

Language Policing in East Los Angeles: Ideologies of Value and Parenthood in Court-Mandated Classes

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“Um, they just told me that they were gunna like try and put him in a program, like if I was okay with it. Uh, just for one language.” In this quote, a key informant, whom I’ll call Nancy, describes an instance when the principal of her son’s school asked her to come in for a discussion because her son was speaking Spanglish.

Language ideologies structure how individuals represent phenomena of the world, how ideas are represented, and how humans represent themselves. Through a communicative practices approach to speech, language, and social context, my mentor, Professor William F. Hanks in the department of Anthropology, has shown that “If language and culture are mutually constituting, then neither can be taken to be the cause or the simple consequence of the other. Hence, it is not that people must share a grammar, but that they must share, to a degree, ways of orienting themselves in social context” [5, p. 234].

My research project asks how Latino parents orient themselves linguistically through the California State apparatus of family law court agencies and the surrounding linguistic community. I examine the associated policing of the linguistic and behavioral practices of these individuals within the context of weekly court mandated parenting classes and participant observation in East Los Angeles. I argue that *language policing* occurs within fields of varying power relationships, where different valuations of linguistic capital and practice can have considerable consequences for parents in their ability to retain or regain custody of their children. By language policing, I mean the practice of maintaining the status quo of acceptable language use, by detecting linguistic deviations, and enforcing rules of acceptable utterances.

Parents in East Los Angeles exhibit a *sens pratique*, where they naturally and automatically must align their speech practices to that of the dominant language ideology in order to gain symbolic distinction and legitimacy, and to remove themselves from surveillance by the state [8, p. 19].

I will ethnographically illustrate three points:

(A) A shared use of Spanglish in the barrios of East Los Angeles composes the everyday communicative practices of my informants. Despite a long history in the area, Spanglish is removed of any profit of distinction or legitimacy within dominant social institutions.

(B) Symbolic capital is assigned to bodies that exhibit qualities that are found to be “legitimate” by a qualifying institution. In a field of relations, a lack of symbolic capital reinforces differences of power, therefore propagating power exercised over others. The reinforcing of deficits of symbolic capital is defined by Pierre Bourdieu as symbolic violence. Linguistic capital is therefore a *kind* of symbolic capital, since language can be used as a mechanism for control and mediation [6, p. 69].

(C) By way of acquiring linguistic capital, individuals from the East Los Angeles barrios can secure linguistic value and distinction, but in doing so are institutionally and systematically censored of their natural speech acts. This is dependent on *orientating oneself linguistically* to the reception of an audience that values or disqualifies linguistic capital.

I draw on Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital in order to conceptually engage the notion that individuals in East Los Angeles orient themselves linguistically according to the institutions of power they find themselves in. In the context of my research, the California State courts, certified therapy programs, and the educational system comprise the dominant institutions. This is to say that the value of linguistic capital, which according to Bourdieu is the capacity to produce expressions for a particular language market, is dependent on this institution of power [8, p. 18]. The institution controls the linguistic market, which distributes linguistic capital according to the limited amount of linguistic resources available [1, p. 60]. In order to understand language policing on a conceptual, political, and ethical level among Latino parents East Los Angeles, I conducted participant observation at a weekly court mandated parenting course that serves twelve to eighteen Chicano/Latino parents. These individuals introduced me to other parents who live in the barrios, the neighborhood districts of the government housing projects of Boyle Heights and those of Ramona Gardens. In addition to my participant observation in the surrounding East Los Angeles community, I also conducted informal and semi-structured interviews with parent-residents of the projects here mentioned.

Not everyone speaks Spanglish in East Los Angeles. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, Spanglish is “often considered by the purist and by most Latinos [as] deficient, a mutilation of Spanish” [2, p. 58]. Although it is far from being a “language” that is formally taught, Spanglish is a dominant form of communication spoken Chicanos and Latinos living in the East Los Angeles barrios. According to the last census, East Los Angeles currently holds the highest percentage of Chicanos and Latinos in the country, where 97% of the population identifies as Hispanic [9]. Spanglish is used by “people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English” [2, p. 55].

