“Nos mascan pero no nos tragan”: Countering anti-immigrant discourses in the New Latino South.

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Abstract

The increased visibility of immigrant communities in the southeastern United States coupled with the economic recession has led to a proliferation of anti-immigrant policies and contributed to a climate which positions Latin@ immigrants and the Spanish language as foreign or threatening. In this paper, we examine language ideologies related to Latin@ immigrants that are prevalent in western North Carolina. We explore which language ideologies circulate and how these are incorporated into coherent Discourses that are then taken up by immigrants and “local” residents. Data for this qualitative study include 43 in-depth interviews with immigrants and nonimmigrant “local” residents and field observations. Findings indicate tensions between the ideologies of English monolingualism as inherently “American” and individual self-determination integral to Appalachian culture. While current social policies seek to marginalize immigrant communities, many participants worked to dispel negative perceptions of immigrants and develop understanding between “local” residents and the immigrant community.

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Introduction and Significance

Continued immigration throughout the 21st century has transformed communities in the southeastern United States. The increased visibility of immigrant communities coupled with the economic recession has led to a proliferation of anti-immigrant discourses and policies, especially in the southeast (Oh & Cooc, 2011). In the fall of 2013 in North Carolina, where the present study was conducted, the state legislature passed the Reasonable Enactment of Comprehensive Legislation Addressing Immigration Matters in North Carolina (RECLAIM NC) Act, which created a number of anti-immigrant policies and procedures that curtail immigrants’ ability to obtain state driver’s licenses and identification. The very title of this act—RECLAIM NC—works to frame North Carolina as being under assault and in danger of being taken over by (Latin@) immigrants. Such policies receive significant media attention and reinforce public discourse that positions immigrants as burdens on our educational and social services institutions (Murillo, 2002). This contributes to a pervasive and normalized construction of Latin@s as a threat to the cohesion, health and stability of U.S. society (Carter, 2014; Santa Ana, 2002).

However, as more immigrants come forward to tell their stories, dominant ideologies, policies, and Discourses that position some members of our communities as foreign or less than equal are being called into question.

In this paper, we examine predominant Discourses and language ideologies related to Latin@ immigrants in northwestern North Carolina. Because of the prevalence and increase of Latin@ immigrants in this area of North Carolina over the past fifteen years, our focus is on the Spanish and English languages. Our purpose is to explore which ideologies circulate and how they are interpreted and taken up by immigrants and “local” residents. In this paper, we examine

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1 We adopt Gee’s (2008) convention of capitalizing the term Discourse in order to distinguish it from the generic linguistic notion of extended stretches of language-in-use.
the ways in which immigrants and non-immigrants draw on both localized and historicized Discourses about language and immigration to explain and justify their personal choices and beliefs with regards to language use. We seek to describe the hegemonic Discourses that people grapple with daily, as well as individual and communal efforts to construct counter-Discourses.

**Theoretical Framework**

Language ideologies are consequential and an important area of investigation because they comprise more than personal opinions or beliefs about language—they impinge upon people’s educational opportunities, influence language maintenance and loss, and shape relationships between different linguistic communities. Language ideologies, which can be broadly defined as implicit and explicit representations “that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world” (Woolard, 1998, p. 3), circulate throughout society and are historically contextualized. In analyzing the ways that language ideologies are understood, instantiated, and utilized by our participants, we draw upon Gee’s (2008) notion of Discourses. People act out or act upon language ideologies, which are ideas or political commitments, through their uptake of particular Discourses. Individuals use Discourses to define whose language variety has power and prestige, who can be a member of a specific community or nation-state, or who can be heard or understood in particular contexts.

Discourses are comprised not only of language choices, but also entail the ways we embody and express our social identities: choices we make about style of dress, the way we move, the gestures we use, the music we listen to and the cultural artifacts we consume and produce. We develop, learn, play with, and modify Discourses through our interactions with other people in the social groups to which we belong, those to which we aspire to belong. Discourses define rules for membership in particular communities, and as such they shape social
practice. At the same time Discourses are not fixed ways of being and using language; their boundaries are fluid and shift in relation to other Discourses and social practices across space and time (Fairclough, 1992; Kress, 1989). Discourses exist in a dialectical relationship with society, both constituting and being shaped by society. Additionally, Discourses are shaped by relations of power and reflect particular ideological stances. They inscribe values and beliefs about relationships between people and the ways that power is distributed in society. Some Discourses are afforded higher social status and privilege than others; these dominant Discourses lead to greater access to resources and recognition (Gee, 2008).

