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## ABSTRACT

A study examined the use of the ethnic language as it relates to ethnic self-identification in three generations of a bilingual family of Mexican origin in San Antonio (Texas). Family members were speakers of Texas Spanish and English. Two questionnaires and follow-up discussions examined fluency in Spanish and English; language preferences; formal language education; ethnic identity; ethnic self-identification; and probable language choice in a series of hypothetical situations. Respondents varied in their assessments of the role Texas Spanish plays in their ethnic self-identification, and they were not likely or even linguistically able to exploit the role of Spanish to validate their ethnic identity. Other factors to consider include linguistic insecurity; racial discrimination based on linguistic and cultural markers in addition to physical characteristics; and a diffuseness of ethnic identity. The Quebecois in Canada and the Catalans in Spain have effected socioeconomic and political change by making the ethnic language the very symbol of ethnic identity and pursuing change through language planning and policy. In the face of recent trends in legislation and the "English-only" movement, Mexican Americans in Texas may want to find ways to "reattach" the linguistic component of their ethnicity and thereby focus their identity sufficiently to exploit the socioeconomic and political advantages other minority groups have achieved elsewhere. (TD)

**TEXAS SPANISH:  
LANGUAGE USE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY  
IN BILINGUAL SPEAKERS**

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## **Texas Spanish: Language Use and Ethnic Identity in Bilingual Speakers**

While language is accepted as central to concepts of culture, race, ethnicity and nationality, its role in determining and expressing these concepts is still controversial. Fishman (1985) noted that since ethnic pride is more attitudinal than behavioral, a bilingual speaker can “detach” language from the requirements for ethnic membership, as is often cited in the case of Hispanics in the United States. However, Shu (1994) found in a study of Americans of Chinese descent that the ability to speak Chinese was the primary factor in determining ethnicity. The language requirement also cannot be detached for French Canadians: to be Québécois means to be able to speak Canadian French fluently. Interestingly, Woolard (1989) found in a study of Catalans that her subjects varied in the importance they attributed to the ethnic language. She was able to define the language’s role in determining and expressing ethnic identity as a correlation of two axes: status in the majority culture and solidarity with the ethnic minority. I have adapted Woolard’s methodology in order to examine the use of the ethnic language as it correlates to ethnic self-identification in a

small sample of Texas Spanish bilingual speakers in San Antonio. In this paper I discuss the collection of the data from two instruments to examine the link between language attitude and subsequent language choice in certain social situations as an overt marker of ethnic identity—i.e., the first step toward quantifying the “detachability” of the ethnic language from the ethnic identity and the potential for exploiting a close link between language and identity in order to politicize language choice and thus force change in the socio-economic and -political status quo.

To better identify, measure and analyze variables of language use and ethnic identity for a large-scale quantitative study planned for a later date, I first adapted an instrument of approximately 120 items that record preferences and abilities in language use, cultural heritage, cultural identification, ethnic social orientation, ethnic pride and affiliation, and perceived discrimination. I administered this self-report questionnaire to three generations of a bilingual family of Mexican origin, speakers of Texas Spanish and English, born and raised in San Antonio. I chose this historically bicultural city because of the relatively little stigmatization of a large bilingual population which is reasonably well distributed throughout all socio-economic groups. The

instrument consisted of a brief biographical survey followed by questions: Group I is a self-assessment of the respondent's fluency in both Spanish and English, his/her language use in various situations, his/her legal name and nickname; Group II examines the respondent's language preferences, social networks, the names of the respondent's children; Group III determines formal schooling in both languages; Group IV concerns the ethnic identity and language use/fluency of the respondent's parents; Group V is about the respondent's spouse; Group VI is the respondent's ethnic self-identification over his/her lifetime. The data were analyzed as measuring either Cultural Awareness or Ethnic Loyalty according to the model proposed by Keefe and Padilla (1987). Internal variation in ethnic identity as well as changes over time can be examined and quantified in terms of social, cultural and structural assimilation to the majority (Anglo) society. Each respondent was then classified as one of five types in a continuum of ethnic orientation: from Type I, clearly unacculturated, identifying as Mexican and least likely to detach the ethnic language from ethnic identity to Type V, highly Anglicized, identifying little with Mexican culture and most likely to have detached the linguistic component of ethnic identity. Type III respondents have a

moderate amount of Mexican cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty and some knowledge of Anglo culture, and while they might be considered bicultural, it is significant that they retain their ethnic identity, are conscious of their Mexican heritage and retain at least nominal/ritualistic use of Texas Spanish to affirm ethnicity.

