

Slang as a Means of Language in Low-Socioeconomic Status Individuals: A Cross Comparison of Multicultural Individuals in the United States

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Eble (1996) describes slang as “an ever changing set of colloquial words and phrases that speakers use to establish or reinforce social identity or cohesiveness within a group or with a trend or fashion in society at large” (11). It differs from formal speech because it is colloquial, informal and often pertains to a certain subculture. In some cases, slang may be transitory, or it may become widely accepted and used until it becomes the dominant way of saying something and eventually become an acceptable term in mainstream speech (Muhammad46). Slang is often associated with speakers who are low socio-economic status, individuals with low levels of education, and certain groups who identify with the particular slang usage. Even though slang is viewed as substandard way of communicating, it can be useful to incorporate slang and similar types of verbal communication when teaching standard languages. For example, bilingual learners of Spanish often benefit from acknowledging non-standard Spanish in heritage language education.

In his 1966 influential work, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*, William Labov studied the concept of social stratification among different occupational groups employed in various department stores in New York City. Their speech patterns were observed as they interacted with customers. According to Snell, (2014), this study helped establish that language use correlates with social factors such as social class, age and gender and that social categories influence linguistic behavior. As this important study showed, “some sociolinguistic variables involving pronunciation used more ‘standard’ variants in middle class speakers than in working class speakers. Some variables – sociolinguistic indicators – have little or no social evaluation attached to them. “Indicators vary with social stratification, but do not vary within the usage of individual speakers. Other variables – sociolinguistic ‘markers’ and ‘stereotypes’ carry greater social significance. One variant is generally considered to be more socially prestigious, while the other may be stigmatized, causing individual speakers to monitor (though not necessarily consciously) their own usage and to style-shift” (2).

Elinor Ochs (1996) explains how language is used to indicate social class in terms of roles, social relationships, and group identities. The members of a community share cultural norms and expectations, referred to as “culturally constructed valence” (417). Penelope Eckert (2000) researched the relationship between language and social class. She studied two different groups of students in a high school in Detroit, Michigan, United States. The first group affiliated themselves with middle-class values and identified with the school and participated in school activities, such as sports, government, and the school newspaper. These students had ambitions to go to college. The other group, who affiliated themselves with the working-class, was alienated from the school culture and did not participate in any school activities. They maintained strong neighborhood relationships and were focused on attaining working-class jobs after finishing school in the urban areas where they lived. Their differences were also apparent in the way they dress and speak. Eckert found that the alienated students more often used the non-standard variants of the English language more frequently than their middle-class peers. It was interesting to note that “there was no correlation between the adolescents’ use of the vocalic variables and their parent’s socioeconomic class” (6). Eckert’s community of practice approach illustrates how individuals use language to construct group identities and an “individuals’ access to and interest in different communities of practice is mediated by their place in wider society, as embodies in macro-level categories such as class, age, gender and ethnicity” (Eckert17). The adolescents created a peer-based sense of social class through the opposition of their social groups regardless of their parents’ social class affiliation. Group identity, in terms of language and slang, was observed in a study by Reyes (2005).

She found that low-income South-East Asian American teenagers living in economically disadvantaged communities of South Philadelphia United States are often “positioned more closely to the African American experience based on a shared socio-economic and minority status” (510). Asian American use of African American slang in this study offers insight about the use of African-American linguistic styles by other non-whites (510). According to Reyes (2005), previous research on African American linguistic styles is centered on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) regarding use, history, structure, and politics with the conclusion that AAVE is not ‘bad’ English but a language variant that “has its own rule-governed system comprised of phonological, morphological, syntactic and discourse features” (510). The author suggests that some researchers assert the use of slang associated with a particular racial group can end up creating issues related to racialization and appropriation where racialization involves connecting a way of speaking to a distinct racial identity while appropriation is exploiting a linguistic variation or slang that was created and used by a specific racial group by individuals not belonging to that particular race. In contrast, the concept of authentication can be used to explore the ways in which linguistic styles are become one’s own ‘authentic’ speech. Authentication refers to the “processes by which people actively construct an identity based on ideas of genuineness or credibility. The practices of cross racial users of AAVE who formulate AAVE as their own variety, for example, exhibit this process of authentication” (511). This article examines how the Asian American teens specified relationships between language, race, age, region and class, while identifying with African Americans and at the same time identifying themselves as “teachers and students of slang” where slang was used to create boundaries not only between teens and adults, but also between each other. Furthermore, the Asian American teens could identify themselves as authentic users of African American slang because of their proximity to them as inhabitants of the same neighborhoods (512). Like many immigrant minorities settling in poor urban areas across the United States, most of the teens in this study identified more with the experiences of low-income African Americans than with those of the white majority. Since their neighborhoods and schools were mostly African American, the Asian American teens had more contact with African Americans than European Americans. They also participated in hip hop culture, like wearing clothing, and hair styles as well as singing and dancing to music that popular among African American youth (512). It is important to note that slang use in this study was noticed to be associated with place of residence, not socioeconomic status since, as the author states, “after all, it is largely socio-economic status that determines place of residence, rather than place of residence determining socio-economic status. The intricate links between place, race and class create the implicit formula that teens invoke to authenticate themselves or others as slang speakers” (527). This study also demonstrates that teens use slang to mark a division between youth and adults and between each other (527). In effect, slang can be used as both way to unify different groups of people in the form of group identity as well as differentiate themselves as different from another group.