**Immigrants and Language Ideologies in the U.S.**

For immigrants in the U.S., being recognized as an American or a “good immigrant” goes beyond allegiance to national values like freedom and equality. The dominant Discourse of what it means to be an American is frequently defined by a commitment to speaking only English—especially in the public sphere (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010; Warriner, 2008; Wiley, 2007). This is confirmed both in the historical record of language policy (Crawford, 2004; Wiley, 2007), as well as by recent proclamations from those in positions of power. Former Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, referred to immigrants speaking Spanish as using “the language of living in a ghetto” and positioned bilingual education as posing "long-term dangers to the fabric of our nation" (Hunt, 2007). In another notable incident, a State District Judge in Texas ordered a bilingual mother to refrain from speaking to her own daughter in Spanish and threatened to remove the child from the home if the mother did not comply\(^2\). In this latter case, the hegemony of English was reinforced through direct monitoring, enforcement, and punishment meted out by

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\(^2\) The judge’s comments reflect the state’s role in codifying an ideology of English-only monolingualism: “If she starts first grade with the other children and cannot even speak the language that the teachers and others speak, and she's a full-blooded American citizen, you're abusing that child and you're relegating her to the position of housemaid. Now, get this straight: you start speaking English to that child, because if she doesn't do good [sic] in school, then I can remove her because it's not in her best interest to be ignorant” (Cummins, 2000, p. 14).
state institutions, recalling the days when using a language other than English in public was met with physical harm, public humiliation, or legal action.

Studies that explore language ideologies highlight that immigrants frequently lack options in terms of expressing their cultural and linguistic identities in their new homes (Carter, 2014; De Fina & King, 2011; King & De Fina, 2010; Warriner, 2007). King and DeFina explain that immigrants have basically two ways that they can position themselves vis-à-vis immigrant Discourses in the U.S. They can either emphasize that they are good immigrants who are doing their best to learn English or that they are “defiant individuals who reject racism and their subservient subject position,” and thus resist learning English (King & DeFina, 2010, pp. 657-658). Immigrants who buy into the ideology that learning English is essential for belonging in the U.S. and becoming “American” have found that their success in the U.S. is complicated by factors beyond English language acquisition. Warriner’s (2007) study with Sudanese refugees questioned the extent to which learning English provided the payback promised—upward social mobility and access to U.S. society. Warriner studied the experiences of three Sudanese refugee women in the context of their participation in an adult English as a Second Language program. Although the women believed that learning English would help them find employment and assimilate into their new home, their lack of social and familial networks and lack of access to transportation impeded their abilities to realize their aspirations even after acquiring English. Warriner concluded that “learning English by itself is, after all, not the ‘key’” (p. 345) since the women’s ability to belong as Americans was complicated by race and refugee status.

Bilingual Latin@ youth must also find ways to respond to the prevalent ideologies regarding Spanish-speaking immigrants. In his study of a middle school in North Carolina, Carter (2014) found that Latino students were effectively prohibited from using Spanish with
their teachers and peers, but were also discussed with distrust as using Spanish in order to exclude others. Bilingual students who wanted to socialize with non-Latino students were read as ethnically inauthentic (p. 231). Similarly, De Fina and King’s (2011) analyses of Latinas language learning narratives revealed that participants constructed strong linkages between language and ethnic group membership in their stories and positioned their Spanish language use as problematic. These studies highlight the contradictory language ideologies that Latin@ youth have to negotiate, as well as the material outcomes of such ideologies, including poor inter-group relations, being relegated to vocational track classes or feeling compelled to reject Spanish. In their ethnography of a northeastern community, Wortham, Mortimer, and Allard (2009) noted that residents applied a form of the “model minority” stereotype to Mexican immigrants, stating that they worked harder and complained less than African Americans. However, in educational contexts, Wortham et al. (2009) found that negative stereotypes that portrayed Mexican youth as unmotivated, lacking in literacy skills, and ill-suited for academic tracks predominated.

Although liberal democracies emphasize individual freedoms, Blackledge (2000) argues that pluralistic societies, like the U.S. and Great Britain, normalize English monolingualism and push people, particularly immigrants, towards monolingual practices by ignoring or devaluing their multilingualism. Ideologies and Discourses that position the bilingualism of minoritized populations as lacking in value have resulted in educational policies and practices that limit immigrant and indigenous peoples’ access to native language literacy. This, in turn, has led to impoverished educational opportunities for immigrants and their children (Gándara & Hopkins, 2010). Given the consequences of dominant language ideologies, it is important to understand how such ideologies and Discourses are reproduced, and look for spaces or interpersonal exchanges in which they are uncovered, challenged, and disrupted.
Methods

The data presented here were collected between 2011-2013 as part of a larger ethnographic study. We utilized interviews and participant observation to examine the experiences and perceptions of immigrants and nonimmigrants regarding the processes of immigration and immigrants’ contributions to the social, economic and cultural fabric of this area. We were especially interested to locate spaces—physical or linguistic or other—where different communities connected and interacted with one another. Data were collected in several rural counties in northwestern North Carolina. Over 90% of the residents across all five counties identified as White non-Hispanic (US Census, 2011); however there is a growing Latin@ presence, which was originally fueled by migrant and immigrant labor in the agricultural and construction industries (Hamilton, 2004). Like many areas of the new Latino diaspora, the overall number of Hispanics remains quite low (approx. 4%), but this population has increased significantly throughout the last decade.

