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# Latinos and Other Minorities in Los Angeles: Their Languages

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## ABSTRACT

*In Los Angeles, among other ethnic groups, live Anglos, Latinos, Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, Iranians, Arabs, Russians, French and Israelis, just to mention a few. They use their native or heritage languages mostly to communicate with each other within their ethnic group. In fact, these speakers and their languages are not erratically intermingled, but grouped by ethnicity in different geographical areas in the city. In this paper, I address the social and linguistic similarities and differences of the minority languages most widely spoken in Los Angeles, which is a geographical point of attraction and irradiation in Southern California. In fact, major ethnic and linguistic diversity in the Western United States is localized in Los Angeles.\**

**KEYWORDS:** *Los Angeles ethnic groups, minority languages, diglosia, koiné, Spanish*

The City of Los Angeles, California is a language hub and a fantastic laboratory in which to observe the role and interaction of linguistic communities. Although Angelinos interact with each other, they do not form a melting pot, but rather a sociolinguistic mosaic of languages in contact. In this city live Anglos, Latinos, Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, Iranians, Arabs, Russians, French and Israelis, just to mention some Angelino ethnic groups. In fact, since the 1970s, the immigrants and their descendants have changed the demographic composition of Los Angeles due to an opening in the political immigration laws in the

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\* This paper is part of a wider research project on the Spanish language in the US, mainly in LA. It is conducted at UCLA's Centro de Estudios de Español de Estados Unidos (CEEEUS). The data was gathered by Argelia Andrade, Kelly Copeland, Angela Helmer, Lizy Moromisato and me. A related paper to this one is Parodi (2006).

United States (Waldinger & Bozorgmehr 1996: 9). In addition, massive non-documented immigration from all around the world, especially from Latin America, has altered the make up of Los Angeles. According to Allen and Turner, “The population that was once overwhelmingly white, with roots in the Midwestern and Eastern United States, now looks very different and captures the diversity of people on this planet” (2002:1).

In this paper, I address the situation of the minority languages most widely spoken in Los Angeles, which is a geographical point of attraction and irradiation in Southern California. In fact, major ethnic and linguistic diversity in the Western United States is localized in Los Angeles. Minorities and their languages are not erratically intermingled, but grouped by ethnicity in different geographical areas. Thus, Spanish is spoken mainly in East Los Angeles and other Latino areas, Korean in Korea Town, Chinese in China Town, Japanese in Little Tokyo, African-American English in South Central Los Angeles, and Vietnamese in Little Saigon (Orange County). Frequently a great number of people that live in the suburbs of Los Angeles, in the ethnic enclaves or in the counties that form the CMSA (the counties of Los Angeles, Riverside, Orange, San Bernardino, and Ventura ) commute daily to work or study in the City of Los Angeles (Allen and Turner 2002:2). This allows them to mingle with each other and create different networks and communities of practice sometimes using their ethnic language and other times using English.

**I. THE MINORITY LANGUAGES PROJECT.** This paper is the result of a pilot project designed to study the place minority languages have in American society, mainly in Los Angeles, and the changes that occur in these languages due to their status as *ETHNIC LANGUAGES*. For this project, I have selected the most frequently spoken languages in Los Angeles according to the 2000 Census. They total thirteen. I chose the perspective of diglossia (Parodi, 2009) to focus on this particular situation in Los Angeles, which has allowed me to make significant generalizations about these languages. In fact, all of these languages spoken in Los Angeles are result of immigration of various ethnic groups. These groups have common features and respond to the same patterns. In addition, their linguistic and cultural make up is very similar. This is so, due to contact of speakers among each other in their ethnic groups and with English in American society outside of their ethnic communities. In this study I also examine how widespread Spanish—the second most spoken language in Los

Angeles—is among other ethnic groups. The data used in this pilot study comes, in part, from the 2000 census and also, in part, from fifteen surveys done in Los Angeles by me and a group of graduate UCLA students. I barely use the data of the 2010 Census because the data available does not provide enough detail on the languages spoken in the US. One of the most relevant findings of this project is that half of the population in Los Angeles is bilingual in Spanish and English.

2. **SELECTED LANGUAGES.** The languages selected in this study are shown in Table 1. They are presented by the frequency with which they are used by speakers who are five years and older, according to the 2000 census for the City of Los Angeles.

LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF SPEAKERS	%
<b>Total</b>	<b>3, 412 889</b>	<b>100.00</b>
English	1, 438 573	42.15
Spanish	1, 422 316	41.67
Korean	81 040	2.37
Tagalog	78 043	2.29
Armenian	57 924	1.70
Chinese	52 928	1.55
Persian (Farsi)	43 043	1.26
Russian	28 870	0.85
Japanese	21 664	0.63
French	20 021	0.59
Vietnamese	17 686	0.52
Hebrew	16 292	0.48
Arabic	13 578	0.40

TABLE 1. Languages spoken in Los Angeles.  
(2000 Census, population five years and older)

In the project I have included English, the national language of the country, because it comprises Standard and non-Standard varieties, all of which are spoken in Los Angeles. Among the non-Standard varieties, we find we find two important ethnic variants: Jamaican Creole and African-American Vernacular English (AAVE). Only the latter, spoken in South Central Los Angeles, is relevant for this study. It is important to add that 93% of the population in Los Angeles speaks English and half of this percentage speaks, in addition, another language. In fact, in the year 2000 42.15% of the population was English monolingual, but the rest of the population used one or more **ETHNIC LANGUAGES** in

addition to English, which was and still is spoken with varying degrees of fluency. I use the term *ETHNIC LANGUAGE* to refer to the linguistic variants spoken in diverse ethnic enclaves in the city of Los Angeles. Despite the fact that English is critical to ascend the social and economic scale in the US, it is possible to find a reduced number of people that do not speak English. According to the census of the year 2000, almost 7% of the Los Angeles population did not speak English at the time of the Census. The Spanish speaking population comprised 6% out of that 7%. In general, these people lived and worked doing manual labor, which does not require English.

The thirteen languages included in Table 1 are the most widely spoken languages in Los Angeles. All of them coexist with English. However the number of speakers varies drastically between Spanish, the second most spoken language and Korean, the third most spoken language. Spanish was spoken by almost 42% of the population, and Korean was spoken by slightly more than 2%. This shows the extraordinary numerical gap between Spanish and the third *ETHNIC LANGUAGE* spoken in Los Angeles. A special case should be made for Chinese. Part of the Chinese-speaking population equaling about 2%, resides just outside the city of Los Angeles and forms a speech community together with the community residing in the city of Los Angeles. Cities located in San Gabriel Valley, such as Monterey Park and Alhambra, are examples of neighboring cities of Los Angeles that have a high volume of Chinese population. From this perspective, Chinese would be spoken more widely than Korean in Los Angeles. However, the Chinese language combines under its name Mandarin, Cantonese and other Asian languages and dialects which are not mutually understandable.

It is important to stress that in Los Angeles there is a strong tendency among the population to group geographically according to their ethnicity. These groups form true speech communities in the sense of William Labov (1972), reinterpreted by Santana and Parodi (1998) and Peter Patrick (2002). The linguistic make-up of Los Angeles (and many other American cities) is due to massive immigrations of different ethnic groups from the 17<sup>th</sup> century on. The groups of immigrants have formed different speech communities pushing back the American Indian aboriginal population. Thus, the vernacular languages of the Americas, the American Indian languages, are almost extinct. Allen and Turner (1997: 92) have found some of them in Los Angeles.

3. **THE SITUATION OF ETHNIC LANGUAGES IN LOS ANGELES.** All the ethnic languages in Los Angeles mentioned above are in a situation of diglossia with regards to English, the national language in the US. I use the term diglossia in a wide sense, as the use of two languages or two linguistic variants in one and the same linguistic community. One of the languages is the prestige high language, or language A. The other is the colloquial and familiar variant of less prestige, or language B. Both languages may be of the same or different genetic origin. They are used, however, in complementary distribution. That is in different contexts. Usually minorities learn and develop the formal register and the culture attached to language A at school or in academic environments. In the US in informal environments they may hear and speak language A with their peers together with language B. However, language B or the minority language is mostly used in colloquial and familiar environments. Usually minorities have little or no exposure to formal environments of language B, even if it is the official language in other countries, such as Mexico, Spain, Russia, Israel or France, among others. Language B in California—and in most of the US—may be learned sporadically in a formal fashion in Sunday school or in high school as an academic subject. Even if language B is acquired orally at home as any native language, it is not acquired pragmatically with all its social functions.

The acquisition of an ethnic language together with the cultural habits of the country of origin of each minority group gives identity and a sense of belonging and pride to each individual that belongs to a group. This is so especially in a society such as the American society, where almost every individual born and raised in the US is AMERICAN plus something else. This SOMETHING ELSE may be Mexican-American, Salvadoran-American, Chinese-American, Japanese-American, Italian-American and so on.

