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One Margarita, Please! Language Attitudes Regarding Pronunciation in the Language of Origin

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ABSTRACT

Much research has been performed on English spoken with an accent (c.f. Carranza and Ryan 1975, Lippi-Green 1997) and English borrowings in Spanish (c.f. González 1999). However, there is a lack of information regarding Spanish words that maintain their original phonetic realization when spoken in English. The present study reveals data concerning attitudes towards this phenomenon, if and how it is stigmatized, and by whom.

KEYWORDS: *Language ideologies, borrowings, phonetic realization, Spanish*

1. **INTRODUCTION.** I was once speaking with one of my Mexican friends who was describing a party she had gone to. She talked about a piñata and some of the food, all along maintaining the phonetic pronunciation of words of Spanish origin. Of course, some of my friends and I teased her about how she pronounced those words, but later on she told us that she didn't know why she said them that way. From there I decided I wanted to investigate whether a population of individuals who did this existed, and also the accompanying language attitudes towards this phenomenon. In the present study, I began with the attitudes.

2. **PREVIOUS RESEARCH.** As the second most spoken language in the United States of America (Census 2010), Spanish is constantly in contact with English. The effects of the HIGH variety, English, on the LOW variety, Spanish, have been heavily researched; however, the effects of Spanish on English have not received as much attention (González 2001). While Standard English is the dominant language and is frequently considered superior to Mexican American English (Galindo 1999), Spanish does

have an impressive influence on English, affecting ‘numerous levels of the linguistic system’ (González 2001).

Much research has been performed on English spoken with an accent (c.f. Carranza and Ryan 1975, Flores and Hopper 1975, Lippi-Green 1997) and English borrowings in Spanish (c.f. González 1999). It has been shown that there is quite a bit of discrimination towards English spoken with an accent (Lippi-Green 1997, Hill 2008). Some examples are seen in Mendoza-Denton (1999) where native English speakers of Chicano English and Puerto Rican English were penalized due to their FOREIGN accents while taking teacher certification tests. There have even been scenarios in which fluent speakers of Chicano English and Puerto Rican English dialects have been described as Limited English Proficient (Mendoza-Denton 1997). While these are, in fact, dialects of English, and not just ENGLISH WITH AN ACCENT, this study refers to a more distinctive phenomenon in English, one that is not necessarily specific to a particular dialect.

It is not uncommon to hear individual lexical items such as place names, personal names, as well as the names of food, pronounced in the language of origin (e.g. ‘Mexico’ [méxiko] (as opposed to [mɛksəko]), ‘Maria’ [maría] (as opposed to [məɹiə]), or ‘burrito’ [buríto] (as opposed to [bəɹíro])) in a sentence spoken in English. While different dialects of English and English spoken with an accent have been widely studied, there is a lack of information in regard to Spanish words pronounced in the language of origin in English. The aforementioned occurrence inevitably evokes particular attitudes towards the speaker and the speech itself.

The present study reveals data regarding attitudes towards this phenomenon. The three primary research questions are the following:

- Is it stigmatized to articulate a word with the phonetic pronunciation of the language of origin (when that language is Spanish)?
- What assumptions are made about people that speak in this way? In what way(s) is it stigmatized?
- Who makes these assumptions? By who is it stigmatized?

3. **INFORMANTS.** The study consists of 24 informants, as can be seen in Table 1. They are 18 to 34 years of age, with the majority being in the age 20–24 category. Of the 10 informants that identified as Hispanic, 8 were of Mexican descent, and the other two were Chilean and Guatemalan. The informants were asked questions regarding their native and, if applicable, learned languages, and self-identified as either monolingual or

bilingual speakers. To this date, certain responses from White, non-Hispanics and Latinos have been analyzed. The *OTHER* category has not yet been taken into account as the ethnic backgrounds are extremely diverse. In a city as ethnically diverse as Los Angeles, it can be challenging to find monolingual English speakers, but I was interested in analyzing their attitudes. In fact, according to the 2010 US Census, 85% of residents of LA County speak a language other than English at home.

