The Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict

Matthew Evans, Lesley Jeffries, Jim O’Driscoll

“You are shamed for speaking it or for not speaking it good enough”

Publication details
Pilar G. Blitvich
Published online on: 23 May 2019

How to cite :- Pilar G. Blitvich. 23 May 2019, “You are shamed for speaking it or for not speaking it good enough” from: The Routledge Handbook of Language in Conflict Routledge
Accessed on: 26 Sep 2023

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
21

“‘You are shamed for speaking it or for not speaking it good enough’”

The paradoxical status of Spanish in the US Latino community

Pilar G. Blitvich

21.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to explore the conflictual dynamics behind one of the six thematic contents (see Section 21.3 below), namely the paradoxical status of the Spanish language within the Latino community in the US, that have been found to make up the matrix upon which the Latino identity is constructed (Garcés-Conejos et al., 2013).

According to the Pew Research Center (2017),\(^1\) overall, some 62 percent of Hispanics\(^2\) aged 5 to 17 and 72 percent of Hispanic Millennials\(^3\) speak Spanish at home. In contrast, eight-in-ten or more Hispanic Gen-Xers (80 percent), Boomers (80 percent) and Silent or Greatest Generation adults (83 percent) speak Spanish in their homes. As a result, the share of all Hispanics who speak Spanish at home has started to decline, and the use of English-only in the home has increased.

This decrease may be the result, among other factors, of the powerful social stigma that, for decades, encouraged assimilation at the expense of preserving Latino cultural heritage and subjected the use of the Spanish language to a deeply racialised attack (Davis and Moore, 2014). However, despite the growing proportion of non-Spanish-speaking Latinos in the US, the language issue is still thorny for those who find their identities or Latinidad questioned over not being able to speak Spanish. Indeed, use of Spanish remains an object of ethnic pride/solidarity among the Latino population, but it is also seen as an obstacle for upward mobility. A positive social identity is associated with Spanish-English bilingualism within these communities. Speaking only Spanish is seen as a weakness, but there is an expectation that Latinos will nevertheless be fluent in Spanish (Dicker, 2006, Velez-Rendon, 2007).

Although Latino issues and collective politics, such as the community’s use of Spanish, have received significant attention from scholars and policy analysts, less attention has been given to the micro-processes involved in everyday interaction among US Latinos (Negron, 2014). Even less attention has been paid to online, micro-processes of Latino identity construction (but see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2018, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Bou-Franch, 2014, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013). This chapter aims to help fill in...
Paradoxical status for US Latinos

this gap by facilitating a more nuanced understanding of the ethnic and racialised processes involved in the reaction to and treatment of the use of Spanish in the US and how these crucially impact Latinos of different generations regarding their self-perceptions of in/out groupness.

To this end, a corpus of comments in response to a video clip of the Nuyorican poet Noel Quiñones’s piece “8 Confessions of My Tongue” in which he explores the struggles of asserting one’s identity, roots and culture even when you can’t master its native language was collected and analysed. The analysis was grounded in the concept of networked narrative (Page et al., 2013), where each comment was seen as a parallel story or an evaluation of others’ shared stories contributing to an elaborated networked narrative on the interconnections between Latino identity and Spanish. This networked narrative constructs the Latino identity as one that is in turmoil. English-only versus bilingualism ideologies, and racialised brownness versus whiteness positions associated with different levels of language proficiency, among others, lie at the core of the Latino identity.

The chapter is structured as follows: Section 21.2 provides a brief historical contextualisation of Spanish in the US. In Section 21.3, the Latino identity, Latinidad, and processes of racialisation are explored. Section 21.4 contains the methods used in the analysis, justifies the selection of the data, explains the coding process and provides an account of the theoretical framework deployed in the analysis. Section 21.5 presents the results of the analysis that are then discussed in Section 21.6. Concluding remarks and suggestions for future research are found in Section 21.7.

21.2 Spanish in the US – A brief historical contextualisation

Since 1513, when Juan Ponce de León landed in modern Florida, Spanish has had a constant presence in what is now the US. Many other settlements followed that initial one. In fact, Spanish was already in place and vibrant when English-speaking colonisers arrived West, and in the late 18th century, Spanish territories encompassed more than half of what is the US today (Carreira, 2013). By the mid-19th century, there were around 100,000 Spanish speakers in New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona and Texas. However, the US–Mexico war (1846–48) that annexed to the US large former Mexican territories changed the status of Spanish in the US forever. Spanish speakers in those territories became subordinate to the US and to English. Spanish was no longer a respected language (Ovando, 2014), a sentiment that continues to the present day. To get a better sense of how this sentiment has sedimented in mainstream American culture, it is useful to take a closer look at history. In his insightful paper on the origins and future of Spanish in the US, Ovando (2014) divides the history of US Spanish into four periods. Out of the four, the dismissive period is of the utmost importance to the present study. The United States, as a country, has never had an official language, although Standard American English has been dominant. However, it was not until the 1980s that anti-minority politics demanded that English be protected legally, and other languages restricted. The English-only movement was behind those changes. In 1982, California Senator Hayakawa introduced an amendment to immigration legislation (S. 2222) in support of English as the official language of the United States. Hayakawa’s amendment stated:

It is the sense of the Congress that –(1) the English language is the official language of the United States, and(2) no language other than the English language is recognised as the official language of the United States.
On 17 August 1982, it was agreed to in Senate by a Yea–Nay Vote of 78–21. Legislation in support of the English-only movement has been possible, in part, due to the powerful lobby backing it up. A year after introducing the amendment, Senator Hayakawa and activist John Tanton founded the US English organisation. Its mission was to promote the use of English in the political, economic and intellectual spheres of the nation. Although the bill sponsored by Senator Hayakawa never became law, the English-only movement, with US English behind it, has been quite successful. Since the 1980s, 27 states have adopted English as their official language, for a total of 32 states, stretching from coast to coast and across the political spectrum. However, as of today, no English-only laws have been passed at a national level.