4. **PROLEGOMENA FOR THE ANALYSIS OF MINORITY OR “ETHNIC LANGUAGES.”** The concept of diglossia as depicted above allows analyzing in a flexible manner the distribution and use of minority immigrant languages and dialects in multilingual societies such as Los Angeles or New York. The coexistence of a generalized variant along the society or language A and one or more minority ethnic languages or B languages used in informal, colloquial, contexts is the starting point to understand the linguistic make up of modern multilingual societies. It is important to keep in mind that in these societies the prestige of a national language, such as English,

and the ethnic languages may vary according to the situation and the context. In certain contexts the ethnic language or language B is more prestigious than the official language or language A. Language B is more prestigious or adequate, for example, when celebrating the independence day of the country of a minority group, a social event such as a wedding or a religious ceremony such as the naming of a child. In addition, when there are several speakers of the same language that come from different geographical areas, each dialect has different prestige inside the ethnic community. For example, among Latinos in Los Angeles, Chicano Spanish or Los Angeles Spanish Vernacular is the prestige variant or variant A versus Chilean, Salvadoran or Guatemalan Spanish, which are B variants. Outside the ethnic communities, any ethnic language such as Chinese, Japanese, Spanish or Urdu in Los Angeles is ranked as a B language contrasted with English. In fact, only English is used in the majority of American schools, after Proposition 227, "English for the children", which eliminated bilingual education, passed in 1998.

Within the perspective of diglossia it is possible to explain the linguistic situation of minority or ethnic languages in the US, the linguistic variation inside and out ethnic speech communities, language and dialect contact, and language change. It is important to keep in mind that almost all the ethnic languages in the US such as Spanish, Korean, Japanese or French, are national or official languages in other parts of the world such as Latin America, Asia, Europe or Africa. However in the US, due to their limited functionality and usage in the American society, these languages become crucial elements of ethnic identity for the immigrants and their descendants.

5. **METHODOLOGY.** In this study I combine statistical figures from the Census and the data given by experts on each ethnic community in interviews and questionnaires specially designed to gather relevant information from each community. Many of these experts have a Ph.D. in linguistics, others teach their ethnic language and culture in local universities. Each expert answered 75 questions that allowed me to determine whether there was diglossia in their country of origin, as in Japan, or only in their community in Los Angeles. The questionnaire includes questions on the professional life of the informant, the geographical location of the communities in one or more enclaves of the city, dialects and languages of the country of origin, language or registers used in their prayers, businesses, interpersonal relations, formal and informal speech,

forms of address for their subordinates, language selection in different contexts in the US, the role of English and Spanish in the communities, practices of language maintenance in their communities, publications in the ethnic language in Los Angeles, their language and the media and knowledge of the writing system of their ethnic language.

Each interview was taped and the results were summarized in a database with information of all the ethnic languages analyzed. I also revised the bibliography on their languages in the US, mainly in Los Angeles. The information given by this group of people offers a preliminary view on their language and culture from the perspective of an educated native speaker, adequate for a pilot study, which can be deepened in future research projects.

6. ETHNIC ENCLAVES IN LOS ANGELES. Excluding English, which is the national language of the US, the other languages spoken in this country and, of course in Los Angeles, are spoken in ethnic areas. Immigrants congregate with their peers in heavy immigration areas to feel protected and to maintain their culture and their ethnic identity. These languages are called ethnic languages in the US, even if they are official languages in other parts of the world. Within this scenario, French is an exception. Most speakers of French as an ethnic language do not live in any particular enclave of Los Angeles. They are scattered throughout the city. This is so because French was a language of colonization, a language of culture and a lingua franca in the past. Its use has been maintained as a second or third language among different European, Asian and African ethnic groups in Los Angeles, such as Vietnamese, Egyptians, Lebanese, and Russians among others. Arabic and French, as well, are relatively disseminated in different enclaves due to the same reason. Russian is used as a third language in several ethnic groups. In addition of being an ethnic language in Los Angeles, Russian is used as lingua franca by people from countries of the former Soviet Union. This occurs in several groups in West Hollywood, Encino, Van Nuys and Beverly Hills. Many of them are Ashkenazi Jews. The most conservative use Yiddish as well. Jews from Israel, instead, use Modern Hebrew as ethnic language. They are mostly grouped in San Fernando Valley and West Hollywood.

The linguistic and cultural features that form the identity of each ethnic group in the US are different from those that prevail in their homeland. As time goes by, the differences increase, even if there is continuous diverse emigration into the US. The influence of the English



language and of American culture in “ethnic languages” and cultures is strong. Ethnic language speakers incorporate right away English loanwords, semantic extensions and code switching. Moreover, they absorb many linguistic and cultural trends typical of American society, such as English expressions, casual dress, fast food consumption and use of technology (see Parodi 2011 for Mexican Spanish).