Data Collection

In order to develop an understanding of immigrants’ life experiences, patterns of immigration to the area, and to gain insight into people’s perception of how immigration had affected their communities, we conducted 43 interviews with immigrants and non-immigrants who worked in a wide variety of sectors including education, health care, social services, faith-based organizations, food services, and agriculture. All interviews were audio recorded and most were conducted with both authors present to allow for the recording of field notes during interviews. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and addressed personal experiences with adjusting to life in the area, perceptions regarding the contributions of immigrants to the local community, immigration policy, language use, learning English, and experiences with schools.
Both authors are fluent Spanish and English speakers. Consequently, interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, depending on participants’ preferences. In addition to interview data, we conducted focused participant-observations from spring 2011 through the winter of 2012. Most observational data were collected in the context of two Latina women’s groups that met weekly in two different counties. In addition to observing and participating in the women’s groups, we conducted observations at English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, churches, school events, tiendas, soccer games and other community events.

Data Analysis

Because our data were qualitative, our data analysis methods were primarily bottom up; however, we also developed codes based on our review of the literature. To begin, we followed Spradley’s (1980) procedures for conducting a domain analysis by reading interviews multiple times, engaging in item-level analysis, and generating codes and a preliminary coding schema. We revisited this smaller subset of data to identify and resolve redundant codes, examine the patterns and relationships between codes, and identify emerging themes. Using this refined coding schema, we examined and coded the entire corpus of data (Maxwell, 2005). Once all data were coded, we identified connections and patterns in the data, allowing us to make interpretive assertions regarding our findings. The relevant themes that emerged include: beliefs and attitudes about speaking English, Spanish or both; and participants’ reports on how language attitudes affected day-to-day activities, decisions, and relationships.

Language Ideologies and Practices in the New Latino South

In this study, we identified the dominant language ideologies in a rural region of northwestern North Carolina and examined how those ideologies influenced the Discourses taken up by Latin@ immigrant participants. The most prominent language ideology was that of
English monolingualism, which was closely connected to Discourses of what it meant to be “American.” We found that participants, immigrant and non-immigrant, generally accepted the notion that learning English would assist them in achieving social and economic mobility. Although English monolingualism was seen as a norm and as inherently “American,” the way this Discourse was taken up in this geographical location appeared to be influenced by participants’ commitments to elements of Appalachian social identity that place a high value on individual rights and self-determination (Donesky, 1999; Gaventa, 1980). In this Discourse, every person should have the right to speak his or her preferred language in his or her own private spaces. This tended to result in the regulation of different languages for different spaces, a phenomenon we call “language zoning.” Language zoning refers to the implicit social policy and self-regulation of language choices via language ideologies. Another important and somewhat conflicting theme was support for bilingualism and the desire among immigrant parents to maintain Spanish with their children. As we discuss these themes, we consider the ways that participants’ expression of particular Discourses were mediated by social class, skin color, ethnicity, documentation status, and other aspects of their social identities.

**Being “American” in Hightown**

Participants, both immigrants and non-immigrants, agreed with the assertion that learning English provides immigrants with access to mainstream social institutions such as schools, medical care, and employment. Although participants emphasized learning English as the key element of the *American* Discourse, closer examination of our data suggests that “learning English” was used to also index racial, cultural or ethnic assimilation. The following example comes from our interview with Tanya, a White, monolingual English speaker who owned a fast-
food franchise. In our conversation with her, Tanya clearly took up the *American* Discourse that linked learning English with being American:

…most Americans think that if you don’t speak our language that you’re stupid. I saw that again and again in Atlanta, even with nice people. I would just encourage (my immigrant employees) to fully participate in American society by embracing the American language. You don’t have to embrace the culture, but you should embrace the language so you have more opportunities… Understanding the language is their “card” for entering into our society. It’s not about money or good looks, but it is understanding the language (that) is the key to enter into society fully. (Interview, 10/24/2011)

Several aspects of this quote stand out and deserve discussion. First, Tanya equated being American with being a U.S. citizen. This is not exceptional in our region, but bears mentioning—even though Mexican nationals are also American, only U.S. citizens were considered “American” by many interview participants. Further, Tanya clearly stated that English is *the* American language, thereby linking our (multilingual) nation with only one legitimate language. Additionally, Tanya noted that “Americans,” which here indexes not just U.S. citizens, but White, monolingual English speakers, often associate a lack of English language proficiency with a lack of intelligence. However, she did not believe this was related to the racial or ethnic identities of immigrants. Throughout her interview she stressed that learning English was essential to success in the U.S., and she had gone so far as to provide her employees incentives for attending ESL classes. Tanya explicitly stated that she did not employ undocumented workers and did not acknowledge documentation as a barrier, since the only membership “card” immigrants needed was English. According to Tanya, as long as an
immigrant learned English, he or she could have increased access to U.S. society regardless of
gender, race, or documentation status.

