# Language as a representation of Mexican American identity

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Chicano English is expanding our notions of American English

## Introduction

Demographic data indicate that the English of Mexican Americans is destined to play a key role in the sociolinguistic study of language variation in the United States. In fact, Mexican American speakers are reported to account for more than 12.5% of the U.S. population. In 2003, the U.S. Census released data showing that Latinos and Latinas had replaced African Americans as the largest minority ethnic group in the U.S.,[1] and by 2007, 29.2 million Americans listed their ancestry as Mexican (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Moreover, in addition to the large numbers of Mexicans (first generation) and Mexican Americans (second generation) living in the Southwest, we are now seeing a new representation of these ethnic groups in other areas, such as the South. For example, between 1990 and 2000, North Carolina experienced a higher percentage of growth in its Mexican American population than any other state (Wolfram, Carter & Moriello, 2004).

These statistics are important with respect to language because they reveal that a large and increasing population of English speakers in the U.S. are Latinos and Latinas of Mexican origin. Our notion of American English, then, must be extended to include the variety traditionally spoken by the children of Mexican immigrants in the U.S., generally referred to in the literature as Chicano English. In addition, if we look at the Mexican American population as a whole, we will find a number of other varieties of English spoken.

This paper presents an overview of the language use, language choices, and language attitudes of Mexican American speakers, focusing specifically on the second generation. In particular, I demonstrate how the linguistic varieties spoken in these communities represent (often in an iconic way) the complex and multi-faceted identities of their speakers. The goal is to inform educators and others interested in the language of Latino children (and adults) in the U.S.

## A brief description of Mexican American language varieties

In all of the sociolinguistic communities studied systematically, linguists have found that there are multiple linguistic 'codes'[2] available for expressing or signaling ethnic and other identities. Many people think that there are just two codes available to Mexican American speakers (English and Spanish), but the reality



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is much more complex. Fought (2006) presents a summary of the types of codes that can be found in Latino communities in the U.S.; for purposes of this article, I will focus specifically on those available in Mexican-American communities, although many commonalities with other Latino communities will, of course, exist.[3] These include a number of varieties of Spanish and English, as well as a code-switching variety (known colloquially as 'Spanglish'). Among these, the varieties of English are particularly important as not all second-generation Mexican Americans speak Spanish, but all of them do speak some variety of English. The following is a list of English-based varieties found in Mexican American communities:

**Standard English.** The concept of a 'standard' English is very difficult to define (cf. Bex & Watts, 1999). However we define it, though, middle-class Mexican Americans will usually have access to a variety of this type. For example, this code is promoted by the school setting, so some children will use a different variety at school than they do at home.

**Chicano English.** This is a non-standard (though linguistically rich) variety of English, which is spoken natively primarily by U.S.-born speakers, and which shows the influence of Spanish, especially in the sound system. It emerged historically from a context in which English and Spanish were in constant contact, both across the community and within the competence of individuals. This variety will be described in more detail below.

**Other local varieties of English.** It is important to remember that wherever Mexican American communities may be located, there will be regional varieties of English available to the speakers. These local non-standard varieties may be described by terms that refer to the geographic region, such as Appalachian English or Southern California English. This category could also include African American English, which may be a particularly influential variety in areas where Mexican American and African American communities have extended contacts.

**Non-native Speaker English.** This is the typical 'learner' English, used by immigrants from Mexico whose first language is Spanish, and who learned English as adults. Sometimes people hear Chicano English (a native variety, learned from infancy) and confuse it with this Non-native (learner) English. However, they are two completely separate varieties, with different rules and patterns (see Fought, 2003:80ff).

**Code-switching (or Spanglish).** As mentioned above, code-switching is the alternation of languages within a single discourse or a single utterance. In almost all bilingual communities that linguists have studied, some 'mixed' variety is found, often with a pejorative label. Though many people view these mixed codes as deficient in some way, in fact they are complex and rule governed, and require a high degree of fluency in both languages. In Mexican American communities, this variety, Spanglish, is a complicated intermingling of English and Spanish. Though it is not strictly speaking a variety of English, it does include English, and it plays a crucial role in Mexican American identity, so it must be included on our list.