According to Tomas Benitez, although there have been many waves of im-

migration to the East Los Angeles area after its incorporation by the United States, its present day population has remained stable for over the past 50 to 75 years [1]. One of my informants could date her family's presence in the area back to the 1800s, where her ancestors, part Spanish and part indigenous, were buried at the San Gabriel mission. These demographics have provided for a linguistic environment where the Chicano/Latino population has been able to use elements of both Spanish and English, rather than just one or the other [7, p. 23]. Generations of people in East Los Angeles have had considerable time to develop their own speech practices, discursive style, and ideology.

In the following excerpt, Nancy describes how the principal at her son's school asked her to bring her entire family to a meeting so that they could learn how to speak to her son in English:

They try to say like, okay if he don't have this level, this level reading score, like they could um, throw the socials on me or something, and I'm like yeah, you have the meeting with the teacher, the I don't know what, the principal, and the social worker, so if she sees that I don't have to write something, or if the teacher's saying that he's too slow or something, that she could like, come against me. Every year I have that meeting.

This example shows that Latino parents, who have not been accused of child abuse, can be targeted by school officials in order to police the way that they speak to their children. Although no evidence of abuse nor neglect was found, it was treated as though speaking Spanglish was threatening enough to the child's well being that a social worker would be called to investigate. The entire family is asked to come into the school for meetings once a year to address this "problem." Nancy describes the observers and experts who evaluate the problem, the teacher, the principle, the social worker, and also the unknown "I don't know what" that could come against her. In the phrase, "throw the socials on me," throwing is indicative of a forceful action, here one that is imposed, interrupting her agency.

English is seen as the professional language of the school and state system, and therefore is awarded the most linguistic capital. Formal English and formal Spanish are enforced as the legitimate languages to be spoken in class, whether at the court-mandated parenting class or at an elementary school in East Los Angeles. Aware of the stigma associated with Spanglish as a "bastard language" that Gloria Anzaldúa describes, I expected parents to say that they spoke "English and Spanish" in their homes [2, p. 58]. As parents proudly explained that they spoke "Spanglish," I made sense of this as a strategy to orient themselves in a context that lies between the dominant language ideologies of English and Spanish. However, there was also a pride associated with being from the barrios of East Los Angeles was intrinsically tied to speaking Spanglish. Nancy illustrates this when she says, "I was born and raised I went to Murchison, and I've always been Spanglish." As a locutionary act, referring to the surface meaning of this utterance, this expression states that Nancy was born and raised in the

East Los Angeles area. As an illocutionary act, referring to its intended meaning, the expression states how Nancy's identity is intrinsically tied to Spanglish. Spanglish has always been part of the indexical "I."

While I did not set out to study Spanglish as a dominant discourse, my work in the field soon proved that to ignore the ideologies of Spanglish versus English or Spanglish versus Spanish would be to miss an important aspect of my informants' cultural pride and also of their embodied language policing. As Anzaldúa describes, "ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity" for my informants [2, p. 81]. Therefore what occurs is not only the policing of a language practice, but the de-legitimizing of an identity that is tied to Spanglish.

The court-mandated parenting class in which I conducted my participant observation is taught in English and Spanish, demonstrating accessibility to the surrounding community. As a space in between the California Family Law Courts and the lived communities of East Los Angeles, the court mandated parenting class is a real-life locus for observation of dialogue between the two spaces. Yet as a paragovernmental apparatus, the agency must work with cases under the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County Children and Family Services Department and County of Los Angeles Court systems. The use of complete Spanish, like the Spanish translations in instructor Barbara's parenting course, is associated with higher education, the court system, and the law. While both English and Spanish are used one after the other by both the parents and the instructor, Spanglish is rarely heard within the hour long course.

The following linguistic exchange takes place during a parenting class, where Barbara describes fathers who provide for their families financially but are not involved in their children's personal lives, as absentee fathers. Barbara, the class instructor, asks if this is normal, and a Latino father, whom I'll call David, spoke up in class:

D: Pero yo creo que estos son sentimientos que vienen de una cultura que tenemos, que es el papa que tenemos que trabajar y salir adelante...

[But I believe that those are feelings that come from a culture that we have, that is the father that we have to work and get ahead.]

Barbara: Y no piensa que eso es negativo?

[And you (formal) don't think that that is negative?]

D: No no creo, es eso, sino que así son las cosas en nuestra cultura.

[No, no, it's none of that (neither negative nor positive), that's just how things are in our culture.]

B: He doesn't see it as negativity, so my question was do you see it as normal. Las cosas que no están bien, empiezan a sentirse normal. Seguimos con lo mismo porque pensamos que es normal.