If one looks at statistics, it is no coincidence that the English-only movement took off in the 1980s, when a major increase in the numbers of non-European immigrants began, and which has continued until the present time. This increase resulted, in part, from the passing of the 1965 Immigration Act, which brought an end to the quota system based on national origin (Molesly, 1988). Most of these non-European immigrants spoke Spanish. Indeed, per the 2015 census, the number of Spanish speakers had risen from 11 million (5 percent of the population) in 1980 to 41 million (14 percent of the population) in 2015. According to the American Community Survey 2015, endorsed by the United States Census Bureau, the three most common languages spoken in the home with speakers older than five are English (237 million), Spanish (40 million) and Chinese (3.3 million).

It is obvious from the numbers above that the fundamentally political English-only movement especially targeted Spanish and Spanish-speakers, due to their growing prominence (see, among others, Zentella, 1997). As de Rossi (2012) argues, crucial ways in which the English-only movement has targeted minority languages have been suppressing bilingual educational programs and replacing them with short-term transitional programs (see also Ovando, 2003). Thus, the emphasis is put on quick assimilation and English monolingualism rather than on bi-culturalism and bilingualism. Quick emphasis on assimilation may be one of the reasons why rates of intergenerational transmission of Spanish among US Latinos are on the decline. These lower rates are also associated with the negative attitudes to Spanish and US Latinos that started right after the US–Mexico war flared up in the last decades (Carreira, 2013).

21.3 The Latino identity

These negative attitudes towards Spanish and US Latinos need to be contextualised in a deep understanding of the Latino identity. The main difference between the Latino and other migrant groups is that the latter had a distinct and recognisable national identity (Turkish, German, etc.) prior to leaving their homeland. Latinos, in contrast, leave their countries of origin as Salvadorians, Cubans, Mexicans and so forth, only to become Latinos in the context of the US, as they acquire their new host culture (Mendieta, 2000). “Latino”/“Hispanic” is thus a top-down, imposed identity, one that was created by the Nixon administration in the 1970 census (Morales, 2002) to refer to all immigrants that could trace their roots back to Latin America/Spain.

Following van Dijk (1998) and applying Wodak et al.’s (1998) methodology, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al. (2013) unveiled six dimensions included in the matrix of thematic contents on the basis of which the Latino identity is constructed: (1) issues of nomenclature: “Hispanic” versus “Latino” as a preferred or more appropriate pan-ethnic term; (2) dual identities: maintaining a national identity versus accepting pan-ethnic Latino identity;
(3) dual identities: constructing a pan-ethnic identity; (4) paradoxical status of Spanish within the Latino community; (5) immigrants versus US-born, generational Latinos; and (6) Latinos, Whites and Blacks – racialisation of identities.

It is the main goal of this chapter to delve into the tensions implicit in one of these dimensions: the paradoxical status and use of Spanish in the US Latino community and how it is negotiated as an index of Latinidad. Before we delve into this dimension, however, it is important to see that all these dimensions involve some sort of conflictual tension or paradox. Of crucial importance is the ambivalence between Latinos maintaining their national identity or seeing themselves as Latino and embracing Latinidad, a sense of shared top-down imposed identity which is shaped within the Latino community as the basis for pan-ethnicity. More specifically, according to Negron (2014, p.91), Latinidad consists of “a fluid repertoire of identities that are contextually invoked, ranging along a continuum that includes panethnicity on one end and micro-regional cultures on the other, with cultural nationalism mediating both poles”. Furthermore, it is important to understand that although “Latino” is properly an ethnic identity, as Latinos can be of any race, it has been racialised in the context of the US (Cobas et al., 2015). Therefore, “Latino” has become the de facto third main racial group, along with “Whites” and “Blacks”. Interestingly, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, 53 percent of Latinos included in the 2010 census identified themselves as White.8 This situates Latinos in the thick of the conflict of racial relations in the US.

Because of its geographical, racial and linguistic diversity, the construction of the pan-ethnic Latino identity, and thus Latinidad, is predicated to a great degree on Latinos speaking Spanish (Negron, 2014). As a result, Spanish, in the context of the US, has also been racialised: speaking it positions its speakers as a non-white minority (Davis and Moore, 2014). The “browning of America”, i.e. the decline of America’s European-descended population, and its replacement by more recently arrived population groups from everywhere in the non-European world, is thus inextricably connected to Spanish (Cobas and Feagin, 2008, p.390). By racialising the Spanish language, white power and domination can be asserted upon Latinos under the pretence of national communication and identity (Davis and Moore, 2014). Thus, public usage of Spanish or accented English, for many Latinos, is either prohibited or seen as an index “of primordial difference (i.e. racial difference)” (Rosa, 2016, p.69). Cobas and Feagin (2008) describe how Latinos are silenced, positioned as suspect or questioned regarding their ability to speak English when heard speaking Spanish in public spaces. Within the academic context, and under the auspices of the English-only movement with its systematic defunding of bilingual programs and the No Child Left Behind Act9 (Borden, 2014, Carreira, 2013), Spanish is seen as an obstacle to be overcome, despite the proven benefits of biliteracy, and heritage language speakers are seen as a problem for language programs (Showstack, 2012). This seems to have serious repercussions for Latinos’ educational advancement. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Latino students’ high school graduation rate for the year 2014–15 stands at 78 percent, whereas White students’ stands at 88 percent. Research suggests that self-esteem issues, along with the separation between home/school and language/culture, are demotivating factors (Borden, 2014, p.230).