In addition to the belief that learning English would provide people with better access to
employment, many participants, particularly business owners and those employed in service
roles, also believed that English proficiency would reduce immigrants’ experiences with
discrimination. This belief highlighted the importance of English language use for membership
in mainstream U.S. society. Housing discrimination, being charged extra rent, being denied basic
repairs on a rental unit, and workplace discrimination were common forms of discrimination
faced by immigrants. Lourdes, a Brazilian immigrant and the director of a Latino-centric social
service agency, explained that Spanish-speaking people in the area were routinely over-charged
for rental properties:

There are some apartments down the road and they charge $350 for a one-bedroom
apartment, but for the Spanish they were charging $500. I tried to call and talk to them
about this and they started talking about how they are Spanish and they don’t belong
here. They said that the Spanish cause trouble. I know that some Spanish cause trouble,
but I think that anybody can get in trouble. (Interview, 04/28/11)

Lourdes and other participants decried the discrimination that immigrant families in the area
were subjected to and some felt that more efforts to acculturate, including learning English and
adopting a style of self-presentation that was less “Mexican” would be a good first step. The
suggestion that immigrants adopt a more assimilative stance was also highlighted in an interview
with Rosalina, an older immigrant from México who had lived in the U.S. since the 1960s.

Rosalina, who was White and middle-class, felt that some members of the Latino community

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3 It should be noted that Lourdes spoke Portuguese, her native language, Spanish and English. The interview was
conducted in English. Her use of the term “Spanish” to refer to people of Mexican descent may be an artifact of her
trilingualism.
were “not accepted because of the ways they dress, like baggy jeans with *La Virgen* embroidered on them. They just don’t seem to care, they don’t want to intermingle. And that’s not helping them” (Interview, 08/01/2011). Rosalina’s observation demonstrates that the Discourse of being American involves not only learning English, but also giving up aspects of one’s ethnic identity.

Lourdes’ and Rosalina’s comments implicate the importance of race and ethnicity in the *American* Discourse, which emphasized English monolingualism. In the excerpt above, Lourdes explained that the local landowners saw Spanish-speaking members of the community as aliens (“they don’t belong here”) and troublemakers, thus eliding language use, a group of people, and the moral worth of that group. Similarly, Rosalina implied that speaking Spanish was associated with a style of dress used by gang members. Several Mexican immigrant participants confirmed that they felt surveilled and judged due to their perceived ethnicity. For example, Cinthia, a college educated, bilingual immigrant from Sinaloa, México, pointed out that the local people in her town equate being Latino with being uneducated and poor. During our interview, she explained that people look at her, see that she is Latina, and make assumptions based on her race or ethnicity. She stated that she has been mistaken for being part of the janitorial staff at her work, and that her own husband joked with his (White) friends implying that she was his maid.

The linkage of race, ethnicity, language use and being American created an untenable situation for some of the Latin@ immigrants in our study. On one hand they were urged or required to learn English, but on the other hand their use of English was frequently misrecognized, denigrated, or discouraged. Although many of our immigrant participants had either learned English or had been taking English classes for years, they articulated a complex array of challenges associated with using English in public. Participants explained that locals had
difficulty understanding their English, and many felt that this lack of understanding was related to their skin color or accent. Cinthia’s experience reflects this form of misrecognition:

> A veces me siento rara cuando voy a algún lugar y pregunto algo en inglés. A mí me ha tocado que si tú entres a algún lugar o tratas de hablar con un americano, nada más porque te ven hispana ya como que se ponen en su mente, ‘no le voy a entender.’ A veces, no me siento tan cómoda hablando inglés con algunos americanos.

*Sometimes I feel uncomfortable when I go somewhere and ask something in English. I’ve had the experience of entering a location or trying to speak to an American, and for no other reason than because they see you as Hispanic; it’s like they already have it in their mind, ‘I’m not going to understand her.’* Sometimes I don’t feel very comfortable speaking English with some Americans. (Interview, 06/20/2011)

Other participants told us stories of linguistic profiling in social service agencies where employees claimed to be unable to understand their English. Beth, who has lived in the area for over fifteen years and speaks English fluently, was forced to wait over an hour for an interpreter to arrive because the receptionist chose to recognize her only as a Spanish-speaking immigrant. Although experiences of misrecognition were frustrating for our participants, most continued to make efforts to learn or improve their English either through self-study or by attending local ESL classes. Based on our interviews and observations, it was clear that immigrant participants invested significant time, money and energy attempting to learn English, but often received discouraging feedback. It is important to note how multiple occurrences of misrecognition and discrimination affected the Discourses that some participants took up. As a result of her experiences Beth indicated that she no longer tries to use English when visiting government agencies; she just waits on the interpreter. In this case, the receptionist forced the Discourse of
the incomprehensible, Spanish-speaking immigrant onto Beth, and she was compelled to accept this interpretation of her identity if she wanted to obtain the assistance she sought (Holland & Leander, 2004). Thus, although immigrants and non-immigrants told us that speaking English would improve immigrants’ access to both institutions as well as to the American Discourse, many people’s day-to-day experiences demonstrated otherwise.

