

Jennifer Ayres

University of Houston

**“In the middle”: Language Attitudes and Identity among Bilingual
Hispanic-American College Students**

Within the last twenty-five years, an area of interest has developed among language education scholars known as heritage language education research (Valdés, 1997). Heritage language speakers are generally (and for the purposes of the present study) defined as persons whose native, or first, language (which is not English) is passed to them from a previous monolingual, immigrant generation. So, while Spanish (in this case) is spoken at home because these persons grew up in the United States, they have received schooling in English, and have typically received little or no formal education in Spanish. Because this field of investigation is relatively new, there remains a great deal of questions yet unanswered; among those questions identified at the Heritage Language Conference in October 1999, as important to developing better heritage language education programs, were ones regarding the impact of bilingual communities and of parents on heritage learners (S. McGinnis, personal communication, March 5, 2000).

The current project was born out of response to the current dearth of research regarding language experiences and linguistic identity within the heritage language camp. It seeks to investigate what current college students born to Hispanic immigrants have experienced growing up bilingual in the United States. From there, the project examines what attitudes towards and what opinions about both the English and Spanish languages the subjects now have as adults. Finally, what ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identity issues these subjects grapple with will be explored. While the more immediate goals of the project are to help give a voice to this marginalized population and to help instructors of Spanish for Spanish Speakers courses better understand what linguistic/identity issues their students are bringing to the classroom, the broader objectives are to offer a view of what members of the various immigrant language communities in the U.S. are experiencing; and to further the discussion of how bilingual programs in the elementary/secondary/university settings should be designed.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As mentioned, there is still a great need for investigations on language attitudes and identity issues within the heritage language education research community. Delany-Barmann's (1997) study on "needs, attitudes, and characteristics" of heritage learners of Spanish, however, serves as a good introduction to the topic. In looking at a small group of college students in Arizona, who were enrolled in Spanish for Spanish Speakers classes, she finds that while "the Spanish language is a critical part of who [the students] are...[they believe that] a person does not have to know how to speak Spanish in order to be considered Chicano or Latino" (144). In addition, the subjects in that study identified speaking Spanish as a source of pride for them, but admitted that, if not for the home, they would have difficulty maintaining the language.

Although the heritage language education field in particular has been slow to address the relationship between language and identity, other areas of interest within the language learning field in general have begun to investigate the issue. Norton (1997) compares five different studies (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Morgan, 1997; Schecter & Bayley, 1997; and Thesen, 1997) completed within the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) field while imparting conclusions or theories that she has drawn herself over the years regarding language and identity. Norton begins by noting that not all linguists see issues of identity as being important to language studies. Many—including her—however, see the two as inseparable: "...every time language learners speak...they are...engaged in identity construction" (410). Norton follows West (1992) in proposing that a person's identity is defined by his or her abilities, including his or her *language* abilities. In her summary of the conclusions drawn in the five studies, Norton notes that all of the authors arrive at the same assertion: "...identity constructs and is constructed by language" (419).

Although there have been no definitive heritage language studies on language attitudes and identity, the issue(s) has been addressed—albeit parenthetically—within the literature of the field. Both Bernal-Enríquez (2000) and Carreira (2000) speak of the need for validation of the Spanish language within the United States, while Carreira specifically mentions the importance of abolishing the "derisive" attitudes in this country toward the language. Brown (1997) identifies the source of the negativity towards minority languages such as Spanish as "linguicism," a term coined by Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1992 in Brown, 1997) and defined by Brown as "any type of language planning which promotes one language at the expense of another" (227). Both Bernal-Enríquez and Carreira regard Spanish as an important component of the Hispanic identity. Bernal-Enríquez, in studying

socio-historic factors in the loss of Spanish in New Mexico, specifically identifies language as an indicator of both cultural and ethnic identity.

METHODS AND DATA

Sampling Procedure

This research project was conducted during the Spring, 2002 semester at the University of Houston. Ten semi-structured interviews and one directed focus group session were conducted in order to gather data for the study. All interview subjects—six females and four males—are second generation immigrants. That is, they were born in the United States to parents who immigrated here from Central- or South-American countries. They range in age from 19 to 25 years. The focus group participants—five females and two males—are demographically very similar. The subject pool was drawn from three Spanish for Spanish Speakers classes at the university.