The above description begs the question why Latinos in general and Latino youth, in particular, do not completely abandon Spanish and assimilate to English monolingualism. This assimilation does occur, but despite all the malignant positioning10 that Latinos are subjected to, which is reflected, among others, in students’ reported low esteem (Borden, 2014), Spanish has a longer life across generations than any other immigrant language, as it does not appear to subside until the third generation.11 Davis and Moore (2014, p.678)
argue that there is a direct connection between nativist attacks on the Spanish language and the way in which it becomes a crucial component of Latino identity in the US. Indeed, instead of giving up their heritage language and cultural traditions, many Latinos choose to negotiate bilingualism and biculturalism (Ovando, 2014). What is more important, there is an assumption held by both in- and out-group members that even Latinos who have been in the US for many generations will speak Spanish. Sanchez et al. (2012, p.1029) show that, due to Spanish having been regarded as the foundation of Latinidad, Latinos who are unable to speak Spanish see this lack of ability as a major hindrance for intragroup acceptance. Findings of their two studies revealed that (1) “Spanish speaking inability was associated with greater perceived intragroup rejection, lower collective self-esteem, and less felt similarity to other Latinos” and (2) “when Latinos’ inability to speak Spanish was revealed to a fellow Latino, they are less likely to categorise themselves as Latinos and also indicate lower private regard and less felt connectedness to other Latinos”. Thus, within the Latino community, a positive social identity is associated with Spanish-English bilingualism. Speaking only Spanish is seen as a weakness, but there is an expectation that Latinos will nevertheless be fluent in Spanish (Garcia-Bedolla, 2003). Along these lines, discussing parental attitudes, Carreira (2013, p.111) reports that, “Remarkably, 100 percent of those surveyed reported it is important for Latino children to grow up bilingual”. For Latinos then, Spanish fulfils essential personal functions that English alone cannot fulfil. These functions are related to family relations and, crucially for this study, personal identity (Carreira, 2013). It has also been reported that many Latinos see bilingualism as a means of professional advancement in a globalised world (Negron, 2014, Showstack 2012).

Powerful language ideologies emerge from the picture presented above. It is these ideologies that Latinos invoke when negotiating their pan-ethnic identity, their Latinidad. We see that Latinidad is an identity in turmoil. In relation to the White majority, the out-group, Latinos are positioned as “the other”, racialised, and marginalised. The use of Spanish is discouraged and English monolingualism is presented as the only path for the Latino minority to mainstream. On the other hand, within the Latino in-group, maintenance of Spanish is seen as a badge of honour and the only real claim to Latinidad. It is not difficult to see how this may lead to social and personal conflict since Latinos are trapped in a paradox regarding the double standard applied to Spanish within their community/country.

Although there is a myriad of methods which researchers have used to look into Latinos’ views on Spanish vis-à-vis the construction of their own Latinidad, such as ethnographic interviews, questionnaires, classroom interaction and written narratives, less attention has been paid to the micro-processes of everyday interaction (Negron, 2014). However, it is essential to gain access to such processes since, as Blackledge (2002) argues, language ideologies are constantly constructed and reconstructed in discursive interaction at the micro-level.12

The internet has become a medium for daily interaction for millions of people and gives us unprecedented access to public discourse. These everyday interactions become ideal sites for identity construction. They allow us to see how powerful macro ideologies are (re)constructed, adhered to or resisted at the micro level. The internet is a new world that is continually generating new data and new ways to think about it and allows us to respond to the massive mobility and connectivity of today’s society (Rymes and Leone, 2014). It also allows us to narrow down our analytical focus to specific ethnic groups, such as Latinos. Although there is now a significant bulk of research on postings and online commentary, with very few exceptions (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2018, Garcés Conejos Blitvich and Bou-Franch, 2014, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich et al., 2013, Mendoza-Denton, 2015), scholars
have not looked into Latino online interactions. Another exception, especially relevant for the present chapter, is the work by Pano (2016), who analyses attitudes towards Spanish in the US by looking at comments in response to six YouTube videos. Similarly, the present chapter looks at comments posted in response to Noel Quiñones’s poem about language attrition. Here, the aim of the analysis is not necessarily to research language attitudes, although these ideologies surface in the discussion, but the shared stories of Latinos on how fluency in Spanish or lack thereof intersects in crucial ways with how they and other Latinos construct their claim to *Latinidad*.

### 21.4 Methodology

In order to attain this aim, the methodology described in this section was devised.

#### 21.4.1 Data

To carry out the above goal, a reference corpus comprising 198 comments (circa 16,532 words) spanning from 21 December 2016 to 19 July 2017 and posted in response to a video clip of the performance by Nuyorican poet Noel Quiñones of his piece “8 Confessions of My Tongue” was collected and analysed (see link at n.13 in endnotes). In it, the poet explores the struggles of asserting one’s identity, roots and culture when the native language associated with them, Spanish, cannot be mastered. This video clip was linked to an article on Quiñones published by Remezcla – a self-described source for emerging Latin music, culture and entertainment. Regarding participation, 174 people only posted once, ten posted twice, and five posted 3–4 times. The most prolific were two participants who posted five times, one who posted eight times, and another one who posted nine times.

Out of this reference corpus, an analytical corpus was derived. This corpus comprises 129 comments posted by 120 Latinos in which they (1) narrate their own stories regarding the impact that knowledge of Spanish (or lack thereof) has had on how they and others assess their *Latinidad*, and (2) evaluate other posters’ stories regarding this matter.

The data were selected for their great identity to researching the paradoxical role of the Spanish language in the construction and perception of *Latinidad*. Since the poem focuses solely on topics and issues that may be of interest to Latinos, it was expected that many Latinos would be attracted to the discussion. Furthermore, the naturally occurring data provided access to a new site of identity construction. In addition, the data sample comprised comments from Latinos of all generations, all levels of Spanish proficiency and English/Spanish bilingualism, diverse professional and educational backgrounds and different geographical locations, both in terms of country of origin and residence within the US.