Informants by Sex and Ethnic Background			
	Males	Females	TOTAL
White	3	4	7
Hispanic	3	7	10
Other	4	3	7
TOTAL	10	14	24

TABLE 1. Informants

4. **METHODOLOGY.** In order to answer the aforementioned research questions, an anonymous online survey was conducted through CCLE (i.e. Common Collaboration and Learning Environment Initiative) in which participants heard a recording and answered questions about it. A native English/Spanish bilingual speaker was recorded reading from a script in English regarding a hypothetical scenario. The speaker was a female between the ages of 20 and 30. She was a native bilingual in both English and Spanish, born and raised in Los Angeles. She had a Bachelor's degree. She could be described as a G2; that is, an immigrant of second generation, as her parents were born in Mexico.

The speaker was instructed on how to read the words (i.e. to not phonetically adapt the words), something that she said sounded natural to her in certain contexts (e.g. with bilingual friends). Common words of Spanish language origin were not phonetically adapted to English. Instead, they were pronounced in their language of origin, Spanish. The script was originally written by the author who aimed to write something as natural as possible, incorporating words of Spanish language origin that had been completely borrowed into the English language and could be found in English dictionaries. These words were all cognates and also were spelled the same in English as they were in Spanish.¹ Words of this nature were chosen as opposed to words of Spanish origin that had been completely borrowed into the English language that were not in fact cognates (e.g. *hombre*), as this study was focusing on the choice to

phonetically realize a word in one of two languages. Once the author had written the script, she reviewed it with the speaker to verify that the wording was something that the speaker could imagine herself saying. A few changes were made to the script.²The speaker was recorded multiple times in an effort to get the most natural-sounding recording. The script can be seen below.

My best friend **Maria** and I went to her cousin's birthday party Friday night and right when we walk in the door they had all of the food out. There were chips, **tacos**, rice and beans, and then they had **tortillas** so that you could make your own **burritos**. And they had a full bar, too. I got a **margarita** because they're my favorite, but my friend said that the **tequila** itself was pretty good, too. I just can't drink it alone. As we were eating we saw her uncle sneak in with a **piñata**. I think he was trying to hide it from her cousin. We ended up staying in **Tijuana** for another week, but I had to get back because my sister was getting married.

In an effort to get background information of the respondents as well as other important factors contributing to their dialect(s), the survey began with 16 demographical questions. Many of these questions were modeled after the 2010 Census questions. Following this, was a series of 18 questions that were designed to evaluate the respondents' attitudes towards the speech and the speaker, or, more specifically, her language ability, ethnicity, education, and income.

After listening to the recording, the informants responded to open-ended, or free response questions, and closed-ended (i.e. yes-no or multiple choice) questions about the speaker and the way she spoke. Respondents were frequently asked to explain their answers; examples will be given below. It should be mentioned that questions directly related to the speaker's linguistic abilities were asked, but also, following Zentella (2002) and Mendoza-Denton (1999), less direct questions regarding the speakers' education and income were asked in order to discern their underlying attitudes about the speaker and her way of speech. Responses that were not considered included those that were not completely filled out and those from respondents that weren't able to hear the recording, as technical difficulties did arise.

From the variety of questions, responses related to questions regarding the speaker's education, English ability, ethnic background/origin, and income were chosen to be analyzed. The following interview

questions were used in an attempt to answer my research questions. Possible responses to closed-ended questions are listed in parentheses.

- What level of education do you think the speaker has? (Less than a high school diploma; High school graduate, no college; Some college or associate degree; Bachelor's degree; Graduate degree)
- Complete the following sentence: She speaks English. . . (very well; okay; not very well)
- Do you think she is a native speaker of English? (Yes/No)
- What do you think is her ethnic background? What city or country do you think she is from?
- What would you estimate is the speaker's annual household income? (\$0–\$15,000; \$15,000–\$35,000; \$35,000–\$50,000; \$50,000–\$100,000; \$100,000+)

5. RESULTS. The first survey question that was analyzed regarded the speaker's education. As can be seen in Figure 1, the majority of informants agreed that she had less than a bachelor's degree. No one posited that she had less than a high school diploma. As far as their deviations go, we can see that one informant that identified as White thought that the speaker had a graduate degree. The reader will take note that the informant did, in fact, have a Bachelor's degree. The results were relatively inconclusive. Some examples of the free responses can be seen below. The first response in the Latino category expresses a purist attitude; this person did not believe that educated individuals would code-switch. The last response in that section was in regard to the fact that the speaker did not employ the Spanish trill /r/ where it was expected (i.e. in the word *burrito*). This could be due to the alleged neutralization of the Spanish tap and trill in Los Angeles Vernacular Spanish (Parodi 2009, Carr 2011). The first two responses in the White category were relatively positive.