Interview Protocol

Both the personal interviews and the focus group discussion followed the same interview schedule, which touched on three general areas: past language experiences, current language attitudes, and identity issues. Each lasted approximately 45 minutes and was recorded on audio-tape. The focus group session was conducted as a comparison/contrast to the interview data.

Data Analysis

After transcribing each interview and the focus group session, the data were coded according to three broad categories and several more specific sub-categories. The first general category considered was input about the languages. Any experience related by the subject which indicated to him/her an opinion or attitude about the English or the Spanish language was considered here. The “input” could have been direct (i.e., a parent might have told the subject that Spanish was part of their heritage), or it could have been indirect or inferred (i.e., the subject related that s/he had always had the *impression* that his/her parents thought a certain way about the languages). Three important sources of input were identified in the transcriptions: parents/home, school/teachers/peers, and extended family “back home.” The second main category that was coded was their realities now. Data that address how the subject currently views being English-speaking, being Spanish-speaking, and being bilingual fall under this heading. The third and final main category identified

was outcome: Does language equal identity for these subjects? Here, the subjects' responses to the closing questions on ethnic, cultural, and language identity were considered.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

Input About the Languages

Parents/home: "My dad would say, 'you go outside you speak English, but in the house you speak Spanish.'" (JJ 5)¹

Among all interview subjects and nearly all focus group participants, the rule of home when they were children was "Spanish only." When asked why this was, the first reason reported was usually a simple one: My parents do not speak English. Upon further probing, however, more deliberate reasons were revealed:

I remember when I was young I would always try to speak English to my grandparents [who I lived with]. And they were always like, "No! No! You need to speak Spanish with us...because it's very important!" (Miguel 10)

Many participants reported that their parents iterated time and again the importance of maintaining their Spanish; they saw it as a vital part of maintaining ties with their cultural heritage and with their families "back home" in their countries of origin.

Not all input from the home was direct. In fact, quite a bit of the messages these subjects took from their parents were simply observations that they themselves made about their parents' lives. The following is quite representative of what the subjects of this study expressed:

[Not speaking English] has been a barrier to [my mom] because she's had to take jobs that {pause} I wouldn't say 'demeaning'...she worked... cleaning tables in the cafeteria. (Patricia 4)

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

It seems that, as children, these subjects were soaking in quite a bit of detail from their parents and home environment. According to these subjects, their parents also sent them clear messages about the importance of English in school:

Actually, when I was in school they tried to force me to be in bilingual classes, but my parents were really against it...How are you supposed to learn English when they're speaking to you in Spanish? (Isabel 2)

Therefore, the message from home was clear to these subjects as children: Your heritage equals Spanish, school equals English.

School/teachers/peers: "Well, they would say, 'you'll get detention or we'll send you to the principal's office—you can't speak Spanish.'" (Carmen 3)

If the message from their parents about school meaning English was not clear, there was certainly no room for doubt once the children got to school. Most participants either remembered being told they would be punished for speaking Spanish anywhere on school grounds or said that it was simply "understood" that they were not supposed to speak Spanish *in class*. There were countless tales among the participants of teachers telling them that it was rude to speak "that Spanish stuff" and reminding them that they were in "America" and should therefore speak English.

Extended family "back home": " 'What?! What are you talking about? That's not a word!' " (Lourdes 16)

Although these participants' parents are accepting of their children's Spanish, their monolingual relatives in their countries of origin are less than supportive of their young bilingual kin's efforts. It was an all-too-common statement by the study participants that their Spanish was ridiculed upon visiting their parents' homeland. All who spoke of this situation admitted that they were bothered at least a little bit by the jibes from their extended family. Many used the word "embarrassed" to describe how they felt upon either not knowing a word in Spanish or using a loanword or calque² from English. Although a few subjects looked to their monolingual relatives for help in "improving" their Spanish, others had more serious reactions:

They would laugh sometimes because we'd say things wrong. But I wouldn't mind asking them 'how do you say that?' (Isabel 4)

I'm really confident with my Spanish, but when I go to Mexico they tear me down: "You don't speak it right..." (MJ5)

The Realities of Now

Soon after beginning the analysis of the data, a pattern of "selves" began to emerge. It became clear that anytime the participants were speaking about their schooling, their jobs or their future careers, they were talking about English. And anytime they were responding to a question on their culture or ethnicity, they were referring to Spanish. And then there was an intriguing third component of their lives: being bilingual, to which no particular "self" seemed to belong.