Due to the publicly available nature of the data, IRB approval was not required. This is in line with Page et al. (2014, p.64), who connected a researcher’s right to analyse online data to two contingencies: “whether the material is made publicly available and [whether it is] considered to be free from privacy restrictions”. Nonetheless, in compliance with the 2012 report on ethics in internet research discussed by the Association of Internet Researchers, the commenters’ screennames were replaced with numbers and all other information that could identify them was removed in order to ensure the anonymity of the commenters. All examples included in the chapter are reproduced as they stand in the original corpus; thus, typos and other orthographic errors have not been corrected.
21.4.2 Framework and procedure

Regarding the theoretical framework, and following Page et al. (2013), these comments are understood as networked narrative. What is significant about networked narrative is co-tellership i.e. how story worlds are co-constructed by multiple narrators. Page et al. (2013) analyse this co-construction on Facebook, “the environment par excellence where networked narrative has flourished” (2013, p.195), and relate it to the practices of “commenting, linking, tagging, photo sharing, and marking geographical location” (2013, p.192). Out of these different practices, I focus only on comments through which individuals participate in the construction of a shared story (Georgakopoulou, 2007). Besides constructing a shared story, by adding a further episode to the same story or telling a parallel but different narrative, comments also carry out an evaluation of others’ shared stories. Evaluation has been a very important part of the influential Labovian (1972) model of narrative.14

Page et al. (2003) make an important connection between narratives on Facebook and offline contexts as well as between narrative and identity. These are important for the present analysis, as the narratives on the Remezcla page respond to an activity beyond its confines, Noel Quiñones’s poem and the Latino community in the US, and are also seen as the sites for the performance of the Latino identity. As de Fina (2015, p.351) argues, narratives are a prime vehicle for expressing identity, as identities emerge through semiotic processes through which people construct images of themselves and of others.

Regarding procedure, the comments were downloaded and then numbered. The next step consisted in the coding of the corpus. To be coded, the comments had to be posted by participants explicitly or implicitly self-identifying as Latinos. Furthermore, Latino participants needed to respond to either the initial video and story about Quiñones or to other participants’ stories by (1) providing a parallel story or (2) evaluating the stories shared by others. The focus of their responses needed to be on language issues.

An example of a comment in which the identity of the narrator could be directly accessed is number 193. In it, the narrator explicitly self-identifies as a Latino:

Example 21.1 (number 193)
So I am a 3rd generation American … I speak fluent Spanish, I know that all my greats (grandparents) were from Mexico and I know all the parts they were from .. I know all about growing up playing loteria on weekends at Grandma’s house ..I grew up eating beans , rice , fideo, menudo, and the only thing I didn’t do until I was older was the speaking Spanish.

The next comment was also coded as having been posted by a Latino. In this case, the narrator does not explicitly, but rather implicitly (thus indirectly), self-identify as Latino:

Example 21.2 (number 181)
We don’t have that problem in Miami. You can talk either in English or Spanish. No one will make you feel less or more for your choice.

As can be gleaned, in both cases, the posters engage with language issues.

It is worth pointing out that the deindividuated online environment in which these comments were posted does not guarantee that those self-identifying directly or indirectly as Latinos were indeed members of that ethnic group. Researchers are never immune to dishonest responses. Not only is this true of online contexts, but also of more traditional data.
collection methods: respondents can lie during interviews or provide misleading answers to questionnaires. In the case under scrutiny, the saliency of the topic under discussion and the emotional connotations it carries for the Latino community would lead us to take in-group claims at face value.

Another step in the coding process was establishing comments as parallel stories or as evaluations of others’ shared stories. Evaluation is an intrinsic part of all stories. However, some comments provided people’s details about their own experiences with Spanish, in which case their posts were coded as parallel stories (Example 21.3), and others just evaluated others’ shared stories without providing a story of their own, as in Example 21.4:

**Example 21.3 (number 79)**
I learned Spanish at home. Tested out of taking foreign language in public school. Still had the wherewithal to also take Spanish in college and master my heritage’s language, grammar, spelling. Not sure what barriers keep Latinos from speaking Spanish today.

**Example 21.4 (number 161)**
Holy god you guys. This is exactly what the article is talking about. If she says she is 100 percent latina, then she gets shit for not speaking Spanish well. If she doesn’t reveal her entire genealogical history to anyone who asks, then she’s hiding it and is a terrible person. It’s exhausting. Can you guys just chill?

Other comments which were off-topic, regardless of the identity of the poster, or on topic, but posted by non-Latinos, were coded as non-relevant. Examples 21.5 and 21.6 illustrate comments that were coded as non-relevant. In the first case, the comment is off-topic, although the narrator could be identified indirectly as a Latino:

**Example 21.5 (number 27)**
Lloran mucho !! Thats what you should keep as part of your “latino” identity, not to complain or take every little thing like this so hard and like we say back homeNo chille agarré Piedra. Uff … such an struggle..!!!!!!

Example 21.6 is on topic; however, the narrator could be identified indirectly as non-Latino:

**Example 21.6 (number 87)**
My sister in law is spanish and doesn’t speak it … I don’t see her as American OR spanish, I see her as equally both and above all else ..a person !!! And for that alone she is always “enough”.