What is particularly interesting about this complex array of linguistic codes is how it reflects the complexity of second-generation identity among Mexican Americans. In particular, like second-generation speakers in many other communities, Mexican Americans often want to distinguish themselves linguistically, as well as in other ways, from first-generation Mexican immigrants. In a project conducted in Los Angeles, for example, Fought found that there were various expressions of conflict between second-generation speakers and first-generation immigrants, which sometimes led to quite serious tensions in the community (2003:39). Moreover, the second-generation speakers themselves often pointed to language as a key element of their identity, as will be discussed below.

At the same time, Mexican American speakers often have some level of direct geographic access to their heritage culture in Mexico, something that would not be so easily available to African American or Chinese American speakers. Fought (2003) found that almost all of the U.S.-born Mexican American speakers who were interviewed had spent at least some time in Mexico. Like other children of immigrants, then, Mexican Americans must negotiate identities that draw on multiple cultures, and in which ethnicity and other factors, such as gender, social class, age, and so forth, are interwoven.



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## More on Chicano English[4]

Chicano English (CHE) is a variety of English unique to Mexican American communities. As mentioned above, it arose from a situation of contact between Spanish and English. As immigrants from Mexico came to California and other parts of the Southwest, communities developed in which many people spoke a non-native English marked by sounds and grammatical constructions from their first language, Spanish. The children of these immigrants grew up using this English as a native language, so it became regular and rule-governed, like all native varieties.

Because of its origins, CHE does have many features that show the influence of Spanish, especially in the phonology (i.e. the sound system). For example, in the ending on words like *going* or *talking*, CHE speakers tend to have a higher vowel, more like the 'i' of Spanish (as in *sí*), so that the words end up sounding more like 'goween' and 'talkeen'. CHE speakers tend to reduce vowels in unstressed syllables less often than speakers of other dialects. For most American English speakers, then, the first vowel in *together* would usually be [ə] (which is the sound heard in the first syllable of *ago*). In Chicano English, however, the first syllable of *together* might be pronounced more like the number *two*. In addition, CHE speakers variably drop final stop consonants, such as the final [t] in *met*. CHE also manifests patterns of intonation (i.e. the changes in the pitch of our voices as we speak) that are very distinctive and can sound 'sing-songy' to outsiders.

In addition, CHE also has different verb patterns, such as the use of multiple negation, as in *He didn't say nothing to nobody*. This way of marking negation is certainly not exclusive to CHE, and can be found in many vernacular varieties (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 2006:35). With regard to the semantic features of CHE, there is the use of the word *barely* to mean 'had just recently' as in *These were expensive when they barely came out*. (Standard English translation: *These were expensive at the beginning, when they had just come out.*) CHE speakers also have a specialized use of *tell* to mean 'ask' (as in *If I tell her to jump up, she'll tell me how high*).

Despite its wide range of Spanish features, it would be a mistake to characterize CHE as just an English variety influenced by Spanish. As a freestanding English variety, now spoken by native speakers, Chicano English is in a process of change and development just like all varieties of language around the world. Among other phenomena, it has the ability to borrow from local or other varieties. For example, the Los Angeles CHE speakers in Fought (2003) used some features of local California dialects, such as the use of fronted /u/ in words like *dude* (wherein the first syllable sounds like *dew*), and the use of *be like* to introduce quoted speech (as in *She's like, Don't eat that!*).

Because of the Spanish sound of CHE, when people hear Chicano English they often mistakenly assume that it is the 'accent' of someone whose first language is Spanish. However, many speakers of Chicano English are not bilingual, and do not know any Spanish at all. These Mexican American speakers have in fact learned English natively and fluently, like most children growing up in the U.S. Their English code just happens to be one that retains indicators of contact with Spanish. As an illustration of this phenomenon, I have made up an experiment, in which I play a tape of short segments (in English) spoken by four CHE speakers. Two of the speakers are bilingual, and two speak only English. I ask the students to listen, and to identify each speaker as bilingual or monolingual. Inevitably, students are unable to classify speakers correctly. The most non-standard sounding CHE speaker, for example, is usually labeled as bilingual, yet he knows almost no Spanish, beyond being able to count to ten. Clearly, CHE is an independent variety of English that has nothing to do with ability to speak Spanish.