Given that the Latino Immigrant Discourse linked speaking Spanish and “browness” with being uneducated, poor, dangerous, and alien, most all of our Mexican immigrant participants (both documented and undocumented) worked to counter this negative framing and to be recognized as contributing members of their communities. In our interviews, participants stressed that just because they were from México or lacked documentation did not mean that they were inherently less worthy of respect. Participants frequently explained that they went out of their way to be obedient, polite and compliant to local residents and the police because, as Rena, an immigrant from Michoacán, México, explained, “we have to realize that we are not in our own home and so we need to respect what the laws say.” Luis, an immigrant from Jalisco, Mexico who had lived in the region for over a decade, pointed out all of the contributions that Mexican labor made to the physical environment of the town and the university through construction of prominent highways and buildings. The fact that our interviewees sought to emphasize that they were good people who worked hard and contributed to society reflects their struggles to reckon with a Latino Immigrant Discourse that constructed Latin@s in negative ways (Carter, 2014; Chavez, 2008). In fact, similar to the findings reported by Wortham et al. (2009), we found a type of “model minority” stereotype frequently expressed by both immigrant and non-immigrant participants when it came to physical labor, but not educational pursuits.
Participants asserted that Latin@ immigrants were harder working and more willing to engage in undesirable work as compared to “locals.”

**Language Zoning**

While explicit discrimination against the use of Spanish in public was less prevalent, the dominant language ideology of English monolingualism acted as de facto public language policy, creating what we refer to as “language zoning,” and what Hill (1998) has called “White public space” (p. 684). In our context, language zoning enforced English for all public matters and relegated Spanish for use with family in the home and in private spaces, although even this was contentious for some of our participants. Consistent with Appalachian cultural commitments to individuals’ rights and self-determination (Donesky, 1999; Gaventa, 1980), language zoning provided an air of liberal tolerance for Spanish as long as it did not enter into the public sphere. In other words, “Do what you like in your own space, as long as it doesn’t affect me.” While our participants largely complied with this public/private zoning of English and Spanish, our findings demonstrate the complexities associated with efforts to zone or regulate a social phenomenon like language. Unlike physical property that can be measured and defined in finite terms, language is a slippery social construct, and decisions one makes about language use are influenced by myriad sociocultural and political factors. Much like explicit governing policies, we observed that language zoning regulated participants’ decisions regarding language use. In her interview, Laura articulated her understanding of language zoning very explicitly:

Para mí sí, es una regla muy estricta; es una regla de oro... En la casa, sólo hablamos español; en la casa no se habla inglés... Aún cuando viene la niña (la vecina), yo le digo, ‘¿quieres jugar?, okay. Pero en mi casa se habla español.’ Entonces la niña qué hace? Se pone un pie afuera y dice, ‘okay, L,’ le pregunta, ‘dablpblpblp?’ Y Leslie dice, ‘Okay.’ y
tiene un pie afuera, y, ‘dablplpblplp.’ Pero no, normalmente hablamos más español aquí en la casa. En la calle sabemos que, claro, todo es en inglés. Aquí es un país de inglés, y entonces en la calle sí hablamos inglés.

*For me, it’s a very strict rule; it is a golden rule... In the house, we only speak Spanish; at home, English is not spoken... Even when the neighbor girl comes, I say, ‘you want to play?, okay. But in my house, Spanish is spoken. Then what does the girl do? She puts a foot outside and says ‘okay, Leslie,’ she asks her, ‘dablplpblplp? And Leslie says, ‘Okay.’ And she has one foot outside, and, ‘dablplpblplp.’ But no, we normally speak more Spanish here in the house. In the street we know that, of course, everything is in English.*

This is an English-speaking country, and so in the street, we speak English.

While this example illustrates Laura’s commitment to maintaining Spanish, it also demonstrates the shared and pervasive understanding that her power to do so stopped at her doorway. Even her daughter and elementary school-aged neighbor understood that just beyond the threshold of her door, English prevailed. Laura thus complied with the zoning of public spaces (“the street”) as being English spaces. This perspective was also shared by Lena, an ESL teacher from Chile, who described how she regulated her use of Spanish at school with her students: “*No, of course we never do it in front of teachers that don’t know Spanish because that is ugly I think. It’s not nice because they don’t understand.*” Here, Lena acknowledges that English is the accepted language for communication and to force Spanish onto others in public spaces like schools was not only unacceptable, but also rude and ugly.

On the surface, the notion of language zoning appears to support immigrant families’ wishes to nurture and maintain their native language within their own homes. Several participants successfully maintained Spanish as the home language, and in many cases, as
illustrated by Laura’s family, this was the result of an explicit rule. However, the reality of language use in the home was typically much more complicated given that different members of the family had different skills and preferences. Participants in “mixed” immigrant and non-immigrant families often found their right or ability to use the mother tongue in the home infringed upon by spouses or children. The immigrant women we interviewed who were married to U.S. citizens were expected to conduct family affairs in English. For example, Lena’s husband frequently expressed dislike both of Spanish and of the Spanish-speaking population in the area. When Lena’s daughter from a previous marriage came to the U.S. to live with them after finishing university in Chile, Lena’s husband insisted that she speak English: “He was there all day with her, English, English, English. When he found us talking in Spanish, he went ‘English, English!’” Even within the intimate space of her own home, where Spanish-dominant persons outnumbered English-dominant, the hegemony of English prevailed.