In a second phase of coding, the 129 comments posted by Latinos that engaged with language issues were subjected to thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thematic analysis, a foundational method for qualitative analysis, offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes are patterns across datasets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated with a specific research question. In this case, the goal of the thematic analysis was to help unveil what themes emerged as relevant for Latinos regarding the paradoxical status of Spanish with respect to their and others’ perceptions of their Latinidad.
On occasion, more than one of the recurrent themes identified came up in a given comment, in which case the comment was coded for different themes. For instance, Example 21.7, which narrates a parallel story, was coded for the following themes: Enoughness (feeling/being perceived not as an authentic Latina for not being able to speak Spanish), Individualism/Neoliberal views (took the matter in her hands and learned from others and majored in Spanish) and Emotion (difficulty in admitting that she is not bilingual; it is still a sore topic for her not to be as fluent as she would like to be):

Example 21.7 (number 150)
Have you ever been to McAllen TX? Lots of Spanish speaking people there. It’s where I’m from. I’m 2nd generation American, y por razones que todavía no tenía, mi mamá no nos enseñó. It is difficult to admit, especially coming from a place where EVERYONE spoke Spanish, and being a Hispanic who couldn’t speak or understand it because the first generation wouldn’t teach us.I think they thought that it was not important for us to learn. Fortunately for me, listening to it, and being Hispanic, it helped me to more easily learn Spanish, and to not sound gringa when I speak, Not that it’s a bad thing. I’m far from fluent, but … I don’t know. It’s definitely a sore subject for me. I majored in Spanish and it brought up my fluency levels, so I’m thankful for that. I guess my point to you is, Miami is not the only place in the U.S. where there are high rates of Spanish speaking people and language fluency. Texas, Arizona, California, and of course, Florida. And likely more.

The corpus was coded separately by the author and her research assistant and any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

21.5 Results

Table 21.1 Contributions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of contribution to networked story</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parallel story</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of others’ shared stories</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of contributions</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 21.2 Narrative themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative themes</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enoughness</td>
<td>The set of semiotic resources needed to be assessed as an ‘authentic’ Latino, Spanish fluency being key.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoliberal views</td>
<td>The individual, not institutions or White hegemony, is in control. (S)he can reverse an adverse situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Language is strongly related to emotion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical views</td>
<td>Institutions or White hegemony are to blame for individuals not having access to the language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essentialism</td>
<td>There is an intrinsic connection between language and identity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
21.6 Discussion

This networked narrative unfolded through 86 parallel stories and 43 evaluations of others’ shared stories. There were twice as many parallel stories as evaluations of others’ shared stories. This makes sense in the context of a networked narrative that unfolds by narrators building upon others’ stories as they share their own.

The narrative was found to unfold in networked patterns. For example, 44 shared stories responded directly to Quiñones’s poem. In other cases, a parallel story or an evaluation received multiple responses, such as the case of the evaluation found in number 196, which triggered 15 other parallel stories/evaluations. On 51 occasions, a story/evaluation responded to multiple previous stories/evaluations. Another chain of networked narrative was found in which each story/evaluation responded to the immediately preceding one.

Regarding narrative themes, enoughness, essentialism and emotion are key themes in Quiñones’s narrative, as well as in the narrative of the article by Remezcla written to contextualise the video of his performance. It makes sense that these themes would emerge frequently in those parallel, shared stories that contribute to the networked narrative. These three first themes relate to the personal conflict that Latinos experience in claiming and constructing Latinidad vis-à-vis, mostly, their own Latino in-group. Furthermore, as Quiñones does in his poem, when posters take positions for or against or try to explain the reasons for the quandary Quiñones and others find themselves in, they invoke ideologies of power: either institutional power à la Bourdieu, i.e. how institutional power and hegemony constrain the individual (i.e. they take a critical approach) or personal power as seen by neoliberalism. Conflict is a major part of ideologies of power. These last two themes especially point to the conflict, within the current racial relations climate in the US, between the Latino in-group and the White majority, the powerful out-group at the top of the social structure. This is the rationale behind the quite coherent and unified narrative themes that emerged from the analysis and are explored in more detail in this section.

21.6.1 Enoughness

Blommaert and Varis (2013) argue that identity practices are discursive orientations to sets of features that are, or are seen as being, emblematic of specific identities. Those practices, they claim, revolve around notions of authenticity which rest on assessments of “enoughness”. According to the authors,

authenticity is manufactured by blending a variety of semiotic resources, some of which are sufficient (“enough”) to produce a particular targeted authentic identity; and consequently, enable others to identify as “real”, “authentic” members of social groups in different niches of our social and cultural lives – within different hegemonies.

(Blommaert and Varis, 2013, p.143)

In the Latino narratives found in the corpus, enoughness emerges as a key concept in relation to Spanish being a crucial semiotic mode without knowledge of which it is very difficult to feel or be considered an “authentic” Latino. As mentioned above, enoughness was the key theme in Quiñones’s poem and the one he associated his inner conflict with in terms of being an English monolingual Latino, so it is not surprising that it was also prevalent in the networked narrative triggered by it.
Latinos and Spanish are othered and racialised in the US, as we saw in Section 21.3, as they are seen as a threat to national unity and represent the “Browning of America”. On the other hand, those generational Latinos who have assimilated and have no knowledge or very little command of Spanish are “othered” by other Latinos, who position them as “different” and not representative of the “genuine” core authenticity of Latinidad. This is the paradox that Latinos are trapped in and:

**Example 21.8 (number 189)**
Antonette the corrections you are getting are perfect examples of the fine line we walk … you are shamed for speaking it or not speaking it good enough.

They are thus in a cultural, ethnic limbo: always having to prove that you are “enough” is a situation deemed exhausting:

**Example 21.9 (number 6)**
I call it the Exhausting Battle. Why? My kids were born here. If when they go to P.R., they have to be linguists like Concha Melendez in Spanish or great orators like Muñoz Marin or they are not PR Rican enough. But they were born here in the USA and if they are not flying The American flag and talk English like Webster (of the Dictionary) they are not American enough. This is exhausting!

For the in-group, not speaking Spanish is problematic and it makes one suspect, as English-speaking Latinos non-fluent in Spanish are thought to believe they are better than those who are Spanish monolinguals (which may lead to intra-group conflict). They are called “pocho”, an assimilated Latino who has lost their language and culture, or accused of “pretending to be white”. English is seen as a marker of whiteness, whereas Spanish is a marker of colour in the US:

**Example 21.10 (number 198)**
I totaly get this., when around older mexican woman they dont wanna talk to me cause im not mexican enough, to them im just a guerra with green eyes, a pocha from the US. And to americans im just a beaner. Salina said it best “Either your not mexican enough or not american enough”.

