

# **Language as an Ideological Weapon of Oppression**

Heidy Sarabia  
CCS 160: Introduction to Chicana/o Speech in American Society  
Prof. Santa Ana  
Fall 2003

I know that it is not the English language that hurts me, but what the oppressor do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize.

--bell hooks

Teaching to Transgress

## **Language as an Ideological Weapon of Oppression**

Learning a second language is very difficult. I remember what it was like to sit in a classroom where I could not communicate with anybody; I could not understand the strange sounds teachers made; and I would always be fearful of people speaking to me because I would have to answer with the only sentence that I knew, “I don’t speak English.” Eventually, the strange sounds began making sense, I learned English.

Universally, all human beings acquire language naturally because language is a social tool that allows us to communicate with one another. However, those in power have used language as a weapon for oppression and extermination of different languages, cultures and traditions. Specifically, in the United States, language has been used by the dominant society not only to construct the other but as a proxy for race as well. Yet, language has also been used by those oppressed as a tool of resistance.

### **I. Historical construction of the other through language**

The construction of the national identity of the United States has always revolved around white-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant-Males (WASPM). Even though the first inhabitants of this land were Native peoples of different tribes; enslaved Africans have been members of this society from the beginning; and Mexicans were established in the southwest before it became part of the United States. The United States has always housed a diverse population, but historically has constructed a national identity through language that excludes diversity.

Language has been used a tool to construct non-WASP people as the “other” and forced them to acculturate. All groups that did not speak English have faced the same ideological violence and social pressure to adopt English, which is considered superior to all other languages.

Native Americans, for example, were the first inhabitants of this land, had diverse languages and cultures, and rejected acculturations. Yet, the U.S. congress, representing the WASP population felt that “[s]chools should be establish [in] which [Native American] children would be required to attend; their barbarous dialects would be blotted out and the English language substituted” (Leibowitz). Clearly, Native American dialects were considered inferior and English superior.

Africans also faced cultural and language annihilation when they arrived in slave ships to the shores of the United States. The slaves were explicitly treated as merchandise and deliberately separated in order to prevent communication among them and subsequent rebellions. Slaves were only exposed to pidgins, a limited set of words used to community between two people that do not share a common language. Subsequently, their children developed a Creole language based on English to communicate among each other. Even though Black English is a language, the language ideology that is used to construct the other has labeled Black English as a corrupted English dialect.

In addition, German Americans faced a similar experience of language extinction. From 1830 to 1890, immigration from Germany increased significantly. The expansion of the German population made them very important, to the point that the U.S. constitution was translated into German to “attract the support of German residents in a number of American colonies” (Fallows). The German community concentrated in some states, where they sent their children to schools where they were taught German as well as English. The Germans acknowledged the fact the importance of learning English, but also wanted to preserve their traditions, culture and language. However, World War I crated an American patriotism movement that translated into a blunt rejection of German culture and language.

The Southwest belonged to Mexico until 1848 when the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo officially marked the sale of the territory to the United States. In California, for example, school was taught in Spanish since most pupils were of Mexican descent and Spanish was also the language used in the courts. In fact, the first California State Constitution of 1849, Sec 21 of Article IX, states that “All laws, decrees, regulations, and provisions emanating from any of the three supreme powers of this State, which from their nature require publication, shall be published in English and Spanish.” (CA Constitution, 1849). However, in the period of the gold rush, many Anglo-Americans came to California and the feeling towards the Spanish language changed. In fact, “in 1870, California passed a law requiring that ‘all school shall be taught in the English language’” (Leibowitz). Hence, the rejection towards Spanish was officially promulgated and enforced through laws.