The English self: "English is the most useful language I have...all my papers, all my studies, all my work, my career—everything is in English." (David 14)

When speaking of their professional lives—whether their current jobs, their college studies or their future careers—all of the subjects spoke in the context of English. When asked if one could "make it" in this country without the majority language, the response was almost always the same:

You can't live in the United States and not know English. (MaB 16)

It should be noted that none of the participants expressed any defined pride in their English. While there were certainly no negative feelings about the language, there were also no particularly positive feelings about it. There was simply a neutrality; the subjects do not express any emotions when it comes to this language.

The Spanish self: "Spanish is kind of who I am...without it, I'm without a culture." (Ana 11)

If the English self dominates the professional life, it is the Spanish self that clearly handles the participants' cultural/ethnic life. Each interview was opened with the question, "What do you think of when you hear the word 'Spanish'?" Almost all responded at first that they think of the/a/their language, and then, when probed, expanded that to *their* "heritage" or "culture." Almost all participants overtly expressed that they feel a sense of pride in their first language:

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

I'm still proud that I know Spanish because it helps me speak to different people. (Carmen 11)

The bilingual self (?): "It was kind of two little worlds that I had to live in." (Patricia 7)

Bilingualism is clearly a part of these subjects' lives. It is something that they talk about often in their interviews, something that they live with daily. What is not clear, however, is where this facet of their lives belongs. It obviously cannot fit squarely into just the English self or just the Spanish self. Unfortunately, there are no obvious patterns within the data to help us locate this very important aspect of their lives.

A definite overlap of being bilingual and the English (professional) self was noted among nearly all subjects:

Bilingual people get paid more...So it's like an added bonus. (Carmen 1)

There is a little bit more of a positive sentiment, however, with being bilingual than with being English-speaking; it is seen by the subjects as something "extra" that will help them professionally.

When looking for any possible overlaps between this proposed bilingual self and the Spanish (or cultural/ethnic) self, the pattern found was definite: Trying to reconcile being Spanish-speaking with being bilingual creates a great sense of frustration. For most, the frustration was in trying to claim a culture (the Hispanic one) that does not speak the language that they spend much of their life in (English). Many sheepishly *admitted* that they were "too Americanized." It seems that their bilingual status has interfered with their Spanish-speaking culture.

The Relationship between Language and Identity

"It wasn't about being white, it wasn't about being Mexican...it was about being me." (Isabel 6)

Upon exploring what the participants here had to say on the relationship between language and identity, several common opinions emerged. The most obvious pattern among the data was confusion: Participants either did not know what to call themselves, were not sure of what all the ethnic labels mean or both. For Daniel—and many others—the language one speaks does not help to determine one's identity:

Just because I speak Spanish doesn't make me 'Mexican-American.' (21)

And there was a telling trend among many of the interview subjects regarding language and identity:

{Should people of Mexican descent who don't speak Spanish still call themselves 'Mexican-American'?) {long pause} No, I don't feel that they should. (Lourdes 26)

In fact, many participants spoke of language and identity interchangeably. One even addressed the issue head-on (and with no prompting!):

Well, both [languages] are part of my identity now. (Sonia 14)

It seems to be this close association of language and identity that has prompted the confusion among the participants as to their identity: With two languages, they do not seem to know what to call themselves:

I guess I consider myself "other" because I'm neither one nor the other; I'm a little bit of both. (Rodolfo 6)

DISCUSSION

One major conclusion becomes clear upon analyzing the data identified as "input about the languages:" These subjects are receiving very strong messages about both English and Spanish from a variety of sources. First and foremost, their parents plant the seed of the importance of Spanish as being a vital link to their heritage, roots, and ethnic identity while English is equated with school and, therefore, professional success. Input about English from their teachers and peers has been the same, but with regards to Spanish, it has not been as positive. In addition, almost all participants in this study spoke about being chided about their Spanish by their monolingual relatives "back home"—members of the culture with which they are trying so desperately to connect through the language.³ Due in large part to these particular messages, there seems to be great concern among these heritage speakers that their Spanish is not "correct."⁴ As we move into the discussion later of the relationship between language and identity, this belief obviously presents some serious implications.