**Example 21.11 (number 44)**
I totally get this! Mexicans can be very harsh to their own kind when you don’t speak Spanish. I was born in Mexico, been in U.S. since I was 3. I speak English at home. Growing up I struggled to fit in with my own kind. They would make nasty remarks, like “you think you’re better than us” or “you think you’re white”. I didn’t understand why they were so upset. I have 5 kids. I didn’t show them Spanish. They’ve also had the same struggles. Always hearing from family members “pobresita, you don’t speak Spanish”.

A very few exceptions were those Latinos who tried to find “enoughness” in hybridity or argued that lack of knowledge of Spanish was not a source of inner conflict for them:

**Example 21.12 (number 39)**
We are Mexican American enough. We need to stop blaming our parents they were only working with what they had. The Mexican Nationals who look down on us and judge
us should be ashamed of their arrogance… I am grateful i am fluent in both languages but have always resented the Mexican National who look down on me call me pocha. No tienen ninguna razon para juzcar.

Example 21.13 (number 146)
I don’t care! No one will ever make me feel less important cause I can’t speak spanish!

21.6.2 Emotion
Carreira (2013, p.114) – when explaining why Latino youth, despite the malignant positioning to which they are subjected, do not succumb to the pressure to abandon Spanish but go to considerable lengths to maintain it – argues that Spanish fulfils functions that English alone cannot realise. Among others, such functions are: maintaining family bonds, establishing and strengthening connections with peers and finding a sense of self in between two cultures. As Carreira (2013, p.133) puts it, Spanish occupies a privileged position “in matters of the heart, particularly family relations and personal identity”. Thus, for Latinos, Spanish is strongly connected to emotion. This emotion is palpable in Quiñones’s piece, as well as in many of the parallel shared stories that make up this networked narrative.

In the parallel stories, there was frequently a connection between the strong emotions felt and the inability to connect with or be rejected by family members, which often led to intra-group conflict:

Example 21.14 (number 68)
This makes me want to cry. I never understood why I didn’t get Spanish when all my cousins did. I hate family functions because while they spoke English, I was a niece, a daughter, granddaughter..but then it would made into Spanish and I suddenly felt how disconnected I was. I’ve wanted to write a poem about it but always felt like it would be stupid to do so. I’ve always been the only Hispanic girl I know of who didn’t already learn Spanish (besides Serena but even then, she at least learned it… It’s nice to know there are other kids out there like me.

Narrators had to deal not only with their own feelings of loss caused by language attrition, but also with the strong sentiments – rudeness, hatred – the intra-group conflict I referred to above – that this lack of knowledge of Spanish triggered in their relatives:

Example 21.15 (number 69)
I feel this. I have had to deal with not just dirty looks but rude questions and outright hatred that I don’t speak Spanish. Even from family. It’s so irritating I avoid family functions and certain situations.

Whereas rediscovering the language is equated with feeling whole as a person again and reconnecting with ancestral family values:

Example 21.16 (number 76)
So I took a trip to Spain and learned the Spanish of my mothers family. Then a trip to México to learn the Spanish of my father. I found myself in the process and now teach the Spanish language. Language and identity are tightly fused. To speak your ancestral tongue is a spiritual journey worth taking. It will change you and your children forever.
21.6.3 Essentialism

As Showstack (2012) discusses, there is a substantial amount of literature in language education that argues that heritage language learners’ identities are intrinsically connected to the development and maintenance of their heritage languages. According to Showstack (2012, p.5) “This naturalised link between language and identity is a kind of ‘essentialization’, an assumption that all entities in a particular category share certain characteristics”. This essentialised view runs counter to most post-modern work on identity, which sees it as emerging in interaction i.e. inherent in action not in people (see Bucholtz and Hall, 2005).

In the corpus under analysis, however, many narrators refer to essentialised views, of both themselves and non-Latinos, regarding the strong connection between Spanish and the Latino identity. This matches general assumptions, reported by Sanchez et al. (2012), that Latinos, even those who have been in the USA for many generations, will speak Spanish. Assumptions surface in the parallel shared stories in Example 21.17, where a Latina explains her disappointment, which may affect intra-group relations, when meeting Latinos who do not speak Spanish, and Example 21.18, narrated by an English monolingual Latina who is expected by her manager to speak Spanish and is, therefore, put in very difficult situations which result in her having to quit her job. Example 21.18 shows how essentialised views can also lead to intergroup conflict:

Example 21.17 (number 100)
I’m Mexican born and raised but have been living in the US for over 10 years. I have Mexican-American friends, some speak Spanish, some don’t…BUT I must admit that often times my friends, mainly American non Latino friends get excited to introduce me to other Mexicans. It’s happened several times, that I’m introduced to a Mexican friend I immediately get excited and start speaking Spanish and it turns out that that person doesn’t speak it. I can’t help to be confused and a bit disappointed.

Example 21.18 (number 22)
I worked in a hotel in upstate new york and I was the only latina there. My manager thought it was funny to test out his spanish speaking abilities to me every single day we worked together. I finally asked him to stop because I found it rude and because I was born here and don’t even speak spanish with my family … Needless to say I had to quit my job because it became uncomfortable.

Furthermore, the narrators in Examples 21.19 and 21.20 agree that Spanish is what binds Latinos together, both among themselves and with their history. It is not race, as Latinos are an ethnic group, but language that is the essential component of Latinidad:

Example 21.19 (number 59)
I feel like you can’t fully comprehend your culture if you don’t have a grasp of Spanish. Spanish is the link that binds us with the great figures of the past (post-Spanish invasion), and without knowing Spanish, you’re missing out. Spanish is a beautiful language that allows you to fully understand the texts and writings of the past. It’s also binds generations of latinos together.

