	Mostly English
Blue	English	Spanish	Mostly English	English
Jenny	Eng./Span.**	N/A	Eng./Span.	Eng./Span.
Ana	English	Spanish	English	English
Lynn	English	N/A	English	English
Susie	English	Spanish	English	English
Cheryl	English	Spanish	English	English

*Mostly - in the interviews I asked each participant about what languages they spoke at home and with friends. If the participant provided me with more than one language I then asked, “What language is spoken the most at home/friends?” Based on the answer that the respondents gave me I then described that language as the “used the most” in that particular setting. The definition of *mostly* more than likely varied for each participant but I have no way to gauge his or her use of the language.

**Eng./Span.- when participants were asked about what language they first learned or what language was mostly spoken at home they stated “English and Spanish.” When asked about her first language Jenny stated “Actually I was ___incorporated with both it was Spanish and English, I started out with both and then my dominant for a little bit was English and then it started kicking in when I was five is when I started to understand it better and use it more.” When asked what languages are used at home she stated “Spanish and English.” Specifically speaking for Jenny’s case the use of Spanish and English at home and with friends involved both the separate use of both languages and the mixing of both languages.

Table 2. Participants' Mixing of Spanish and English

Participants	Mix English & Spanish	With Family	With Friends
Jenny	Yes*	Yes	Yes
Purple	Yes	Yes	Yes
India	No	No	No
Blue	No	No	No
Ana	No	No	No
Cheryl	No	No	No
Susie	No	No	No
Lynn	No	No	No

* Participants that stated they mixed Spanish and English together intrasententially (within the same sentence) and intersententially (alternating sentences).