

## **LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, PREFERENCE, AND CO-ETHNICITY**

*Alma Simounet-Géigel*

### **Introduction**

It was not until we established our residence in St. Croix about ten years ago that we realized we were not what we thought we were. For forty-two years my husband and I had referred to ourselves as Puerto Ricans. Hearing us codeswitch from English to Spanish, islanders, U.S. mainlanders and other “anders” would comment in a surprising manner: “Oh, you’re Hispanic,” or as one Crucian expressed to complicate matters more: “I thought you white; you Hispanic.” Thus, we were initiated into what was to be our newly found ethnicity, one which we presumably shared with some Cubans and an impressive number of Dominicans in St. Croix. Throughout our lives we had learned to distinguish ourselves from Argentinians, Mexicans, Cubans, Dominicans, and other Spanish speakers, but, lo and behold, we were now to view ourselves as part of a larger, presumably homogeneous whole.

How the term Hispanic emerged as the official label for millions of Spanish speakers from Central, South, and Caribbean America is succinctly explained by Shorris in his book *Latinos* (1992).

... in 1980 the U.S. Census was on the verge of choosing Latino as the correct word when someone said that it sounded too much like Ladino, the ancient Castillian now spoken only by descendants of the Spanish Jews who went into exile in the fifteenth century. Latino was replaced by Hispanic in the Census. (xvi)

And this is how we all came to be called.

In this paper I will first attempt to show you through the use of data collected in the continental United States that, even though as a Spanish-speaking group we do possess “shared and distinctive values, common ancestry, a collective consciousness and a self-perception as being different from others” (Dow 1991:23), still we ARE different within this ethnicity and it is precisely through the preference and proficiency in our shared language that this coethnicity is manifested. Subsequently, I will describe the sociohistorical circumstances which effected these differences in our language behavior.

### **Language variation**

For centuries distinct groups of peoples have believed that the languages they speak are monolithic entities which should remain intact despite contact with other languages and despite the “transgressions” committed by their own speakers. This view has given rise to the desperate call of “save our language” which today is still found in the daily misinformation spouted out by an impressive number of writers in newspapers and magazines all over the world. In spite of the contributions of sociolinguistics, one of which has been to shed light on this matter, diehard –standard–bearers of the normative proposition of language purity continue to rave about the issue in warlike calls to arms, and to revel at the discovery of the most insignificant “offenses” in the speech and writings of well-known figures.

This quasireligious view of language as an unchangeable whole was first challenged by historical linguists—the great vowel shift and the IndoEuropean family of languages—and dialectologists, who since the beginning of this century have sent out scouts to different regions to record the occurrence of linguistic changes. The great challenge, however, came from sociolinguistics, whose research has uncovered, among other findings, “the recognition of the importance of the fact that language is a very variable phenomenon, and that this variability may have as much to do with social reality as with language. A language is not a simple, single code used in the same

manner by all people in all situations ... “ (Trudgill 1983:32). Moreover, it is never static in its lifetime.

This principle of language variation has explained not only how the same language spoken in noncontiguous geographical areas has developed differently (English in England, the United States Australia) but also how the same language of a speech community which shares territorial space within a nation varies according to setting, social class, gender, age, and others. This variation, of course, like language itself, undergoes constant change. (Trudgill 1983; Holmes 1992) Therefore, this phenomenon results in the varieties of English spoken in the US or that of French in France, or that of Spanish in Spanish-speaking America. In the case of the latter, the varieties of Spanish are the result of not only variation within national boundaries but also of variation from country to country and island to island—from Argentina to Mexico, to Venezuela, to Nicaragua, Cuba, and Puerto Rico, to mention a few.

If we take a quick glance at the immigrants from these countries to the United States, it is rather easy to fall prey to the notion that we are faced with a group of peoples whom we would readily categorize as a rather homogeneous speech community; that is, one that shares not only language but also a similar set of cultural values reflected in attitudes and norms which rule their communicative behavior (Gumperz 1976) or as Hymes states “a community sharing knowledge of rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech” (1974:51).