In fact, historical discourse about immigrants also point to the powerful use of language to portrait immigrants as dangerous through the use of water and disaster metaphors. In 1793, Benjamin Franklin wrote about immigration in this way, “Unless the *stream* of their importation could be turned from this to other colonies...” (Frick). By the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the metaphors had not changed much. Samuel Busey wrote in 1856 that “the report urges some action of legislature, if any is practicable, by which the tide if pauper and criminal immigration can be checked” (Frick). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the representation of immigrants through water and disaster metaphors were historically cemented and popularly used. The historic metaphors are in fact the “foundations of Anglo-American xenophobia and racism... [used as a tactic to maintain a] hegemonic worldview that marginalizes and alienates/ foreignizes Latinos” (Santa Ana).

## **II. Language as a proxy for Race**

Languages other than English have been considered inferior and unimportant. Hence rejection of non-English languages has become a tool for marginalizing other cultures, traditions and languages. However, language ideology is stretch in other ways to in order be used as a proxy for race, namely through the ideology of validation and supremacy of standard English. The ideology behind standard English mythology has translated into a prejudice that devaluates non-standard forms of English. Hence, Black English and Chicano English are only two examples of how the ideology of standard English has been used to marginalized people of color.

But the general notion that standard English is superior to all other variations of English is part of an ideology. Lippi-Green explains that standard language ideology (SLI) can be explained as “a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken languages which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class” (Lippi-Green). Hence, Black English, Chicano English or any other variation of English that does not conform to upper middle class standards will be denigrated.

Yet, language and culture are closely related and intertwined. Pastora San Juan Cafferty and Carmen Rivera-Martinez point out that “while ethnic differences are sometimes not accompanied by linguistic differences, it is rare to find two different language groups in society where speakers are not in tow different ethnic groups: the ethnic group’s greatest identification becomes its language” (San Juan Cafferty and Rivera-Martinez). For marginalized populations such as the African Americans and Chicanas/os in the United States, their non-standard forms of English not only reflect their cultural differences from the Anglo-Saxon middle class, but their language also symbolizes their marginalized status in this society.

In fact, the racial undertones behind language ideology are reflected by the double standards regarding second languages. A person who learns French through traveling is considered high-class; while a person who learned Spanish at home is considered low-class. In fact, the “U.S. Department of Education has poured billions of dollars into bilingual education, mainly the transitional variety design to replace the languages of minority children with English. Meanwhile, other federal programs were spending billions to support ‘foreign’ language instruction – that is, to teach many of these same tongues to English speakers” (Language Policy). Hence, as children of color are forced to abandon their native languages, white children are learning other languages that allow them to be more competitive in the global economy. Further marginalizing people of color educated in the United States.

### **III. Retention of Spanish among Chicanos, resisting hegemony**

The history of Chicanas/os in the Southwest is a history of colonization and resistance. While the dominant WASPs in the Southwest have used language as a tool to oppress, discriminate and abuse Chicanas/os; language has also been used by Chicanas/os as a tool for resisting language and cultural annihilation. The expression of resistance was different immediately after the northern part of Mexico was annexed to the U.S, then 100 years later.

In 1848, half of the Mexican territory became part of the United States and all of the population became part of the new colony. The Mexican population, that found themselves in a foreign country, was faced with a systematic agenda to diminish their rights and eradicate their language and culture. But the newly colonized Mexicans resisted acculturation. They understood the importance of learning the new language, English, but also valued their historic roots. “As early as 1855, Southwest Mexicans were calling for an educational system that would teach them English, and by extension other Anglo ways, without depriving them of their own

language and culture” (Chavez). In addition, Southwestern Mexican people maintained their culture, history and language through various newspapers published in Spanish, such as *El clarín de mejicano* from Santa Fe, New Mexico, *El horizonte* and *El bajareño* from Texas, and *El clamor publico* from Los Angeles, California. These newspapers are just some examples of how Mexicanos in the Southwest resisted acculturation through language. In addition, corridos, ballads in Spanish, were also used as a form of resistance. In fact, “corridos began to be used to record in songs the increasing incidents of social conflict arising from Anglo social and racial oppression of the Mexican American population. The corrido became a form of cultural resistance composed and sung in Spanish at a wide variety of public and private events” (Tantum). The new Mexican-U.S. citizens used culture and language to reject and resist the oppression of Anglo-Americans.

