



Losing My Language

How the Subaltern Speaks

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Stories of immigrant communities throughout the world are fairly well documented—most face some combination of assimilation, segregation, and unification. However, scholars and journalists have paid far less attention to those who fall somewhere in-between these immigrant communities and in-state nationals. Individuals often struggle to fit into the group they identify with when they are multiracial or when their family immigrated one or more generations ago. Through ethnographic case studies and testimonial, this article seeks to examine the contested relationship between language, culture, and identity. Specifically, the author investigates how language ideology affects this language-identity-culture bind. Ultimately, the objective of this article is to stimulate greater dialogue in the academic community about the relationship between language and culture.

Introduction

Like many Americans, my ethnic and cultural heritage is complicated and sometimes contradictory. My mother's parents were both first-generation Mexican Americans; although they both spoke English as a second language (ESL), they did not pass their first language or cultural traditions on to their two daughters. In fact, my grandparents only spoke Spanish at home when they did not want my mother and aunt to understand them, for at the time, immigrant and first-generation families needed to assimilate into mainstream American culture to survive. Growing up, the closest connection I had to my Mexican heritage was the enchiladas suizas my mother occasionally made. I learned Spanish as a second language in high school, as my mother did, and I did not learn how to make tortillas by hand until I asked my grandmother to teach me after my freshman year of college.

Despite the significant lack of any cultural or linguistic knowledge of my roots, and despite the

fact that I am only half Latina by blood, I passionately identify as Mexican American. However, I never sufficiently fit into the Latin@—the gender-inclusive form of “Latino”—communities that dominate parts of California's Bay Area, where I grew up. My experience is shared by both multiracial Americans and minority individuals whose families migrated at least one generation ago; for example, my first-generation Filipino American classmates in elementary school and college generally have little knowledge of Tagalog, the language of their heritage, when compared to their parents and grandparents. Yet anthropological research typically focuses on immigrants' integration into their new countries rather than the feeling of displacement that arises years or generations later. Researchers such as Qin (2006) and Monzó and Rueda (2009) have studied the voluntary linguistic distancing of Chinese American and Latino immigrant children, respectively, from their families as the children hid their knowledge of their families' primary language or even stopped

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talking to their families altogether. Few scholars have focused on the reverse problem of immigrants' descendants' desire and struggle to connect with their ethnic community.

Individuals who face this problem often feel caught in-between these two identities: on the one hand, their own "people" do not fully accept them on the basis of different language abilities, culture, or personal appearance, but other groups do not readily accept them either. I do not speak Spanish, did not have a coming-of-age quinceañera, and in fact could not even begin to describe what Mexican culture might entail beyond those two things. I know more about Mexican political events than the average white American, which does not amount to much, but I am at a complete loss with regards to the cultural politics of Mexicans and other Latin@s. I was never sufficiently socialized into Mexican American culture, and consequently, I have never felt like an active member of it. I can sympathize with Mexican Americans' identity struggles, but, for the most part, I cannot empathize.

As a result, I have never felt truly comfortable claiming my Mexican American identity in front of other Latin@s, yet I have been stereotyped by non-Latin@s (chiefly white Americans) on the basis of my skin color. Though I have a racially ambiguous name and physical appearance, strangers seem to clearly identify me as an "Other," a generic person of color. People often ask me where I am "really" from, where my family is from, or even "what" I am, which disputes my unspoken claim that I am American and human. I exist in a sort of no-man's land between the Latin@ and white American communities, and my forays into both sides often make me uncomfortably aware that I do not belong.

Using both first-person testimonial and others' ethnographic case studies, I explore the contested relationship between language, culture, and identity. While autoethnography and testimonial are controversial research methods, they can add unique perspectives from anthropologists living within communities under

study. In my case in particular, my connection to my heritage has become more convoluted by my interest in the Middle East and the Arabic language. Ultimately, I hope to initiate a broader conversation within the academic community about the relationship between language and culture at a time when the subaltern must learn new languages in order to be "heard," as Spivak (1999) might have said. After all, it is impossible to ignore the connection between globalization (or neocolonialism) and language death.