LATINO

- 'If she were an academic, she would not break out of either language that much.'
- 'She speaks spanglish.'
- 'She doesn't speak spanglish her english and spanish are mixed but she does not make up words. She expresses herself clearly too [sic]'
- 'burritos. . .she had trouble w/her r's in Spanish'

WHITE

- '...the way she speaks sounds pretty normal to me for a person that grew up in a spanish speaking household.'
- 'She was well spoken and enunciated her words.'
- 'rolls her "r's" exaggerates her "a's"'

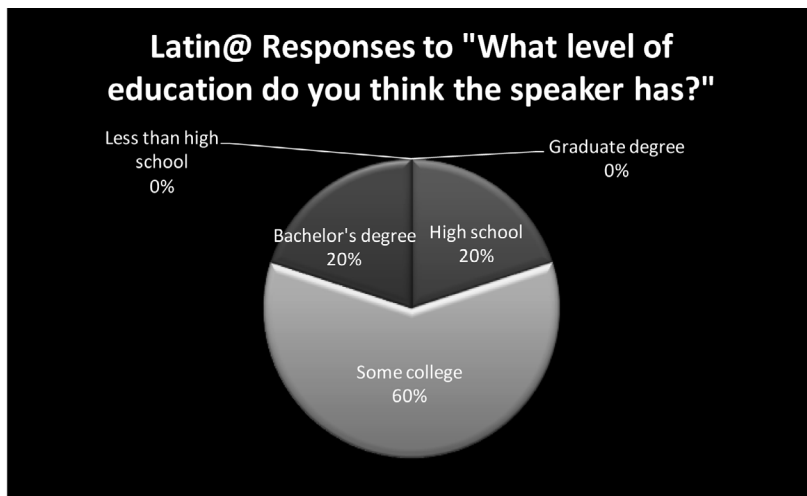


FIGURE 1. Speaker level of education

The next survey question of interest was regarding the speaker's English skills. The reader will recall that she was a native speaker of English, born and raised in Los Angeles. Interestingly enough, all individuals who identified themselves as White expressed that she spoke English very well (as can be seen in Figure 2). However, not all of them agreed that she was a native speaker of English (as can be seen in Figure 3). Two of the Whites that were interviewed believed that a person could speak English very well, even if it was not his or her native language. Regarding the Latinos, the majority thought that, as opposed to acquiring English in the home, she had learned English and wasn't a native speaker. However, two informants said she only spoke it okay, and one even said that she did not speak English very well (Figure 2). Oddly enough, three of the Latinos that agreed that she spoke English very well stated that she most likely was not a native speaker of English (Figure 3). The lower rating of her English on the part of Latinos could be due, in part, to their belief that their Spanish is not necessarily *GOOD* or *CORRECT*. In a presentation by Raymond (2011), it was shown that speakers of most dialects of Spanish

find their own dialect of Spanish as the most prestigious (along with the dialect of Spanish spoken in Spain). The only exception to this occurred in the opinions of speakers of LAVS, or the proposed dialect of Spanish spoken in Los Angeles (Parodi 2009).