6.1. ETHNIC LANGUAGES IN LOS ANGELES. Our inquiries in Los Angeles showed that when immigrants that speak different dialects of the same language interact on a daily basis, they may create a koine as a result of leveling their speech (for details on koines see Kerswill 2004). This is the case of Chicano Spanish, which is a koine of Mexican Spanish (Parodi 2003, 2004), that became a vernacular in Los Angeles or LAVS (Los Angeles Vernacular Spanish). . When adult Latino speakers of dialects other than Mexican Spanish, such as Salvadoran, arrive to Los Angeles, they learn Chicano Spanish or LAVS, as a second dialect. That is, they do not lose their vernacular, which they use with their fellow citizens. However, when their children are born in Los Angeles, they mainly acquire Chicano Spanish or LAVS, and not the dialect of their parents if they live in a Latino community (Parodi 2004). The same occurs with Chinese Americans from Los Angeles, who usually speak Cantonese—the dominant language in Los Angeles— even if their parents speak Mandarin or another Chinese variant. Moreover, due to the fact that ethnic languages are used in limited contexts, they all have analogous features. In almost all of them the different registers to address numerous situations are limited. Usually they use the informal register at home and in the community. However, many times they mix formal and informal registers. If the language has a Case system, it will be reduced among the ethnic language speakers. Their pronunciation of the ethnic language is native or near native. Most of the times they ignore the writing code of the ethnic language, especially when such language differs from English. This is the case in languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Vietnamese among others. When the language is written using the Roman alphabet, minority language speakers have a very high degree of comprehension of written texts. If the religious texts and prayers are delivered in an old variant or a high register of the language, they maintain it. This is the case of Classical Hebrew, which is used in prayers only. Most minorities learn their religious and cultural traditions and some

times the standard language in Sunday schools, which are close to the temples of their religions most of the times.

In Los Angeles there are newspapers and radio and television programs in the thirteen languages here analyzed. Some of them are produced in this city. With regards to Spanish, in addition to radio and television programs, there are books published in this language. For example, the biography of the Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, *Vivir para contarla*, was published in the US for internal consumption. In many cases it is frequent that during adolescence, due to identity and business reasons, the speakers of ethnic languages study the standard language that corresponds to their ethnicity in colleges and universities. For this reason, the colleges and universities in Los Angeles have designed special classes on language and culture for minorities to whom they name **HERITAGE SPEAKERS**, that is, bilingual speakers that use a language other than English as an ethnic language in the US. For examples, see Parodi 2008 and other articles in the same volume.

7. **SPANISH IN LOS ANGELES.** Spanish was spoken in this geographical area since the eighteenth century, after the Spaniards, the Mexican **CRIOLOS** and the Mexican Indians came from New Spain to conquer the land of the North. However, the usage of Spanish has greatly increased from the nineteenth century on. For example, we have seen that in the year 2000, 42% of the population older than 5 years spoke Spanish at home (see Table 1). This figure increased 7% from the year 1990, since the Census of that year reports 35% of the population 5 years and older speaking Spanish at home. These percentages show that Spanish, mainly Chicano Spanish or **LAVS**, a koine of Mexican rural dialects, became the Spanish vernacular in the area. This situation is stable in Los Angeles because Chicano Spanish not only is prestigious, but it is widespread in the area. Furthermore, it is maintained thanks to the continuous massive emigrations from Mexico and Central America that adapt and adopt the vernacular of the area. In addition, there is a strong Chicano community intensely rooted in Los Angeles for more than two hundred years. That is, Chicano Spanish, just like Chicano English, is widely spoken among Spanish speakers in Los Angeles. Chicano Spanish, as all ethnic languages in the US, has loanwords, semantic extensions, grammatical influence and phonological borrowings from English (Parodi 2011). Some people call it *Spanglish*. However this term is inaccurate because it comprises different varieties of Spanish that are spoken in the US, such as Cuban Spanish,

Puerto Rican Spanish and Dominican Spanish among others. These variants are typologically very different from Chicano Spanish.

Outside the Chicano communities in Los Angeles, Spanish is used as well. On the one hand, merchants, restaurant workers, construction workers, vendors and housewives learn some Spanish to sell their products, to hire Latinos or to be employed by them. On the other hand, our consultants informed us that Latinos learn other languages, such as Vietnamese, Japanese or Chinese, when they work with speakers of these languages outside the school system, for example in ethnic restaurants or stores. It is interesting to note that in mixed communities of Los Angeles, there are advertisements on boards written in an ethnic language other than Spanish and in Spanish on the walls. That is, Spanish is starting to expand outside the Latino communities.

In American high schools, colleges and universities, Spanish is the most widely studied foreign language. In public universities Spanish was studied by 636,000 students out of 831,000 in the year 2005. That is, 76% of the classes were Spanish classes. However these classes were taught in Standard Mexican Spanish and not in the vernacular of Los Angeles or Chicano Spanish.

8. CONCLUSIONS. In this paper I have shown that ETHNIC or minority languages in Los Angeles have common features that mostly affect their sociolinguistic status in a similar way, despite their typological and grammatical differences: (a) They are official languages in other countries, (b) They are mostly contained within a geographical area in LA in a situation of diglossia, (c) They are limited in their functions, but not in their core grammar features (in the sense of Chomsky), (d) Their speakers do not master the same registers of these languages as monolingual speakers do and (e) their linguistic variants have strong English influence. All these facts are crucial to understand language contact, language change, language and identity, and language survival.

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