One hundred years later, the expressions of resistance changed dramatically. Namely, the Pachuco resistance and rejection of assimilation was reflected not only in their dress but in their speech as well. The Pachuco deliberately rejected assimilation through their actions. They “stamped their own imprint on what may have been someone else’s sartorial, hair, and life style; primed their pocho Spanish with new word and expressions; fought the loneliness of rejection through neighborhood clubs and gangs; hid their bruised sensibilities behind impenetrable exteriors...” (Madrid). Furthermore, the jargon used by Pachucos symbolized a rejection of mainstream white-U.S America and the endorsement and pride of Mexican-American culture, language and history.

Decades later, during the 60s and 70s, the Chicano Civil Rights Movement flourished, and demands for social justice and equality were asserted. Bilingualism became an important item of the agenda as a means to maintain a rich cultural and traditional history. For example,



Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales, in *El Plan del Barrio*, demanded in the name of Chicanos that “kindergarten through college, Spanish be the first language and English the second language and the textbooks to be rewritten to emphasize the heritage and the Contributions of the Mexican Americans or Indo-Hispano in the building of the Southwest” (Gonzales). A period of Chicano political activism was complemented by political legislation. In 1967, a bill was introduced in the Senate by Sen. Ralph Yarborough, which aimed to benefit students whose mother tongue was Spanish by providing them with classes in their own language. By 1968, the bilingual Act of Education passed, an important victory in an era where “you couldn’t say one word in Spanish [at school]. You would get expelled or get a whipping” (Cockcroft).

In 1974, bilingual education was expanded further with the case of *Lau vs. Nichols*. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the students of Chinese-background, by concluding that, “California [had] violated the ‘equal protection’ clause of the 1964 Civil Rights Act when it deprived children who knew only little English their rights ‘to a meaningful education’” (Cockcroft). The *Lau vs. Nichols* case was an important case because as a result, bilingual education was implemented in most of the school districts that had twenty or more students with limited English proficiency. However, the support for bilingual education and bilingualism was short lived.

In 1986, Proposition 63 was put in the ballot to make English the official language in California; it stated, “English is the common language of the people of the United States of America and the State of California. This section is intended to preserve, protect and strengthen the English language, and not to supersede any of the rights guaranteed to the people of this Constitution...” (California Constitution, Article III, Section 6). Hence legally and politically, California voters validated English over all other languages that are part of the diverse

population of the state of California. While English is not the official language nationally, by 1990, “25 states have passed legislation to make English the official language” (Delgado). By 1998, California electorate had approved Proposition 227, thus eliminating bilingual education in the state. The politics behind the elimination of bilingual education can better be understood by the proponent. Proposition 227, also known as the Unz initiative and called by its proponents *English for the Children*, was sponsored by a millionaire businessman with no knowledge of linguistics or education.

The movement to declare English the official language is a reflection of the paranoia of some groups that fear that English is eroding. For example, the National Commission on Excellence declared in 1983 that, “The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and as a people” (Sledd). But the English Only movement can be interpreted as Standard-English Only, for the fear is not only that English is not been used in the United States, but the argument involve the rejection of non-standard forms of English. The policies of English only have many direct consequences such as: the silencing of language minorities thought the denial of government documents in their own language and the official legitimization of the ideology that asserts English as a supreme language.

U.S. Census data indicates that in 1990, only 13.8% of the total population in the United States did not speak English well and less than 6% did not speak English at all. Furthermore, in 1996, only 9.3% of all the population was foreign born (Wiley). Hence, we can conclude that the language policies of the 80s and 90s mask racist and xenophobic fears that mainstream U.S. society holds, and ventilates through language ideology that ultimately serves as a proxy for race.