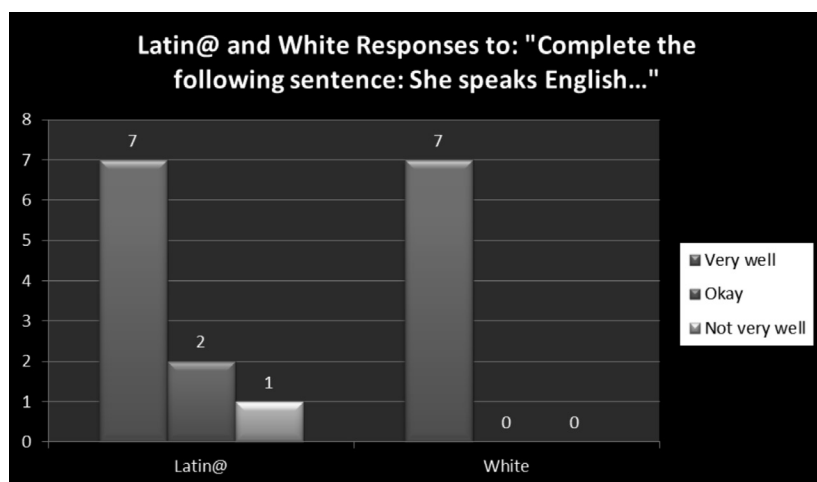


FIGURE 2. Speaker English proficiency

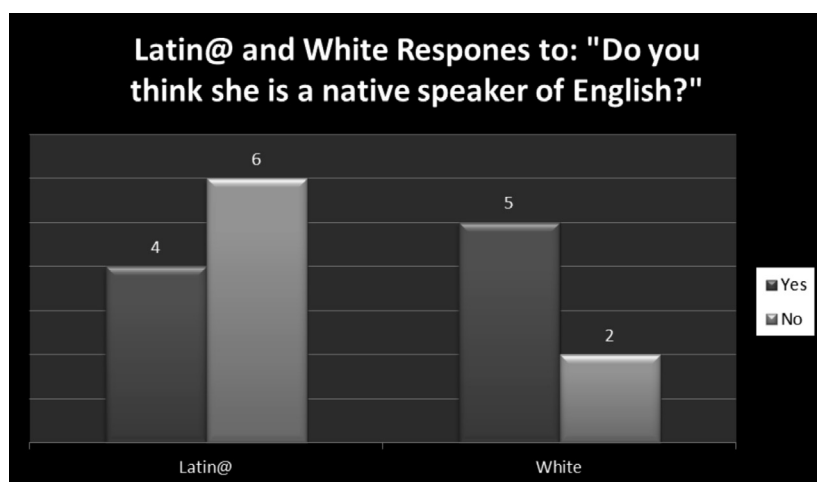


FIGURE 3. Native English proficiency

The next set of questions had to do with where the speaker was born and her ethnicity. As can be seen in Figure 4, almost all Latinos stated that the speaker was most likely of Hispanic origin, specifically of

Mexican origin, and that she was born in the United States (G2), probably in Southern California. Although, there were two that responded that her ethnic background was White. One of these was not of Mexican origin (Chilean) and tended to have differing responses overall from many of the Mexican-origin respondents. While not one of the informants of White descent thought that she was White, three thought she was a first generation immigrant (G1), born in Mexico. Two believed she was a G2, and still two more were unsure.

Additionally, because informants recognized that she was using Spanish phonetic pronunciation, they tended to think that she was of Hispanic, specifically of Mexican origin. We can also differentiate responses based on listeners' ethnic backgrounds. For example, the Latino G2s all correctly identified the speaker's background; she was also a G2 from Mexico. Whereas some who identified as White believed she was born in Mexico and thus a G1, others did not know.

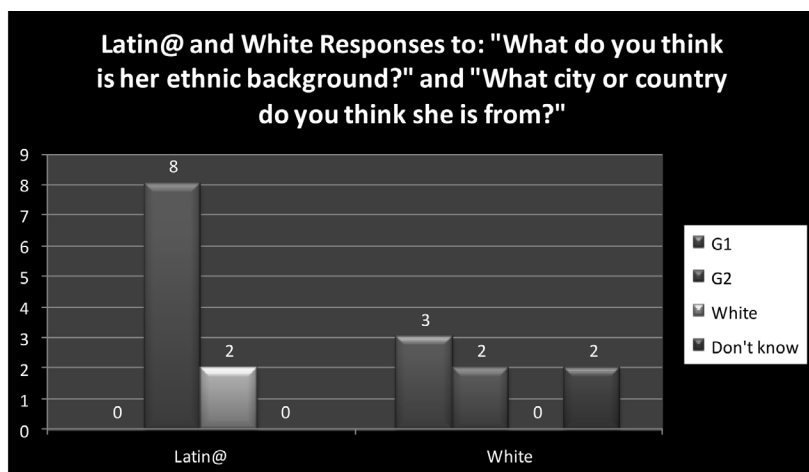


FIGURE 4. Ethnic background and country of origin

The final question of analysis pertained to the speaker's annual household income. The responses to this question, as seen in Table 2, were used to classify the speaker into different social classes. The first two categories (i.e. \$0–\$15,000 and \$15,000–\$35,000) were considered lower class; the second two categories (i.e. \$35,000–\$50,000 and \$50,000–\$100,000) were considered middle class; and the final category (i.e. \$100,000+) was considered upper class. The only really strong tendency that was seen was that the majority of the Latinos (i.e. 60%)