Much as Woolard discovered in Catalan, my subjects in San Antonio varied in their own assessments of the role Texas Spanish plays in their ethnic self-identification. As expected, different components of ethnic identity seem to undergo varying degrees of shift. There doesn't seem to be whole-sale loss of traditional cultural traits replaced by new ones of the majority culture as the family members integrate socially, economically and politically into Anglo society; for example, knowledge of Mexican history might diminish but Catholicism remains stable and extended familism is even strengthened. Further, the analysis echoes a sentiment among sociologists that the "Chicano" culture has "creolized", becoming distinctive and possessing many features unique from either Mexican or American cultures, including idiosyncratic uses of the ethnic language—a reflection perhaps of the bicultural/bilingual speech community that is particular to San Antonio.

The second self-report questionnaire consisted of a series of situations for which the subject indicated his/her probable choice of language in an interaction. The hypothetical interactions required transactions with increasing linguistic skill: beginning with a simple business transaction with little personal investment, through one which included ordering dinner, then the purchase of a specific item in a department store, and finally the rather complex linguistic strategies of buying a car. For each situation, the informant was asked to report his/her probable choice of language first when approached first in English, then in Spanish, by a probable out-group member first in an anglophone then hispanophone environment; when approached in English, then in Spanish, by an ethnic-looking service clerk in each of the two environments, and finally when the ethnic-looking service person made it clear that English was the only choice of language for the transaction in an hispanophone environment. Finally I asked details of any actual past encounter in which there had been a conscious choice of language or any situation in which the subject would insist on speaking one language over the other.

Heller (1992) claimed that the valuing or legitimizing of Canadian French, or Québécois, was a significant factor the ethnic

mobilization in Québec and Ontario. The second instrument was designed to show how far ethnic members were willing to go in exploiting language choice as a political strategy in the mobilization of their ethnic group. I had anticipated that the family members analyzed as Type I would be least likely to have detached the language component from their identity and would be most likely to choose the ethnic language in all unmarked situations, with the possibility of making a political statement by choosing it as the dispreferred language in anglophone situations. Those of Type V would be most likely to have detached the ethnic language and so would accommodate English in most/all transactions. Results indicated that the Spanish-speaking bilinguals tested were much less likely or even linguistically able to so exploit the role of Spanish in order to validate the ethnic variety.

The third method of acquiring data was in discussion as a sympathetic out-group member: recollection of discussions within the speech community about language choice, any notice of change in attitude toward either language, events leading up to the “politicization” of ethnic identity, personal characterizations of the ethnic variety vs. the standard “school-taught” or Mexican Spanish.



What factors may be responsible for the variation in the “detachability” of language from ethnic identity? The ethnographic data I have collected in addition to the data analyzed above yield evidence of at least some of the factors important to consider in the case of bilingual Texas Spanish-speakers of Mexican origin living in San Antonio:

linguistic insecurity induced by the low status assigned to this particular ethnic variety of Spanish both by native speakers and by other Spanish- and English-speakers alike; also, quite understandably, linguistic insecurity induced by imbalanced bilingualism due to the lack of opportunities for education in the language

racial discrimination, both real and perceived, based primarily on physical characteristics such as skin color, but also based on linguistic markers such as accent and cultural markers such as family/given names and preferences in food and music

diffuseness of ethnic identity as reflected in the lack of an ethnic “label” acceptable to all members—Chicano, Mexican American, Texican/Tejano, Latino, Hispano/Hispanic, etc. Complicating factors include a continuing influx of new immigrants from Mexico, a continued interchange with family members still in Mexico, a “lumping together” by out-group members (particularly by the Anglo majority) of all Spanish-speaking immigrants from diverse geographical areas (both newly arrived as well as those completely assimilated after generations in the U.S.)

The variation in “detachability” of the ethnic language found within a single bilingual family in a single speech community is indicative of the complex nature of ethnic identity

and the ambivalence some ethnic members feel about that identity in relation to the majority society. The situations in Québec and Catalonia have been studied extensively in order to analyze how ethnicity can be reinforced, politicized and validated to force change in the socio-economic and -political status quo. The Québécois and the Catalans have effected this change by removing any notion of detachability: the ethnic language has been made the very symbol of ethnic identity and it has become the vehicle of change through language planning and policy. The Isleños, a Spanish-speaking community in Louisiana, have been attempting to “re-attach” the ethnic variety through language instruction in the community centers; results have been mixed. This particular study contributes data about a very small part of an already sizable and rapidly growing ethnic population who will be deciding individually and collectively the course of their identity as expressed in their ethnic language. In the face of recent trends in legislation and the “English-only” movement in the United States, particularly in areas with large concentrations of Hispanic populations like Texas, members of this ethnic minority may want to find ways to “reattach” the linguistic component of their ethnicity in order to focus the identity sufficiently to exploit the

socio-economic and political advantage other minority groups have achieved elsewhere.

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