Language as Identity

Sociolinguists have long documented the ways in which people distinguish in-group members from out-group members through word choice, pronunciation, and other linguistic features. In other words, people use different "social languages," which can be anything from geographic dialects to professional languages (see Gee, 2011, p. 156-161), partially as markers of identity. Groups construct certain dialects and languages as prestige languages, meaning that people proficient in a particular group's prestige language will have access to more social benefits and economic opportunities than those not proficient in the prestige language.

For example, in her research in the California Bay Area, Mendoza-Denton (2008) found that English use among Latina high school students corresponded with individuals' personal beliefs about orientation toward either the U.S. or Latin America, which in turn corresponded with the girls' social identities. Both official and self-identified members of the Sureño gang claimed to know only Spanish, though in reality some were nearly proficient in English as a result of spending years in ESL classes. Sureñas strongly identified with the general global South as well as with their home country—usually Mexico—hence the construction of Spanish as a prestige language. On the other hand, Norteño gang members and affiliates spoke Chicano English, code-switching to various degrees between English and Spanish. As one Norteña explained, in order to succeed in America, one had to know English, so it was

foolish of the Sureñas to prioritize Spanish. The Sureñas, for their part, saw the Norteñas as “sell-outs” who, in the same Norteña’s words, “betrayed Mexico and...don’t deserve to call ourselves Mexicans” (Mendoza-Denton, 2008, p. 111).

This gang dichotomy provides a limited picture of social life, however. Within the same population of high school students, there were a number of major social groups composed of non-gang-affiliated Latinas, including a group Mendoza-Denton (2008) refers to as “Latina Jocks.” The Latina Jocks were heavily involved in extracurricular activities such as sports or yearbook, unlike some of their peers who adhered to cultural values and gender roles by coming straight home after school. For this reason,

...it could be said that Latina Jock girls, athletic, “popular,” and acceptable to teachers, already stood on the other side of a wall, having acquired or shifted into cultural patterns that ran counter to a large part of what a “good girl” in the home culture might be. And despite the fact that a Latina Jock’s parents may themselves have been second-, third-, or fourth-generation Americans aligned with mainstream Euro-American values, the large population of recent immigrants with a world-view rooted in rural Latin America still held Jock girls in some degree of contempt for having assimilated. Faced with little validation from their ethnic/cultural peers, it was no surprise that Latina Jocks turned to institutional sources of approval. (Mendoza-Denton, 2008, p. 30)

These assimilated Latinas also claimed to know no Spanish, although this was not always true. Other Latinas accused the Jocks of being whitewashed sell-outs, and in some cases referred to the Jocks as “coconuts” because they were brown on the outside but white on the inside.

I recently attended an undergraduate research symposium where one student presented the results of interviews asking African-American

university students about their perceptions of the “American Dream,” the idea that any American can achieve anything with hard work and perseverance. When asked if Barack Obama’s presidency was a sign of progress for African Americans, nearly all of the female participants replied with scorn. “He’s a symbol of someone who, before becoming married to the system [of the U.S. government] itself, was quite vocal about inequalities but then once he was actually accepted into that system was no longer,” said one interviewee (Dalgo, 2015). I felt stunned and wondered if my Latin@ peers felt the same way when they looked at me. Like Mendoza-Denton’s (2008) Latina Jocks, I applied myself to academics and extracurricular activities, eventually winning a Hispanic achievement award during my senior year of high school. But the award felt wrong to me. Although my grades were strong, plenty of my classmates had higher grades than I did. In my mind, I was being rewarded for being intellectual despite my ethnicity, for having fully assimilated into the mainstream American culture with respect to education, for having risen above the low expectations and stereotypes of “Mexicans who refuse to learn English.” I did not attend the award ceremony.