Cinthia, who was also married to a U.S. citizen, recounted a similar experience. She told us that although her husband claimed to have a desire to learn Spanish, whenever they spent time with her family or bilingual friends he would become frustrated and request that they use English:

yo me siento más cómoda hablando español… con mi familia. Porque a veces mi esposo me dice, “si tu familia habla inglés, ¿por qué no hablamos inglés?” Y yo le digo, bueno pues es difícil porque nosotros pues nuestro idioma es el español y estamos a veces bromeando y diciendo cosas y pues en inglés como que no. A veces mi esposo se enfada, pero para mí es más cómodo hablar español.

I feel more comfortable speaking Spanish... with my family. Because sometimes my husband says to me, "If your family speaks English, why don't we speak English?" And I
say, well, it is difficult for us because our language is Spanish and sometimes when we are joking around and chatting, in English? Well of course not. Sometimes my husband gets mad, but for me speaking Spanish is more comfortable.

This story highlights a dynamic that many participants had to negotiate—if the only place where Spanish language use was “allowed” was in the home, what happens when that implicit right is questioned? When Cinthia and her family got together and used Spanish to socialize, the status of English as the central and unmarked language was upset and this, in turn, frustrated Cinthia’s husband. He felt justified in expressing his discomfort because of the dominant ideology of English monolingualism. This quote also demonstrates Cinthia’s attempt to educate her husband regarding the importance of the Spanish language to her identity, to the maintenance of her intimate relationships, and for effective communication. By continuing to use Spanish despite her husband’s disapproval, Cinthia and her family challenged the normalization of English as the default language for communication in bilingual contexts.

In addition to challenging the intrusions of English into her own home, Cinthia also took an educative stance towards her bilingualism and language use in public spaces. When she and her sister were standing in line and chatting in Spanish at a local fast-food restaurant, a complete stranger chastised them:

…un señor me dice, ‘es que ustedes tienen que hablar inglés porque estamos en Estados Unidos.’ Entonces, yo le respondí en inglés. Le dije, ‘Yo hablo el idioma que yo quiero. Porque, porque yo puedo.’ Entonces le dije, ‘yo no estoy hablando con usted, entonces usted no tiene por qué molestarse si yo estoy hablando otro idioma. Entonces el señor como que se quedó sorprendido porque lo más seguro pensó que yo no hablaba inglés.’
A man said to me, ‘You all need to speak English because we’re in the United States.’

And so I responded to him in English, ‘I’ll speak the language that I want. Why? Because I can.’ And then I told him, ‘I am not speaking with you, and so you don’t need to get upset if I’m speaking another language. The man looked surprised since, I’m sure that he thought I did not speak English.

Here, Cinthia is talking back to the English-only ideology that attempts to zone public spaces as English-only spaces. In so doing, Cinthia asserted herself as a bilingual person who should be able to use Spanish regardless of the space in which she finds herself. Further, she also expressly rejected the uptake of assimilationist Discourses exhibited by some of our other participants and the notion that using Spanish in public is rude or un-American.

**Constructing Alternative Discourses**

Despite the dominant monolingual English-only ideology, Cinthia and other participants worked to construct positive Discourses that allowed them to represent themselves in more complex ways—as people who are bilingual, bicultural, Mexican, and American. Through their day-to-day interactions with family members and members of the community, participants tried to represent being bilingual and being Latin@ as assets to the broader community. For the most part, these efforts focused on the functional benefits of being bilingual, as participants stressed integration and accommodation, only responding to the racism inherent in local Discourses when pushed to do so. In this portion of our findings, we explore Magda’s and Sara’s struggles to formulate positive immigrant Discourses and identities.

Magda was an immigrant from Chihuahua, México, who worked as an interpreter, translator, and parent liaison for a public school system located in a conservative area where anti-immigrant sentiment dominated, and the use of languages other than English was not accepted.
As with many of our Spanish-dominant Latina participants, Magda’s home was an English-dominant space despite the fact that her husband spoke Spanish and worked in Mexico for several months each year. Magda and her husband had two children and the default to English in the home resulted in her son’s loss of Spanish-language proficiency and dis-identification with his Mexican heritage. Although Magda appeared to accept her son’s preference for English with resignation, she hoped she would be able to continue to speak Spanish with her daughter. While Magda acquiesced to an English dominant environment in her home, she also questioned and attempted to push back against the norm of English-only monolingualism by emphasizing the functional benefits of bilingualism in the community. During our interview, Magda expressed her belief that immigrant children should have access to bilingual education in order to have more opportunities. She noted that her nieces and nephews in Texas attended bilingual programs, and she believed that their bilingualism benefitted the children and their families. Although she was guarded in making any criticisms about the public schools where she worked, she did state that the lack of bilingual programs and bilingual faculty made it difficult to serve children and families appropriately. Magda had even made presentations about Mexico, the Spanish language, and the contributions of immigrants to the U.S. for her son’s Boy Scout troop:

…hace poco les di una presentación y les enseñé un mapa diciéndoles cuántos países en el mundo, qué cantidad de millones de personas hablan español. Y qué cantidad de personas hablan inglés y que tanto poder de comunicación le daría a un niño aprender a hablar dos idiomas, con qué tanta población mundial pudieran ellos comunicarse… cuando ponen los números de los millones de personas que hablan español y el inglés juntos, es impresionante. Y que importante sería que todos aprendieran los dos idiomas.
Just a bit ago, I gave a presentation, and I showed them a map telling how many
countries in the world, how many millions of people speak Spanish. And how many
people speak English, and what power of communication it gives to a child to learn to
speak two languages, much of the total world population they could communicate with...
when you add all of the millions of people who speak Spanish and English together, it’s
impressive. And how important it would be for everyone to learn two languages.

We interpret Magda’s efforts to educate her son’s Boy Scout troop about the benefits and
power of being bilingual as an attempt to counter the pervasive English monolingual norm found
in her county and in the schools where she worked. Through this presentation and her interview
with us, Magda demonstrated the value of bilingualism by drawing on statistics, numbers and
demographics. Magda sought to de-politicize Spanish-English bilingualism and emphasize the
pragmatic benefit of increased communicative ability, highlighting the utility and normativity of
bilingualism around the world. Although unable to maintain bilingualism with her own children
in her own home, Magda felt that if a more inclusive perspective could be developed in North
Carolina, then perhaps other children would have better chances of becoming bilingual.

In contrast to Magda, Sara was much more visible and outspoken in her small mountain
community. Sara, an immigrant from México, D. F., worked in farmworker health and advocacy
and consistently attempted to improve relations between the Latin@ and Anglo communities in
her town. She spent significant time, energy and resources working Anglo-centric institutions
like schools and health clinics to set up community education forums and workshops. However,
during our interview, it was clear that Sara also felt frustrated by the lack of involvement and
support from the wider community. When we asked her about the relationship between the
Anglo and Latin@ communities in her area, she stated, “they can chew us, but they can’t
swallow us. Which just means they can see us, but they won’t accept us…. nos mascan pero no nos tragan… I don’t think we’re openly rejected. But sometimes I get some very hateful emails.” Sara went on to explain that for some time, the local paper published letters to the editor that portrayed immigrants as freeloaders who used social welfare programs without paying taxes. Sara felt compelled to respond to these misconceptions directly:

I thought like, I need to step in. I need to send a letter with actual facts with how we really influence the economy here. It’s not negative, it’s actually positive because we are supporting local businesses, and we do pay tax, regardless of documents or no documents. When we find a job, we get those taxes out from our paycheck. Not all of us use the welfare system and people will not abuse it either… So I was making this letter telling them the facts. So I send that hoping to kind of cool off the situation and the hate that was coming through the newspaper.

Unfortunately, the editor of the paper elected not to publish Sara’s letter, but she persisted, and went door-to-door, approaching local churches and community organizations. She and some of the Latina women she worked with offered to cook for different congregations, and while people were eating, she made presentations about the positive contributions of the immigrants to the local economy. In our interview, she explained that she believed that talking to people directly about their fears and misconceptions would result in consciousness-raising. Through her actions and speech, Sara explicitly confronted and deconstructed the negative Discourses surrounding immigrants and immigration in her community.

In addition to her activism and her efforts to construct a positive identity as a Latina immigrant, Sara also had to be an activist within her own home. As with Magda and many of our other participants, Sara wanted her daughter to be bilingual, and so they used both Spanish and
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English at home. However, once her daughter entered preschool, she began to use almost exclusively English. Sara found this frustrating “because I felt like I couldn’t communicate with her. Even though when I was talking with her in Spanish, she will answer me in English.” Sara’s concern with her daughter’s preference for English deepened after “the children at the school were making fun of her because she was able to speak Spanish, and then she became ashamed of her Spanish heritage.” Sara explained to us how she reacted to her daughter’s rejection of her home language and culture:

What I did, very extreme, but I bought two plane tickets and took her back to Mexico City, to the center of Mexico City. I made her sit in the middle of downtown… I told her, “just listen.” So, after like an hour or so she started to go like, “What are we listening to?” I say, “What are you listening to? Tell me what are you listening?” She said, “A bunch of people talking in Spanish.” I say, “Lots of people talk Spanish and this is a whole different country. If you are unable to understand Spanish, or refuse to talk Spanish, or are ashamed of your mommy and our heritage, then you are ashamed of who you are, because you come from here and you are ashamed of my whole family, and you will not be able to communicate with my family.” And then she got it; into touch with Mexico (after) a couple hours sitting downtown. (Laughter)