Two very clear, very distinct identities were observed among these subjects. The cultural or ethnic identity seems to be located within the Spanish-speaking self. While

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

there were a few participants who expressed (with some reservation) that they identify more with the American or Anglo (read, *English-speaking*) culture, for the most part the participants agreed that they were culturally and ethnically Hispanic (read, *Spanish-speaking*).

Overwhelmingly, because Spanish has been presented to the participants by their parents as the “core” of their culture, they are proud of it. They identify with it. They think it is “beautiful, passionate.” They embrace it. But it is not something that they *must* have; it is a “plus,” an added skill. However, they are told from nearly every direction (whether overtly or not) that it will not *do* anything for them by itself. That, in the absence of English, Spanish is a barrier.

Professional or academic identity, however, is another matter. Without exception, the key to professional success for these subjects is mastery of the English language. Because they so heavily equate academics and their professional careers, it is understandable that the “English equals success” association would be made by them. Therefore, they see English as something that they *must* have, but it is not something that they embrace.

These observations about the dual (or dueling?) identities of these bilingual Hispanic-Americans lead us to a very important question: If the key components of one’s overall identity (namely culture/ethnicity and profession/success) are divided between two selves—between two languages—where does this leave them? Can they not reconcile or somehow combine these two selves? The answers to these questions—and perhaps more questions!—may be found in the subjects’ attitudes toward and discussions of their bilingualism. Throughout their lives, these participants are told that being bilingual is a great skill, and that is exactly how they see it—as a skill that has payoffs.

For all of the connections made by the subjects between language and identity, however, not one person answered the question “How do you identify yourself?” with the bicultural (and bilingual?) term “Hispanic-American.” They either do not seem to be aware of their bilingual self, or they do not quite know how to get in touch with it. Although in theory it would seem to be the perfect solution to their identity confusion, being bilingual—Hispanic-American—just does not seem to be accessible to them as an answer to “who they are.” They seem to think that they must choose either black or white; they do not seem to be aware of the possibility of gray. Jones-Correa and Leal (1996) note that there is no “Hispanic identity” because “Hispanics...share neither a common culture nor a common history” (216). This is unarguably the case with these Hispanic-Americans. They do not share a common history (or language, for that matter) with either monolingual Hispanics “back home” or with Anglo-Americans. They look around, and there is no one “like them.” Perhaps if given access to people who are like them—whose cultural/ethnic and

professional identities and languages are not in sync—these participants would be able to access their bilingual selves and, therefore, have a clear and confident answer to “who they are.”

CONCLUSION

The present study in no way pretends to answer all the questions surrounding identity issues among bilingual Hispanic-Americans. Rather it serves as a starting point, as merely a glimpse into the world (or worlds?) of children of language minority immigrants to this country. Obviously, there are many limitations to the work done here. First, we cannot ignore what so many of the study’s participants reiterated: Every American of Latino descent is *different*. Because Spanish for Spanish Speakers classes are populated by members of various generations, a look at these other groups is needed. Another limitation of this study that cannot be ignored is that of location; Houston is one of the most ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse cities in the nation. It would be interesting to see what (if anything) is different for immigrant communities in other cities.

In addition to addressing the limitations mentioned, further research on this topic should include, among other things, interviews with the first generation parents and observations of bilingual classrooms in elementary schools and heritage language classes at universities.

The hope here is that this study will be one of the first of many steps in helping educators of bilingual Hispanic-Americans better serve their students. The more that educators understand their students, the more informed and *positive* their attitudes towards both Spanish and English will be. And the more positively the languages—and in fact bilingualism—are presented to these vital, valuable members of our society, the more easily they will be able to identify with their bilingual, bicultural selves, and the less confusion they will suffer thinking that they must choose one language over the other. This surely would be preferable to the disturbing, unjust alternative that they feel they must currently live, for “to reject one’s...language”—either language—“is to reject oneself” (Gloria Rodríguez in Artze, 2000, 34).

NOTES

1. Subject initials or pseudonym followed by page number of transcript where quote may be found.
2. The term ‘loanword’ refers to a word that is transferred from one language (here, English) into another (Spanish), with only the pronunciation and spelling changing. For example, “lunch” has been loaned into Spanish as “lonche.” ‘Calque’ refers to the literal translation of an expression. In most instances, the “new” word or expression already existed in another form in the standard variety of the receiving language. Both loanwords and calques are common occurrences of U.S. Spanish due to that language’s relationship with the dominant language English.