Language as Culture

Many anthropologists accept the concept of a connection between language and identity, as well as between identity and culture. So is language an essential part of culture? According to the well-known Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, different languages describe reality in different ways, which in turn impacts language users’ perceptions of the world (Whorf, 1956). The second tenet of this hypothesis has inspired much debate in the linguistic community, because Benjamin Whorf, who incorporated the ideas of his deceased mentor Edward Sapir into the hypothesis, died before he could clarify or expand upon it (Darnell, 1990, p. 375). Some scholars believe that Whorf meant that languages constrain users’ thoughts, meaning that if there is no way of expressing a concept in a given language, that concept must then be

unthinkable to the language's users. This interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is known as linguistic determinism (Mooney, 2011, p. 32-35). However, most linguists and linguistic anthropologists support an alternative interpretation known as linguistic relativism, which states that languages influence but do not completely determine users' thoughts and behaviors (Mooney, 2011, p. 32-35). Both linguistic relativism and linguistic determinism support the existence of a connection between language and culture.

Modern-day media and academia sometimes amplify this connection and apply it to language death. Recently, NPR (2013) and PBS (2015) have both featured programs on "endangered" languages, respectively titled "When a Language Dies, What Happens to Culture?" and "What Does the World Lose When a Language Dies?" Swarthmore College's website enhances this sense of urgency, saying:

Language is one of the things that defines a culture, both through who speaks it and what it allows speakers to say. Words that describe a particular cultural practice or idea can never be translated exactly into another language... Without speakers of these languages [with no written form], an entire culture is lost (Anderson and Harrison, 2007).

The Smithsonian Institute has even established an organization called "Recovering Voices" that is dedicated to recording disappearing languages.

However, these discourses of language endangerment do not satisfy everyone. For example, McWhorter (2009), a linguist who studies creole languages, argues that language death is neither good nor bad. Instead, he sees it as an inevitable process linked to globalization, claiming that "a language itself does not correspond to the particulars of a culture but to a faceless process that creates new languages as the result of geographical separation" (p. 63). In other words, linguistic differences have nothing to do with cultural differences; they merely occur when

a group of language speakers splits, after one or more subgroups have migrated in different directions and speakers are no longer in contact with one other.

For this reason, McWhorter (2009) considers linguistic differences to be more random than special, suggesting that "[t]he main loss when a language dies is not cultural but aesthetic" (p. 65). He also supports the possibility of English becoming a universal language spoken by all individuals in addition to their native languages, because English is easier to learn than languages like Chinese and Russian, and many people around the world already speak it. McWhorter (2009) acknowledges the colonial overtones of such a situation, but brushes them aside. While he dislikes the idea of languages becoming extinct, he also believes that people must adapt to the modern, globalized world by adopting a single language as a means of communication.

As someone studying the "colonization" of Arabic in the former British Mandates by integrating postcolonial studies into linguistic anthropology, this prospect makes me distinctly uncomfortable. In some Arab states, English has become the prestige language due to its association with globalization and modernity (Suleiman, 2011, p. 61-64). As a result, individuals who do not have access to the English language through wealth and thereby education are excluded from economic opportunities. For instance, in Jordan, medical classes are taught in English, and medical associations hold conferences solely in English. If a family is poor and cannot afford to send their children to a school with good English teachers, those children have little hope of becoming doctors. English can never be a truly universal language because non-English-speakers' access to the language is stratified by external factors such as geographic location, social class, and wealth.

However, McWhorter (2009) does have a point. The professed connection between language and culture can be particularly problematic for groups who are "losing" their languages. Muehlmann (2008) studied this phenomenon

among the Cucapá, an indigenous group scattered between Baja California and the Southwestern United States. Within this population, the grandparent generation needed to become proficient in Spanish in order to find work. Since they wanted a better life for their children, this generation spoke Spanish at home with their families. However, the grandparents claimed they had been too busy engaging in the continual “fight for the land, for the water, and to fish [sic]” (Muehlmann, 2008, p. 36) to also teach their children and grandchildren Cucapá.