## Language attitudes and the linguistic reflection of Mexican American identity

The various linguistic codes that we find in Mexican American communities play different roles in the language attitudes of the community and in the construction of ethnic identity by second-generation speakers. First of all, although this article has focused on English varieties, Spanish, of course, also plays an important functional and cultural role. In fact, speakers will often report that Spanish is important to their Mexican American identity. For example, in Fought (2003) a young Mexican American girl says, 'I think it's very important. Very. Cause, you know, you're Mexican,



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you have it in your blood' (200). Interestingly, speakers will often express this attitude even if they do not actually speak any Spanish themselves, beyond a few emblematic words. Despite these positive attitudes by young speakers, dismayingly slow progress is being made in fighting the dominant U.S. ideology that values English and associates Spanish with the poor and uneducated. Unfortunately, language ideologies about Spanish in the U.S. are still influenced by deep prejudices. For this reason, in most of the Mexican American communities that have been studied, retention of Spanish beyond the second generation is increasingly uncommon (Veltman, 1990, Fought, 2003).

By far the most salient variety to Mexican American speakers themselves is the code-switching variety, or Spanglish. While CHE plays an important role in the construction of ethnic identity, particularly for monolinguals, it is less often the topic of overt commentary. Although comedians such as George Lopez sometimes mimic elements of CHE, most second-generation Mexican Americans, when asked about 'how people talk around here,' cite code-switching as the type of language that distinguishes them.

Studies of immigrant communities have shown code-switching to be a particularly iconic form of expressing the multiple identities of second-generation speakers. By code-switching, Mexican Americans born in the U.S. are able to index simultaneously their Mexican heritage (through Spanish) and their claim to a specifically U.S. identity (through English). A young second-generation speaker in Los Angeles articulates the role of code-switching in ethnic identity particularly clearly, saying 'Two languages sounds better for us Mexicans' (Fought, 2003: 209).[5] When asked about Spanglish, another speaker said:

> Es que así nos- se hablan los Chicanos, los Mexicanos. Los que viven aquí. Como los de Mexico no hablan- no saben na' de eso, pero los que viven aquí sí hablan Chicano- 'Chicano language'.
>
> ['It's like, that's how we- how the Chicanos speak, the Mexicans. The ones that live here. Like, the people from Mexico don't speak- don't know nothing about that, but people that live here do speak Chicano- 'Chicano language'.']
>
> (Fought, 2003:209)

This speaker identifies code-switching as part of the construction of a specifically *American* Mexican ethnicity, in contrast with that of immigrant Mexican speakers, which, as mentioned above, is of great significance to second-generation speakers.

Although it is rarely commented on in the same way, CHE is also, of course, an important variety for expressing Mexican American identity. And like code-switching, it provides an iconic reflection of the second-generation culture. It is undeniably English; yet sprinkled with some influence of Spanish. Unlike code-switching, it does not require fluency in Spanish, so it is the variety of choice for Mexican Americans who are monolingual English speakers. As our understanding of the role of non-standard varieties grows, and social structures such as the educational system and the media become more enlightened about language variation, we may see CHE receiving more attention, both within and outside the community.

## What's next?

As in all communities around the world, the linguistic varieties spoken by second-generation Mexican Americans are in a constant process of evolution and change, shaped by internal and external linguistic and social forces (see Mendoza-Denton, 2008 for a more detailed discussion of this topic). While it is difficult to predict the exact results of those changes, there are certain areas that sociolinguists might want to focus on in the future. One is the emerging varieties of Spanish-influenced English that we now find in places where there have been very recent increases in the population of Mexican American speakers, such as North Carolina (see Wolfram, Carter & Moriello, 2004). These areas provide a unique opportunity to observe the birth of varieties like CHE, and can contribute to our understanding of linguistic change and stabilization.

