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Bilingual tricksters: Conflicting perceptions of bilingualism in the informal labor economy

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the value of bilingualism in the informal labor economy by analyzing how Latin American immigrants in the United States draw on their language abilities when asserting their socioeconomic positionality as workers. Bilingual day laborers in the U.S.-Mexico border region cultivate bilingual identities through their work as language brokers in ways that augment their social status and facilitate employment. Yet, despite the perceived advantages of bilingualism for day laborers, their monolingual Spanish-speaking peers often evaluate bilinguals unfavorably—as tricksters—because of their ability to communicate in Spanish and English. Ultimately, by exposing the benefits and burdens of bilingualism for day laborers in the border region, this article describes the intersection of the social and economic contours of language contact.

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1. Introduction

Dominant discourses and popular media portrayals of immigrants in the United States, particularly those from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, suggest that immigrants are resistant to learning English; and this is regularly perceived as a barrier to their assimilation to dominant cultural norms (Chavez, 2008). Yet researchers such as Zentella (1997) and Velázquez (2009) have consistently documented that cross-generational English acquisition—and the corollary loss of minority languages (Wong Fillmore, 2000)—actually happens quite rapidly. The rhetoric surrounding immigrants' supposed lack of English acquisition ignores the numerous obstacles to their learning English, ranging from low levels of education prior to migration (Gonzalez, 2000), legal status (DuBord, 2014), access to English classes (Kouritzin, 2000), social isolation from English speakers, long working hours, and family obligations (Menard-Warwick, 2009; Norton, 2013). Despite these multiple barriers, adult immigrants across socioeconomic class regularly succeed in becoming English speakers over time (Chiswick, 1991).

While many researchers have measured rates of English acquisition among immigrants in the U.S. and the dominant ideologies that name English acquisition as requisite for Americanization, others have explored the socioeconomic value of learning English. Earlier ethnographic sociolinguistic research, such as Zentella (1997) and Urciuoli (1996), demonstrated that English acquisition did not guarantee socioeconomic mobility among Puerto Ricans in New York.¹ Other researchers have focused on rates of language acquisition and corresponding earnings among different immigrant populations (Chiswick, 1991; Espinosa and Massey, 1997; Gonzalez, 2000). More recently, Callahan and Gándara's (2014) excellent collection explores the

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¹ It should be noted that both Zentella's (1997) and Urciuoli's (1996) research focused on Puerto Ricans in the mainland United States. Their status as U.S. citizens affords them a different migration experience as compared to other Latin American immigrants, particularly for undocumented immigrants.

value of bilingualism in the U.S. labor market, showing that the economic value of bilingualism varies geographically, by profession, and by generation; and—most relevant to the present discussion—there is limited economic gain for speaking English or being bilingual in unskilled labor markets in the Southwestern United States (Alarcón et al., 2014).

The current article examines the contours of the value of bilingualism in the informal labor economy by analyzing how immigrants draw on their language abilities when asserting their socioeconomic positionality as workers. More specifically, this qualitative analysis explores how bilingual day laborers in the Southwest cultivated identities that drew on their bilingualism in ways that could augment their social status and facilitate employment. Despite the perceived advantage of bilingualism for day laborers, their monolingual Spanish-speaking peers often evaluated bilinguals unfavorably *because* of their ability to communicate in Spanish and English. Therefore, language acted as a powerful tool that bilingual day laborers used to mark their status in comparison with their monolingual peers who were eager to learn English. And while bilinguals recognized the value of speaking English at work and in the community, they were also acutely aware of the limits of their bilingualism. Language alone did not guarantee socioeconomic mobility in the ways that many Spanish monolinguals and emergent bilinguals believed to be true. While immigrants often perceive English as an important rung on the ladder to socioeconomic success, language may also be a tool for exclusion that allows those higher up on the ladder to reinforce their privileged status (Bejarano, 2005; DuBord, 2014). The findings presented here complicate our notions of the value of language and how language practices in contact zones—such as the U.S.-Mexico borderlands—often bolster the status of English as a dominant language and entitle English speakers.

Drawing on imagery of the trickster, a prominent figure in mestizo and indigenous myths and folklore in Mexico and other parts of North America, I examine the linguistic tightrope bilinguals walked as interpreters for their Spanish-speaking co-workers and English-speaking employers at a day labor center (DLC) in Arizona. Monolingual Spanish speakers at the DLC perceived bilinguals as cunning tricksters because they thought bilinguals used their language skills to have an unfair advantage in job negotiations and at the work site. In contrast, bilinguals understood their language skills as having hard-earned social capital; in effect, speaking English allowed them to expand their social network connections with a variety of employers. Despite this advantage, speaking English could also be burdensome because of the additional responsibilities bilinguals bore on the job.

Tricksters are characters who take on roles ranging from ‘culture hero’ to ‘selfish buffoon’ (Carroll, 1981; Basso, 1996; Stookey, 2004). Perhaps the most widely recognized trickster in myths and folklore of the Americas is the coyote, known for his creative and cunning ability to defy ‘fixed roles or behavior’ (Erdoes and Ortiz, 1984, p. 335). Basso (1996) defines tricksters as contradictory figures who ‘act inconsistently and experience inconsistencies’ (p. 54–55); in essence, they may be alternately selfish and selfless. Tricksters are often jovial and charming characters who look for opportunities for self-promotion, yet may also perform great acts of generosity (Stookey, 2004). It is perhaps unsurprising that ‘coyote’ is the moniker for human smugglers in the borderlands. When successful, these guides deliver undocumented migrants to waiting family and friends but are notorious for their unscrupulous tactics (Spencer, 2009). Just as coyotes and other tricksters are not to be trusted, bilinguals may be suspect, precisely because of their linguistic abilities that allow them to facilitate communication.

2. Research setting and methodology

Throughout the Southwest and increasingly in other parts of the United States (Fine, 2006; Lazo de la Vega and Steigenga, 2013; Ordóñez, 2015), day laborers informally gather on street corners and parking lots, and sometimes more formally at worker centers in search of employment. This pursuit of temporary labor offers a precarious form of employment for workers who toil at the most informal end of the labor market. The ethnographic research described here was conducted at the DLC in Saguaro City, Arizona²; this newly organized church-affiliated worker center provided free employment matching services for Mexican and Central American immigrant³ men in a neighborhood where employers had traditionally negotiated with and hired day laborers (DuBord, 2014). This setting was selected as a research site because it allowed for the observation of ongoing face-to-face intercultural communication practices among day laborers and employers and the exploration of the role of language in ordering the informal labor economy in the borderlands.

Many day laborers at the DLC had family in northern Mexico, some of whom were part of a multi-generational pattern of cross-border circular migration, while others were from areas further south in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, or Nicaragua. It was the DLC’s policy not to inquire about workers’ legal status. Between 25 and 75 men signed up for work on any given day and the DLC’s membership was in continual flux due to factors such as workers finding permanent jobs or leaving town, in addition to the ebb and flow of work available according to the season and broader economy.⁴ Most workers in this setting were male monolingual Spanish speakers who depended on bilingual DLC volunteers and a small number of bilingual workers to help negotiate employment arrangements and communicate with English-speaking employers on the job. While bilingual DLC volunteers were more likely to take the lead as language brokers (i.e. impromptu informal

² Names of all organizations, cities, and people are pseudonyms.

³ I use the term immigrant inclusively to include both temporary migrants who intended to return to their countries of origin and permanent immigrants who intend to remain in the United States, regardless of their legal status.

⁴ Data collection began in the fall of 2006 and continued as the housing market collapsed at the beginning of the Great Recession.

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