Example 21.20 (number 95)
I understand the sentiment and the frustration that non-Spanish speaking people who see themselves as Latinos have, but you have to keep in mind one thing people.
The color of your skin does not make you “latino”, there are latinos that are as white and Anglo Saxon looking as Americans and also as black looking as African descendants. Nor does having knowledge of what hispanics eat or how they behave make you one. What truly connects the Hispanic community around the world is primarily the Spanish language, cause even each Hispanic country has its own variety on culture.

21.6.4 Critical approach

The thematic analysis of the networked narratives further unveiled the fact that narrators used their stories or evaluations of others’ stories to take a stance regarding Spanish language attrition in the context of the US. When they do so, they also echo Quiñones’s own position on these issues. Thus, many saw the paradoxical status of Spanish within the Latino community as the consequence of White supremacy, English-only hegemony and institutional oppression of minorities. They depict a view of power in Bourdieu’s (1991) terms as connected to the State and sociological institutions, such as education, as well as to the idea of oppression from one group over another. Thus, they transferred the problem from the individual to social structure:

Example 21.21 (number 143)
I used to be angry at my father for not teaching me, it took me years to finally realize that if I’m to be angry at anything it is colonialism and white supremacy that made my father feel ashamed of his roots, culture, language and accent to the point that he decided not to teach his only child his first language.

Many parallel stories, of which Example 21.22 is a prime example, relate Latinos’ lack of knowledge to educational programs designed under the auspices of the English-only movement that seek to quickly transition and mainstream bilingual students. They argue that intra-group rejection of English monolingual Latinos is due to the lack of understanding of how Latinos, and their language, are racialised in the US and the enormous pressure they are under to assimilate. It is very difficult for individuals to fight the structures that discriminate against them. Only social transformation of those structures will lead to a transformation of language attitudes and language maintenance:

Example 21.22 (number 40)
When the first major return migration of boricuas to the Island took place on the 1970s I was a teenager. I witnessed the disdain of many people toward their children, for their failure to speak Spanish fluently. Ever since I’ve have spoken against such despicable and ignorant expressions. Ignorant of the racism of the U.S. and outs effects on immigrants. My own children were either born and/or grew up in the U.S. It saw how still in the 1990s and thereafter the bilingual programs were designed to expedite not only the learning of the English language, but also the fading of their own culture (Chicago). So I got to feel the frustration of my children for their limitations with the Spanish language. Yet I understand the whole situation as one of the combined effects of racism and colonialism…So this angst of our Nuyoricans runs much deeper, and won’t be resolved by politics as usual. We need a deep social, economic and political transformation both in the U.S. and in Puerto Rico. Anything short of that will always leave people like us, in the best of cases, in a state of social limbo.
21.6.5 Neoliberalism

Whereas some narrators saw social structure, colonialism and White hegemony as the reasons behind the paradoxical status of Spanish in the US, others seemed to have embraced the ideology of neoliberalism. For them, it is the individual, not social structure, who is in control. Park (2010) describes the neoliberal individual as engaged in self-assessment and self-improvement and not reliant on structured social relations that may suppress unconstrained competition. Further, the neoliberal subject tends to overlook the inequalities that neoliberalism aggravates and tends to see class as a personal trait or life choice. Thus, responsibility for overcoming structural barriers to social advancement is transferred from the state to the entrepreneurial individual. Success or failure is no longer a result of unequal structures of class relations, but a matter of the individual’s aspirations and capabilities i.e. a reflection of one’s naturalised inner qualities. Park (2010) also argues that the ideology of neoliberalism has become hegemonic, instantiated in narratives of success. Latinos embracing neoliberalism position themselves, in a way, in opposition to their in-group. By making individual Latinos solely responsible for their own personal advancement, they are turning a blind eye to the major disparities in terms of opportunity and institutional access that non-White minorities face.

This is certainly shown in the corpus, as can be seen in the following examples. Example 21.23 is a typical narrative of success where a Latina describes her own success at becoming and maintaining bilingual fluency and literacy through making the right choices. She urges Quiñones to make his own choices, too. He can learn Spanish because he, not his past, is in control:

Example 21.23 (number 102)

There is so much ambivalence in learning a new language and keeping your native one. I learned English as a second language to the point that I speak it better than Spanish, but I went to High School and College in Spanish. Then I taught English Language Arts to ESL students. It was rewarding but I never forgot my roots. I suggest you take Spanish classes. You know a lot more than you think. You heard it all your life and it will come back to you. The interference is the pain of what they didn’t teach you but you are older now. You have choices. You are in control.

We find another narrative of success in Example 21.24. A Latina describes her academic accomplishments in both languages and claims that it was not easy to get where she did, but she set her goals and stuck to them. She is very specific that if a Latino wants to learn Spanish, there are plenty of ways available in which they can do it. Therefore, if they don’t speak Spanish, they have only themselves to blame. They should not make their family, teachers or society responsible; they just did not put in the needed effort. Example 21.24 clearly illustrates how this set of beliefs can lead to intra-group conflict.

Example 21.24 (number 35)

As a fifth generation tejana, everyone I knew growing up spoke both English and Spanish. I was an English major at …, then pushed through to get my M.A. in Spanish, and wound up with a Ph.D. in Romance Languages from…. I now have an award-winning novel… I am exceedingly proud of the fact that I can speak and write in the two languages. It was not easy to empower myself in this way. But I was always proud of my two cultures, and in my early twenties, I set a goal for myself to speak and write
in Spanish as well as I spoke and wrote in English. If you want to speak Spanish like a
native of the language, you have to take classes and work at surrounding yourself with
the culture. If you are a Latina/o and do not speak Spanish, don’t blame your parents,
your teachers, or society. There are millions of people like you. You simply did not want
to put in the effort to become a truly bilingual and bicultural person. Otherwise, you
would have done so. I would encourage all young Latinas/os to choose your path care-
fully. If you want to be a monolingual speaker of English, that is okay too. Just don’t
identify yourself as a bilingual.