#### **IV. The Future of Spanish in the United States**

Spanish in the Southwest has survived for centuries, and despite the systematic forces and pressures for acculturation. But Spanish has survived, and the future seems to point to a maintenance of use of the Spanish language in the United States. High birth rates and immigration patterns point to a trend of high Latino population in the United States that will keep Spanish alive. In fact, the U.S. Census projects that by “the year 2030 [there could be] 59 million, and 81 million by 2050” Latinos living in the United States (We, the American...Hispanics). Hence, it is very unlikely that the use of Spanish will diminish. Specially because language and culture are deeply intertwined. Marx J. Castro, Ph.D and senior research associate at the North-South Center at the University of Miami explains about Spanish that, “The sheer size of the Spanish-speaking population worldwide, the communications revolution and the emergence of a global economy mean there are more opportunities to use the language and more economic incentives for retaining it” (Castro).

The global economy supports the use, maintenance and continuity of Spanish use; however, policies must support and encourage this position. Otherwise, language ideologies that have historically call for the eradication of non-English languages in the United States and that have also devaluated non-standard forms of English will continue to perpetuate discrimination against people who do not use standard English.

## References

- . "California Constitution, 1849." California Secretary of State Kevin Shelley: California State Archives. Retrieved November 3, 2003.  
Available online: [http://www.ss.ca.gov/archives/level3\\_const1849txt.html](http://www.ss.ca.gov/archives/level3_const1849txt.html)
- . "California State Constitution, Article III, Section 6.(Proposition 63, 1986)." Retrieved November 1, 2003. Available online:  
<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/prop63.htm>
- Castro, Max J. "The Future of Spanish in the United States." Retrieved November 7, 2003.  
Available online:  
<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/Castro1.html>
- Chavez, John R. 1984. The Lost Land. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Cockcroft, James D. 1995. Latinos: In the Struggle for Equal Education. New York: Moffa Press, Inc.
- Delgado, Raimundo. "English the Official Language of the United States." Retrieved November 3, 2003. Available online:  
<http://raydelgado.com/Articles/EnglishTheOfficialLanguageOfTheUnitedStates.htm>
- Fallows, James. 1997. "The New Immigrants." Writing About Diversity. Ed. Irene L. Clark. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace & Co.
- Frick, Elizabeth. 1990. "Metaphors and Motives of Language-Restriction Movements." Not Only English: Affirming America's Multilingual Heritage. Ed. Harvey A. Daniels. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Gonzales, Rodolfo "Corky." 2001. "El Plan del Barrio." Message to Aztlán: Selected Writings of Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales. Ed. Henry A. J. Ramos. Huston: Arte Public Press.
- . "Language Policy." Retrieved November 5, 2003. Available online:  
<http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/langpol.html>
- Leibowitz, Arnold H. 1980. The Bilingual Act: A Legislative Analysis. Virginia: Inter America Research Associates, Inc.
- Lippi-Green, Rosina. 1997. English with an Accent: Language, ideology, and discrimination in the United States. London: Routledge.
- Madrid, Arturo. 2003. "In Search of the Authentic Pacguco: An Interpretative Essay." Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture & Chicana/o Sexualities. Ed. Alicia Gaspar de Alba. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

San Juan Cafferty, Pastora and Carmen Rivera-Martinez. 1981. The Politics of Language: the Dilemma of bilingual Education for Puerto Ricans. Boulder: Westview Press.

Santa Ana, Otto. 2002. Brown Tide Rising: Metaphoric Representations of Latinos in Contemporary Public Discourse. University of Texas Press.

Sledd, James. "Anglo-Conformity: Folk Remedy for Lost Hegemony." Not Only English: Affirming America's Multilingual Heritage. Ed. Harvey A. Daniels. Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

Tantum, Charles M. 2001. Chicano Popular Culture: Que Hable el Pueblo. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press.

--. 1993. "We the American... Hispanics." Retrieved November 1, 2003. Available online: <http://www.census.gov/aprd/wepeople/we-2r.pdf>

Wiley, Terrence. "Myths about Language Diversity and Literacy in the United States." Retrieved November 5, 2003. Available online: <http://www.cal.org/ncl/digest/Myths.htm>