Another topic of interest is the development of regional variation in Mexican American varieties of English. It was mentioned earlier that CHE in Los Angeles clearly shows features of other local California dialects. Presumably this is true in other regions as well, but very little work has been done on regional varieties of CHE. The flip side of this language contact situation is the influence of CHE on other regional dialects. Is CHE having an influence on the varieties of English spoken by other eth-



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nic groups in places such as California? This is an intriguing question on which we have, as yet, no information.

Finally, how will changing language ideologies affect the linguistic varieties of Mexican American speakers? On the one hand, Spanish continues to be lost within a few generations. On the other hand, code-switching (which necessitates a knowledge of Spanish) shows positive attitudes among young speakers, and is seen as a key component in the linguistic repertoire of Mexican American communities. In addition, Mexican Americans and their linguistic codes are increasingly represented in the media at various levels (including the release, in 2004, of a movie entitled *Spanglish*). Thus, it is possible that social changes will lead to more positive attitudes towards all the varieties available to Mexican American speakers in their construction of ethnic identity. ■

## Notes

**1** Though we should keep in mind that one group is counted as a cultural category, and the other as a race category.

**2** By 'code' we mean a variety of a language (whether standard or nonstandard), or in some cases, a variety that incorporates more than one language, as in 'code-switching' (the alternating use of two languages in a single utterance).

**3** For comparison, see Zentella (1997) for a detailed discussion of how these are distributed in a Puerto-Rican American community.

**4** Examples in this section are from Fought (2003), unless otherwise indicated.

**5** Note that his use of the term 'Mexican' here is the local equivalent of 'Mexican American', and means someone of Mexican ethnicity, rather than someone from Mexico.

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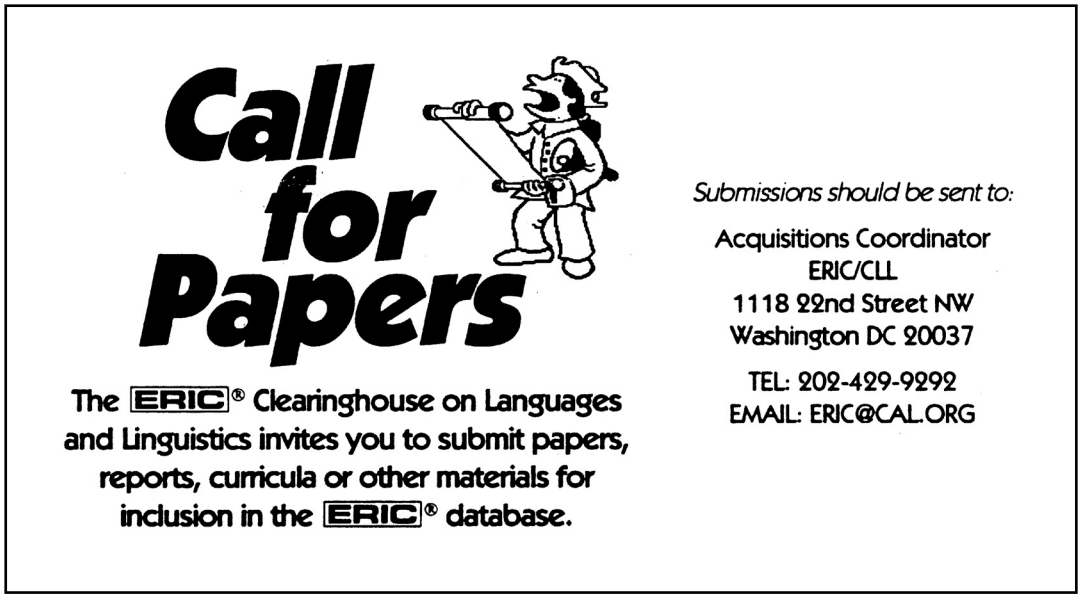
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