Sara said that after they got back from that trip, her daughter did feel more pride in being Mexican and being able to speak Spanish, and that when the other children made fun of her, she just ignored them. This occurred when Sara’s daughter was just four years old. Sara’s story demonstrates how language ideologies directly affect the Discourses that people take up and the grave consequences on relationships that those decisions may have. At just four years old Sara’s daughter had already internalized social messages that conflated language, ethnicity, and
citizenship and positioned her mother’s Latina identity as insignificant. As a result, she felt that in order to take up the dominant Discourse of *American*, her daughter chose to eschew Spanish and distance herself from her mother. Sara framed the maintenance of Spanish as intimately connected to the preservation of family ties and cultural identity: “For me it was very important for her to keep her Spanish because all of my family speaks Spanish. In my mind, if she lost that she was going to lose the link to my family.” This sentiment, that the Spanish language was important for maintaining family ties and ties to the parents’ home culture, was common among our immigrant participants. Notable, however, was the length to which parents went to preserve cultural and linguistic heritage. Sara’s story of her efforts to demonstrate the importance of the Spanish language to her four-year-old daughter highlights the extreme measures needed to combat the overwhelming influence of the monolingual English-only ideology.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

When people take up specific cultural or linguistic practices that are associated with particular Discourses, they are making identity claims and asking for recognition as a legitimate member of a particular community. Ideologies that construct Latin@ immigrants as dangerous, illegal, poor, or uneducated people who come to the U.S. to rely on social services or “cause trouble” severely constrict the identity claims and Discourses to which immigrant participants have access (Carter, 2014). Our research confirmed that Spanish-dominant bilinguals from México and Central America were read as “immigrants” and therefore were often questioned or challenged when taking up Discourses related to being “American.” Actions such as speaking English, driving, or attempting to access local services were questioned by “locals” who could both lay claim to the Discourse of being American, and also authorize or reject the efforts of
others to align themselves with this Discourse. When immigrants like Beth or Cinthia attempted to use English in public spaces, they were frequently silenced, misrecognized, and humiliated.

Our bilingual immigrant participants live in an environment in which being a monolingual English-speaker is normalized and expected, and clearly linked to being an authentic *American*. As a result, residents of this area, from complete strangers, to employers to family members felt comfortable evaluating participants’ use of Spanish or English, particularly in public spaces. Often, immigrant participants reacted to these daily micro-aggressions by attempting to comply with a model minority immigrant Discourse (Wortham et al., 2009; De Fina & King, 2011): being hard-working, obedient, compliant, and highlighting their contributions to the community. Non-immigrant participants also ascribed this Discourse onto immigrants, especially in the context of work ethic rather than to educational or intellectual pursuits. Both immigrants and non-immigrants drew on the model minority aspect of the *Latino Immigrant* Discourse as a method of highlighting positive traits of and talking back to the negative stereotypes about Latin@ immigrants like the ones presented in Sara’s local newspaper. However, appealing to the model minority Discourse may perpetuate monolithic notions of Latin@ immigrants as good for work but not good for school, and may also contribute to continued segregation and distancing between Latin@ immigrants and other minority groups (Carter, 2014; De Fina & King, 2011).

Some of our participants responded to the expectation that public spaces be reserved for English by trying to compartmentalize and self-police language use through diglossic language practices, what we termed “language zoning.” Unfortunately, the assertion that Spanish was a private language and that people should be allowed to speak their native language in their own homes or spaces served to construct public space as reserved for White, monolingual English
speakers (Hill, 1998). However, even in the face of relentless English-only hegemony, immigrant participants also worked to form positive identities as bilingual, bicultural people, and continued the work of maintaining Spanish language and literacy with their children. The most striking aspect of participants’ responses to negative or ambivalent responses to their self-representation was that they often adopted an educative stance—attempting to educate others about the ways that bilingualism was an integral part of their human identity and should be viewed as a resource rather than a threat.

While much of our data emphasized the central role of language—specifically learning and using English—in being recognized as American in Hightown, language was also used to index race and ethnicity. In the area of northwest North Carolina where we conducted this study, we found that being American was related to speaking English, which was related to being White. People who were White or light skinned had much more latitude when it came to language use, a point also emphasized by Hill (1998) who noted that White people are permitted to use Spanish and English in non-standard or “disorderly” ways, but Spanish-speakers are sanctioned when code-switching or when speaking English with an “accent” (p. 682). This effectively silences some people, limits people’s possibilities for self-expression, and re-inscribes social and racial boundaries (Carter, 2014; De Fina & King, 2011). Developing positive social, cultural, linguistic and ethnic identities is an on-going and intimate project. Learning to navigate shifting Discourses within a hostile sociopolitical context is an exhausting reality. Most of us would prefer to just get along, keep our heads down, and maintain peace and balance within our families and workplaces. For that reason, it is imperative that researchers and educators continue to draw attention to these issues and advocate for greater inclusion of bilingual practices in a wider variety of spaces.
References