This situation is further complicated by the fact that recent government and international initiatives aimed at preserving indigenous culture often demand that groups know their indigenous languages as proof of authenticity. Cucapá youth, who know mostly profanity in their indigenous language, offer these words to prove themselves to government officials and non-governmental organization (NGO) workers. These words are not understood or recognized by outside officials, and are therefore readily accepted (Muehlmann, 2008, p. 37-39). The ironies of the situation are not lost on the Cucapá. In one instance, an NGO instituted a mapmaking project in several Cucapá communities; in order to participate in the project, people needed to speak Cucapá. The youth, who barely spoke the language, were furious that they were barred from the project:

- Eva: Why does he [the program director] want us to speak Cucapá?
 Shaylih: He thinks it would be better for the project, give a better sense of the land.
 E: Well then instead of buying new cars he should buy us someone to teach us Cucapá!
 Lucia: It doesn't take out my Cucapáness, if I don't speak it. I have Cucapá blood.
 S: You think you're still Cucapá, even if you don't speak Cucapá?
 L: 100 percent. (Muehlmann, 2008, p. 41)

These younger Cucapá individuals clearly do not believe that their lack of language proficiency

changes their identity or should provide a basis for the denial of opportunities linked to this identity. In the end, some of the youth claimed they spoke “the basics” of Cucapá and spoke profanity to the program director, who then let them into the program.

This connection between biology and culture plays a key role in many communities, but is often ignored in mainstream American culture, as the United States is a former “settler colony” where citizenship does not hinge on ethnicity. However, blood plays a key role in indigenous identity and determines, in Sturm's (2002) words, “who is Cherokee, who is Indian, and who gets to decide” (p. 203). In such situations, genetic heritage provides a firm boundary demarcating insiders and outsiders. Group status is never an option; if an individual descends from one particular ethnic or tribal group then that individual is a member for life, whether the person appreciates it or not. Biology has played and continues to play a key role in identity and affiliation globally, for example in countries such as Kazakhstan (Snajdr, 2005) and, infamously, Nazi Germany (Linke, 1999).

Language proficiency may also play a role in identity legitimization, but the relationship between language and culture is not as obvious as some academics posit. For example, in Yukon territory in Canada, the Liard River First Nation's youth have come to think of their ancestral language of Kaska as belonging mostly to elders and other superiors, an idea that is ironically further reinforced by language preservation efforts (Meek, 2007). Neither extreme end of the argument—language equals culture versus language has nothing to do with culture—seems to encompass the reality of their situation, or the situation of the Cucapá. Linguists and anthropologists should reconsider their positions and initiate a dialogue around the language-and-culture puzzle. Perhaps there is no good answer, and perhaps the debate will never come to a conclusive, satisfactory end. However, it is important to examine the assumptions we make as researchers.

Subaltern Speech

Like the Cucapá, I have lost the language of my heritage to other languages that present me with more economic opportunities. However, only one of the superseding languages, English, was “forced” upon me by the culture of assimilation my grandparents grew up in. The second, Arabic, I learned entirely by choice. In high school, I found myself fascinated by the Middle East, initially due to Moroccan architecture. Now that I know more about the region, I feel a particularly strong connection to its colonial history and postcolonial aftermath because of my own experiences of marginalization based on my gender and race, as well as current and historical indigenous Americans’ experiences of invasion, violent subjugation, and attempted erasure.

In studying the colonization of the Middle East rather than that of “my people,” have I betrayed my heritage? I think not. According to Said (1978), Western colonizers believed that only they could study both East and West; the “uncivilized” peoples of the Islamic world could perhaps study their own histories after considerable advancement, but they could never hope to know the histories of other groups. Said’s (1978) criticism was not directed at the idea of Western scholars studying the East, as Lewis (1982) initially believed, but rather at the West’s imposition of exclusive knowledge upon colonized peoples. Following this logic, the idea that brown people can only study the history of their own societies is an artificially imposed, colonial one. If a white person who is not an Arab can study the Middle East, there is no good reason why I should not be able to as well. Of course, Said’s (1978) ideas must be approached with some degree of caution. Many critiques of Orientalism are well-founded, particularly those constructed by MacKenzie (1995), Gandhi (1998, p. 79), and many Arab scholars (see Sivan, 1985) claiming that Orientalism presents a generalization of Europe, which has been termed Occidentalism and reverse Orientalism.

Regardless, studying other cultures can certainly present difficulties for researchers. In my case, my already-tenuous connection with my heritage through the Spanish language is more unsteady than ever. When I initially began to learn Arabic, my three years’ worth of high school Spanish classes provided a point of access to Arabic’s unfamiliar grammar and pronunciation. For example, like Spanish, Arabic does not require a previously introduced subject to be explicitly mentioned in subsequent sentences due to specific verb conjugation. Both languages have similar-sounding r’s and (non-emphatic) d’s that are softer than the American English equivalents as a result of different ways of forming the letters with one’s mouth. Both Spanish and Arabic also use gendered adjectives, verbs, and non-human nouns. Similarities between these two languages, and corresponding differences with American English, continue from here.