Yet a more scrutinizing look would unveil a conglomerate of communities whose members, although they do share customs, general cultural patterns and an impressive number of regional varieties of Spanish, “have little interaction with each other,...do not recognize that they have much in common culturally,...and do not profess strong affection for each other” (de la Garza et al. 1992:14). Perhaps because of the language matter, these peoples are readily labeled under the rubric of Latin Americans, and when they are viewed as populous pockets within the territorial domain of the United States, they are classified as Hispanics, a term which in reality refers to the people of Spain, or Hispania, the name given to the Iberian peninsula by the invading Romans.

Ironically, in the United States, the real Hispanics are not included in this term but are identified as Spaniards, or the more

recently coined term European Americans (Alba 1990). Thus the general ethnic umbrella given to these "Latinos" in the U.S. brings together, rather forcefully and arbitrarily, a number of individuals who do not view themselves homogeneously (Simounet-Géigel and Géigel 1991). In the introductory chapter to his book *Latinos*, Shorris (1992) quotes one of his informants who states: "Just tell them who we are and that we are not all alike," (xvixvi). Shorris insists on the existence of a larger group. This leads to the following interchange:

"We are Mejicanos," she responded.

"Hispanic?" I asked.

"Mejicano," she said.

"Hispano, Latino, Latin, Spanish, Spanish-speaking."

"Mejicano," she said.

synthesizes wisely this discussion on identity: "To conflate cultures is to destroy them; to take away the name of a group, as of an individual, is to make pale the existence of the group" (xvi).

In response to this threat of the loss of ethnic identity, a number of qualitative and quantitative studies in addition to autobiographical accounts have been published with the aim of correcting these generalized errors (Santiago 1993; De Sipio and Henson 1992; de la Garza et al. 1992; Shorris 1992). It is as a result of the quality, richness of data, and detailed information contained in the last two publications that they have been selected as the main and major sources for the work presented here together with Grosjean's (1982) major work on bilingualism.

The present study examines the language proficiency and preference of Spanish-English bilingual speakers in the continental United States with the end-in-view of providing evidence of the variation which characterizes the linguistic behavior of the individuals in these groups. It is our belief that it is this variation, in conjunction with other types of variation such as attitudes,

education, socioeconomic status and general communication behavior, which gives support to the principle of the groups coethnic rather than the imposed monolithic categorization.

### **Spanish Speakers in the United States**

It is banal and oversimplistic to describe variation in language proficiency and preference if the two linguistic phenomena are not entrenched within the larger perspective of culture, of which language is a significant componential element. The assumption explicated here is that language is a mirror and carrier of culture, more specifically of ethnic culture; and it is simultaneously a disseminating and perpetuating agent of both the static and dynamic cultural knowledge individuals must possess in order to be continuing bonafide members of their particular ethnic group. Thus to speak convincingly of the differences in the language proficiency and preference of Spanish-English bilinguals in the United States, variation factors at the ethnocultural and social levels of the various groups must by necessity be discussed in order to help explain the currents which generate these differences. Variation is then reflected in the linguistic behavior in diverse manners: phonologically, lexically, syntactically and communicatively.

Although Latinos have come to the United States from almost every Spanish-speaking country in the Americas, the majority of the studies available have concentrated on the Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Cubans. This is basically due to the fact that these three distinct Latino national origin populations are

the largest and politically the most significant... As of March 1990, the Census Bureau estimated that Mexicans constituted 64 percent of all Hispanics, while Puerto Ricans and Cubans were 11 and 5 percent respectively... Together they account for almost 80 percent of the nation's Hispanics ... . (de la Garza et al.:7)

In order to prove our argument of the diversity within these three major groups we will first make reference to the evidence concerning language proficiency and preference according to the results of the 1992 Latino National Political Survey (de la Garza et al.), which from here on will be referred to as the Survey. In this