presumed that the speaker was in the middle class range. While none of the Hispanic individuals said that she was in the upper class, two White-identifying respondents did. The White responses were relatively dispersed between the three determined social classes. By assigning a point value to each category (e.g. category 1 or an annual household income of \$0–\$15,000 would be worth 1 point, etc.), we can calculate an average for each group. The average for the Latino-identifying individuals was 2.6, while the Whites averaged 2.6. This shows that, while the responses were dispersed differently, their averages were quite similar to each other, falling into the same social class: middle class. The responses to this question were a little challenging to analyze as some respondents did not understand the concept of household income (as opposed to individual income), and others that had answered that she was a student commented in the free response section that they didn't know if she was receiving funding or scholarships and therefore couldn't determine her annual household income.

Latin@ and White Responses to: “What would you estimate is the speaker’s annual household income?”			
Annual Household Income	Latin@	White	TOTAL
\$0–\$15,000	1	2	3
\$15,000–\$35,000	3	2	5
\$35,000–\$50,000	5	1	6
\$50,000–\$100,000	1	0	1
\$100,000+	0	2	2
TOTAL	10	7	17

TABLE 2. Speaker's annual household income

6. DATA ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION. As with all language ideological studies, it is difficult to make assumptions about others and their own assumptions. While we must keep this in mind, we can still look at what the data tells us and attempt to analyze it, whilst remembering that these are just speculations.

As markers of identity, various linguistic traits imply a wealth of characteristics of speakers. This is important because it obviously has effects on what people may think about you, your ethnic origin, where you were born, your education, and even your socioeconomic class. They may give you entry, or deny you access, into a certain community. They clearly have robust social effects. As seen in Parodi (2003), there can also be economic effects—for instance, in acquiring or retaining a job, or

even in education. In this study, most informants guessed that the speaker had less education than she actually did. Of course this may have been due to a variety of factors, but one of those factors was her phonetic realization of words of Spanish origin, so it is possible that this phenomenon is stigmatized and thought to be employed by those that aren't as educated. One way to test this would be to isolate the variable and create a control in which the same script was read by the same person, this time pronouncing the words with English phonology. The author plans to realize this process in the near future.

In the question regarding whether or not the speaker was a native speaker of English, it was brought to the author's attention that it is possible that the concept of **NATIVE SPEAKER** could have been confusing for the three Latino informants who agreed that, while the speaker spoke English very well, she was not a native speaker of English.

Be it small, the majority of White-identifying individuals thought that the speaker was actually born in Mexico. This could be due to a particular ideology that English is the (only) language of the US, and that anyone that **HAS AN ACCENT** or speaks another language, is considered a foreigner.

7. **CONCLUSION.** Spanish is the second most spoken language in the United States (Census 2010) and proves to be a great linguistic influence within the country. As such, a variety of opinions tend to circulate about its dialects and their usage. A multitude of language attitudes is inevitable, especially in areas with frequent language and dialect contact, as occurs in the bilingual communities of Los Angeles. Language Ideologies proves to be an exceptionally important field because many times the attitudes people have towards other languages and their own language(s) not only determine the fate of the languages and dialects, but can also have great effects on the speakers themselves.

Being a pilot study, this project has much room for development and improvement. In the future, the author plans on making use of a control group in order to compare results. Additionally, more research will be conducted regarding the populace that participates in the aforementioned phenomenon.

NOTES

1. English is not a language with accent marks; therefore the accent in *MARÍA* is generally not included.

2. The author had originally incorporated the word *MOJITO* instead of *TEQUILA*, but the speaker said that she would never say [moxíto], and had only ever heard it said with ‘an English accent’. She suggested a sentence with *TEQUILA* in it and the script was adjusted to accommodate for this.

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