Since I approached Arabic through the framework of Spanish, I initially found myself using Spanish words instead of their Arabic equivalents. For example, when trying to construct a sentence I often automatically employed the Spanish equivalent of the conjunction “but,” *pero*, rather than the Arabic *lakin* or *welakin*. I still do this, albeit briefly, every time I return from a trip to California, where Spanish dominates over other non-English languages. However, once I became more accustomed to Arabic, that language became my closest point of access to Spanish. Now, at the beginning of every California trip, I find myself using Arabic words rather than Spanish ones. My sister once accused me of pronouncing my Spanish *r* too softly—I was using the Arabic phoneme instead. And in the numerous instances where Latin@ strangers address me in Spanish, likely assuming that because I appear Latina, I should be able to speak Spanish, I stare bewildered at them before responding in English. Without fail, these interactions leave me with a great sense of shame. A coconut indeed.

While I am bitter about the presumed loss of

my language, I am far more wary of my and others' criticisms of this loss. Individuals whose languages are threatened sometimes lament the "death" of languages in a way that effaces history and blames the people who "lost" their languages. For instance, Suzanne Talhouk, a Lebanese woman who created an organization to preserve Arabic usage, gave a TED talk in Beirut titled, "Don't Kill Your Language." Talhouk (2012) extensively discussed people's preferences for English or French over Arabic, but did not mention the decades of Western imperialism and then globalization that resulted in the construction of Western languages as prestige languages in the Arab world. Arabic sociolinguist Yasir Suleiman (2011, p. 61-64) at least briefly credits globalization as the cause of English's prestige status, although he does not discuss colonialism.

In rushing to "bestow" agency upon the subaltern, as the West "bestowed" civilization upon the rest of the world, academia has changed the balance of power without fully improving the situation. It is true that, sometimes, marginalized peoples are not only allowed to speak, but their voices are also listened to. However, the world often likes to pretend that marginalized people have more power to affect change than they actually do. Many Latin@s come to the United States as undocumented immigrants, fleeing a lifetime of poverty, the wars on and for drugs, or state oppression, worrying about disease, death, detection, and other perils of the journey across the United States' southern border. They arrive only to find that their job prospects are reduced to manual labor at less than a living wage, and that they have virtually no rights due to their undocumented status. After all of this struggle, American citizens tell them to "go back to Mexico." Evidently, people (only from Mexico and not from any other state) migrate to California to pick grapes and to be sprayed by pesticides, à la Cesar Chavez (Bishop, 1988), because they are bored. Linguists and linguistic anthropologists should strive to write historical context back into these narratives of language death. Dehistoricization not only withholds

accountability from the powerful entities responsible, either directly or indirectly, for language death; it also runs the risk of shaming people for "killing" their own languages.

Dangerous colonial undertones also lurk behind the Western-based discourse on language death. As postcolonialist Rey Chow (1993) explained, the Oriental "Other" was once as wholly distinct from the Western individual as the Orient was from the West. Thus the Orient represented a pure, peaceful, exotic place where its peoples were untroubled by modern Western life, a place that Westerners could visit or study in order to escape. During the modern age of globalization, in Gandhi's (1998) words, "The native is no longer available as the pure, unadulterated object of Orientalist inquiry—she is contaminated by the West, dangerously un-Otherable" (p. 127). Perhaps I am a threat to some Westerners because I have assimilated and am not immediately identifiable as Latina. Since my family is tarnished by whiteness, I have also lost my value as an object of study. I am not living in a "pure," "traditional" culture in a foreign land, nor am I an immigrant who is "ignorant" of the ways of American life. In some respects, the tendency of early-20th-century anthropologists to attempt to preserve knowledge of such cultures lives on today. But in trying to distance ourselves from anthropology's sordid past, we have disconnected history from our present reality.

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