[The things that are not right begin to feel normal. We continue with the same (old habits) because we think that it's normal.]

Here we see that the parent, who speaks in Spanish, holds the opinion that the role of the so-called absentee father is supported by Latino culture, which values a man who works hard to support his family. Barbara asks him in Spanish if he thinks that being absent due to constant work is a negative trait. When he responds again with a negative, she responds in English, therefore no longer addressing him, saying “he doesn’t see it as negativity,” pointing out to the other parents that his view is incorrect, that he does not “see” or “understand” the truth. She then refers to her previous question where she asked if absentee fathers are a normal occurrence, implying that to think so is incorrect. She returns to Spanish to say that things which are not okay begin to feel normal, redirecting her lesson at David. She uses the word “seguimos,” (*we continue*) in the first person plural, in order to show that this trait is not solely his to correct, but also that of the rest of the group. Here, Barbara redefines “normal” to “negative” and through her code switching enforces a linguistic symbolic violence whereupon the absentee parent is chastised and reminded of his place on the lower end of authority.

According to Foucault’s concept of a disciplinary society based on panoptic surveillance, individuals who are not aligned with the will of the dominant power, in this case the state’s codes and policies on the treatment of children become labeled as “abnormal” by “scientifically” justifying their ostracism, incarceration, or rehabilitation [4, p. 131]. Parents in East Los Angeles are conscious of the fact that anyone, from neighbors to school-teachers to discontented family members, could call the police department or social services to investigate, and if there is a reason to suspect child abuse, children can be removed. In order to regain custody or obtain visiting hours with their children, parents must complete a certain number of hours within a certified family therapy course. Once mandated to attend these classes, there is a stigma of abnormality assigned to the body of these individuals, which through imposed class time schedules, rules of turns at talk, and discursive exercises, works to form a more obedient subject and rehabilitated parent.

Each of these spheres of language ideologies structure how certain ways of speaking and being are imposed and later normalized. Spanglish is referred to as a problem, a non-language, a “linguistic aberration” compared to a “legitimate” instruction in English or Spanish [2, p. 58]. There is a disconnect in the way that state agencies that police physical and emotional abuse become politically and socially mobilized to target a specific language practice. Investigations by social workers that are initiated because of a speech practice, namely, a parent speaking Spanglish, can be explained by a power relationship between what is enforced as a legitimate way to speak versus what speech practices are institutionally marginalized. In linguistic exchange, symbolic violence is rendered to an individual who lacks the appropriate linguistic capital [8, p. 24]. As identity and culture are also negotiated, the mechanisms of that negotiation are affected by institutions defining the boundaries of permissible acting and speaking.

As part of my participant observation in East Los Angeles, I attended a conference at the California State University. At the MALCS conference, short

for *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* or Active Women in Letters and Social Change, educators, students, and activists were very proud of their Chicano Spanglish, Tex-Mex, and Pachuco language styles. Although I was in an institution of higher education, my use of formal Spanish and formal English no longer endowed me with a valued, special, or legitimate position in the field. I felt pressured to orient my speech practices accordingly, mixing Spanish and English, in order to legitimize myself as “Chicana Latina enough,” while to use the same communicative practice 1.7 miles away at an elementary school could cause a mother to be investigated by agents of the state.

This experience highlights that individuals seeking to acquire linguistic capital, consciously and unconsciously, must orient themselves according to the dominant language ideology of the surrounding linguistic market. The theme of my work centers on the power relationships between the dominant language ideologies of the state of California and those of the East Los Angeles community. If we take the court-mandated parenting class as an intersection between the state and Latino parents in East Los Angeles, we see that strategies of linguistic orientating and practice are examples of embodied language policing. Conceptually, identity formation is tied to a politics of culture. And if we say that language and culture are mutually constituting, then language must be a site where the struggle for identity is negotiated and further where linguistic policing orientates identity formation.

Thus my argument focuses on the political and ethical implications of linguistic policing on identity as they are significant in the case of my informants. Speaking in the “wrong” or “illegitimate” language creates a political and ethical struggle for legitimacy as a parent and further as a human being. The parents in my study must be careful in the way they represent themselves in their linguistic and social behavior, because the consequences of not doing so may lead to their devaluation as suitable parents and the subsequent removal of their children.

References

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