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

3. This does match with what Delany-Barmann's participants have experienced.
4. Indeed, wanting to learn "proper" Spanish was the most common reason stated by my participants, as well as those of Delany-Barmann.

APPENDIX A. Participant Data

Table 1. Interview Subject Characteristics

SUBJECT	AGE	SEX	COUNTRY OF BIRTH	PARENTS' COUNTRY OF BIRTH
Ana	19	F	U.S.	El Salvador
Carmen	21	F	U.S.	Mexico
Daniel	22	M	U.S.	Mexico
David	21	M	U.S.	Cuba
Isabel	22	F	U.S.	Mexico
Lourdes	22	F	U.S.	Mexico
Miguel	22	M	U.S.	Mexico/ Argentina
Patricia	21	F	U.S.	Mexico
Rodolfo	25	M	U.S.	Venezuela/U.S.
Sonia	22	F	U.S.	Mexico

Table 2. Focus Group Participant Characteristics

PARTICIPANT	AGE	SEX	COUNTRY OF BIRTH	PARENTS' COUNTRY OF BIRTH
DD	20	F	U.S.	U.S.
JJ	27	M	U.S.	Mexico
KM	26	F	Mexico	Mexico
MJ	20	F	U.S.	Mexico
MG	19	F	U.S.	Mexico
MaB	21	F	U.S.	Colombia
MiB	20	M	U.S.	Colombia

A JOURNAL OF THE CÉFIRO GRADUATE STUDENT ORGANIZATION

APPENDIX B. Interview Schedule

Meaning / emotional associations with “Spanish”
Language issues in the home as a child / adolescent
Language issues with school / teachers / peers
Monolingual family members’ opinions of / reactions to your Spanish
Which language is most important?
Success possible in U.S. without English?
Experiences with racial and/or linguistic discrimination
Reasons for taking Spanish class now
Relationship of language to culture
Cultural identity / ethnic description
Linguistic identity
Typical Hispanic-American?
Anything else?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Artze, I. (2000). To be and not to be: Can Latinos simulataneously integrate into America and preserve their identity?. Hispanic, 13, (10), 32-34.
- Bernal-Enríquez, Y. (2000). Factores socio-históricos en la pérdida del español del suroeste de los Estados Unidos y sus implicaciones para la revitalización. In A. Roca (Ed.), Research on Spanish in the U.S. (pp. 121-136). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press.
- Brown, K. (1997). A world language perspective: English, French, and Spanish. In K. Bardovi-Harlig & B. Hartford (Eds.), Beyond Methods: Components of second language teacher education (pp. 219-239). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Carreira, María. (2000). Validating and promoting Spanish in the United States: Lessons from linguistic science. Bilingual Research Journal, 24, (4), 333-352.
- Chávez, L. (1998). Our Hispanic predicament. Commentary, 105, (6), 47-50.
- Delany-Barmann, G. (1997). United States native Spanish speakers and their Spanish language education: Needs, attitudes, and characteristics. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northern Arizona University, Arizona.
- Félix-Ortiz, M., Newcomb M., & Myers, H. (1994). A multidimensional measure of cultural identity for Latino and Latina adolescents. Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 16, (2), 99-115.
- Jones-Correa, M., & Leal, D. (1996). Becoming “Hispanic”: Secondary panethnic identification among Latin American-origin populations in the United States. Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 18, (2), 214-254.

- Marino Weisman, E. (2001). Bicultural identity and language attitudes: Perspectives of four Latina teachers. Urban Education, 36, (2), 203-225.
- Norton, B. (1997). Language, identity, and the ownership of English. TESOL Quarterly, 31, (3), 409-429.
- Portes, A., & MacLeod, D. (1996). What shall I call myself?: Hispanic identity formation in the second generation. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 19, (3), 523-547.
- Valdés, G. (1997). The teaching of Spanish to bilingual Spanish-speaking students: Outstanding issues and unanswered questions. In M. Colombi & F. Alarcón (Eds.), La enseñanza del español a hispanohablantes: Praxis y teoría (pp. 8-40). Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Zimmerman, R., Vega, W., Gil, A., Warheit, G., Apospori, E., & Biafora, F. (1994). Who is Hispanic?: Definitions and their consequences. American Journal of Public Health, 84, (12), 1985-1987.