In Example 21.25, in another narrative of success, a Latino relates his ability to main-
tain bilingualism to professional success. For him, speaking Spanish is a means of career
advancement. This connection was made by several narrators in the corpus and is also a
manifestation of neoliberalism:

Example 21.25 (number 37)
Twenty years ago working a bank I would speak Spanish to a “Jardinero” no one else
would talk to him in Spanish even at his home branch in the city of Santa Ana. Well
the “Jardinero” was self employed. He owned his home. He had rental properties etc.
That hard working “Jardinero” generated over a million Dollars to the bank In different
products and services. I am so glad I took the time to make him feel like he could trust
me in his preferred language.

21.7 Conclusions
The goal of this chapter was to gain insights into the paradoxical status of Spanish in the
Latino community by looking at the micro-processes involved in everyday interaction
among US Latinos. Whereas Latinos and Spanish are othered and racialised and institu-
tional pressure is put on them to quickly assimilate to English monolingualism, there
is a strong assumption in the Latino and other US communities that (even generational)
Latinos speak Spanish. Thus, English/Spanish bilingualism is seen as the ideal aspiration for
Latinos, whereas no other ethnic or national group in the US is subjected to similar expec-
tations. This double standard is seen as the cause of personal, intragroup and inter-group
conflict for Latinos.

To carry out the analysis, a networked narrative of shared stories on how fluency in
Spanish or lack thereof intersects in crucial ways with how Latinos construct their claim
to Latinidad was thematically analysed. This networked narrative was triggered by Noel
Quiñones’s poem “8 Confessions of my Tongue” and unfolded through 86 parallel stories
and 43 evaluations of others’ shared stories. Parallel stories had twice the number evalua-
tions of others’ shared stories. This makes sense in the context of a networked narrative that
unfolds by narrators building upon others’ stories as they share their own.

This sharing was also found at the thematic level as narrators expounded on the three
fundamental themes found in Quiñones’s poem: enoughness, essentialism and emotion.
Spanish emerged as a semiotic feature of Latinidad, which was related to personal and
intragroup conflict. Without knowledge of Spanish, one cannot feel, or be perceived by
others as, an authentic Latino, or Latino “enough”. One of the main reasons for this is the
fact that many narrators established an essentialised link between Latinidad and Spanish. It
is Spanish – not ethnicity or race – that acts as a conduit to bring Latinos together. Themes
about language and identity – especially in an environment in which one’s language and
identity are under siege, as is the case with Spanish and Latinidad in the current political climate of the US – carry with them a significant emotional load. Those who have lost Spanish see this attrition in strong emotional terms; their inability to connect with their ancestry, their in-group and their culture creates inner turmoil as well as conflict with in-group members who reject them for their lack of fluency.

Two other themes that emerged in the networked narrative, and that also echoed Quiñones’s poem, were related to narrators’ invoking of ideologies of power (either institutional or personal) when trying to come up with explanations or solutions to the predicament that Latinos with low or no Spanish fluency find themselves in. Ideologies of power carry conflict associated with them. In this case, the conflict was seen as unfolding at the societal, inter-group level. Thus, many saw institutions such as education, White supremacy, colonialism and racist oppression as the reasons behind negative language attitudes and racialisation that leads to a lack of generational transmission of Spanish. Others, however, in narratives of success in which the ideology of neoliberalism has become hegemonic, argued strongly for power and control to be in the hands of the individual, not institutions. In their view, English monolingual Latinos were to blame for their lack of Spanish fluency, as the power and ability to learn the language were in their hands.

All in all, this analysis shows Latinidad and Spanish as an identity and a language in conflict. This conflictual relationship between Latinidad/Spanish and White America/English is anchored in the history of the US and in the country’s own struggle to construct its own monolingual, Anglo-dominated national identity in the face of widespread multilingualism and multiculturalism.

Notes

1 www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/05/what-is-the-future-of-spanish-in-the-united-states/.
2 ‘Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ are used interchangeably. Although ‘Hispanic’ was the original term associated with the identity, ‘Latino’ is currently preferred as not all Latinos trace their roots back to Spain. Furthermore, it can be inflected for gender and is Spanish, rather than English, based.
3 ‘Millennial’ refers to a person reaching adulthood in the 21st century. ‘Gen Xers’, for its part, refers to people born in the years ranging from the early-to-mid 1960s to the early 1980s, ‘Boomers’, or ‘baby boomers’, preceded Gen Xers and were born in the years following the Second World War. ‘The Silent or Greatest generation’, in turn, preceded the Boomers and refers to people who were born between 1925 and 1945.
4 A Nuyorican is a person of Puerto Rican descent living or born in New York.
6 www.usenglish.org/.
7 www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/
8 www.pewhispanic.org/
9 The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, President George W. Bush’s education-reform bill, was signed into law on 8 January 2002. Its primary goal is to ensure that public-school students achieve important academic goals and are taught by well-prepared teachers in the context of safe classrooms. To measure progress, NCLB requires that states administer tests to all public-school students.
10 Malignant positioning is dangerous, according to Sabat (2003, p.86) since it can have negative effects not only on the way a person is seen by others, but also on the ways in which the person may come to see themselves.
11 50 percent of the Latino population stops speaking Spanish fluently by the third generation and only 10 percent are fluent in Spanish by the fourth generation (Johnson et al., 2009).
12 The micro level of sociological research refers to small-scale, individual or small group interactions. It is often contrasted with the macro level, which refers to large scale processes and social structures.
13 It can be directly accessed by the general public through this link http://remezcla.com/features/culture/8-confessions-of-my-tongue/.
14 Sociolinguist William Labov identified recurrent patterns in face-to-face narratives. These patterns were: abstract, orientation, complicating action, resolution, evaluation and coda.

15 ‘Language attrition’ refers to the reduction of a person’s first-language skills or their mother tongue proficiency.

References