In an article by Helmer (2013), the inclusion of an ethnic group’s native language in Spanish Heritage Language classes is explored. Oftentimes, an ethnic group’s variation of the Spanish language, for example, Mexican-Americans speaking Pachuco, has been viewed as substandard by speakers of standard Spanish. This view can intrude on student identities and create impediments to learning Spanish. Heritage Language classes are classes where bilingual speakers of Spanish and English are taught how to read, speak and write standard Spanish. The author of this article suggests that identifying the language of a group, especially a marginalized group, as substandard can negatively impact the student’s ability to learn standard Spanish because it is an offense against not only the student’s language, but also their community and family. In the example of Mexican-American students, history of discrimination can lead to students refusing to speak Spanish at all. Helmer asserts that a remedy to this situation is for teachers to include the students’ heritage when teaching Spanish and use cultural sensitivity (280). Furthermore, Leeman (2015) states “although identity has long been central in heritage language educational discourse, it is only recently that researchers have begun to investigate heritage learners’ sense of themselves, as well as how identities are constructed, performed, and represented in heritage language educational context” (103). It is important to realize that national and cultural identity is intertwined with language and that negatively associating the student’s native way of speaking Spanish can impede the student’s motivation to learn. Being a student in a Heritage Language class being taught standard Spanish can lead to the idea that the “implicit message to these learners is that Spanish is not theirs but belongs to another group that manages Spanish-language appropriateness, thus replicating the power imbalances that Latinos can face in other dimensions of their lives (Helmer280-1).To avoid this issue in class, Helmer discusses the example of a Cape Verdean high school teacher, who initially has students resisting learning standard Portuguese.

This teacher taught Portuguese by incorporating the student's community into the lessons. For example, she had students talk about their own experiences in their community and brought in Cape Verdean cultural practices and traditions. For example, the teacher invited student family members and community elders to share their cultural practices, such as songs, music, and storytelling. By enriching the lessons with practices that arose from her students, the students became engaged in the class. They even spoke about their struggles against Portuguese colonialism. This approach enabled students to "became active creators of knowledge and not passive recipients of their own history" (Helmer281). This example shows that "students need to be given opportunities to engage in purposeful activity to use language for authentic purposes through social interaction about topics that matter" (Helmer281). This method appears to empower the students to feel like their experiences and language is a part to their culture and not inferior to the dominant culture or language. In addition, the teacher learns from the students creating a learning environment where teacher and student learn from each other instead of the teacher ordering the students to learn as in top-down instruction (Helmer281). By creating this atmosphere of mutual understanding, it becomes a safe environment where students can feel confident in learning the standard language. It becomes a way of enhancing what they know instead of substituting their language and culture with the standard majority language.

Research about the maintenance of native language at home among immigrants is contradictory. Previous research has concluded that immigrant language is lost by the second generation while other research show that immigrant language persists among Latinos more than other immigrant groups. It is believed that Spanish persists in Latinos through the generations living in the United States because of continuous migration from Spanish-speaking countries and some acceptance of Spanish-language usage in American society. Also, Spanish maintenance may be related to exposure the language, educational background, social pressures, and academic experience with Spanish (Worthy, Nuñez, & Espinoza22).

Findings from survey studies of young adults suggest that Spanish maintenance and proficiency in young adult college students is related to language exposure, educational background, home language, academic experiences with Spanish, and social pressures. Bilingual students who have been educated in English often believe that their Spanish is improper or inappropriate. Sometimes their home language is stigmatized because of their national origin or socioeconomic status. As a result, they believe that the Spanish spoken by middle-class monolingual individuals in Latin America or Spain is more "pure" than their own. This belief can lead to barriers in expanding the linguistic repertoires of these students. Being told by an instructor that the way they speak is not 'correct,' or 'inappropriate' for certain situations can cause the student to becoming demoralized, especially if the student is told what they speak is not 'real' Spanish. These types of remarks are a negative comment not only on a student's language, but the student's national and cultural identity (Rolland97).

Traditionally, Spanish language teaching in the United States was created for monolingual students with no prior usage of Spanish and focused on standard form(s) of the language. These courses tend to be "structured around the acquisition of progressively more complex sets of grammatical forms, which have been standardized to reflect not actual usage, but the forms deemed most 'correct,' generally based on the language of a particular social group at a particular time and place, within which variation and diversity have been minimized to the extent possible" (Rolland97). The concern with this practice is the "erasure of linguistic diversity and the obviolation of bi/multilingual practices. Teaching a standard language involves, by definition, the erasure, or at least minimization, of sociolinguistic variation, and often even of much geographical variation. Thus, phonology, lexicon, or syntax that diverge from the idealized standard are omitted from foreign language texts entirely" (Rolland98). By stating that only a certain set of variations are acceptable, these statements support the belief that a student's ways of speaking are inferior to the standard, reinforcing the student's belief that the standard is superior. Spanish has been traditionally understood as an abstract set of grammar and tenses, not as a living language present in a variety of communities. Textbooks used in classrooms exhibit Spanish speakers who are monolingual with no variation according to region and dialect. It is as if the millions of Spanish speakers living in the United States who originate from different parts of the world with their variation and ways of speaking do not exist (Rolland98). The unawareness of the rich cultural and language identity of the various communities of the United States is evident in textbooks and classroom lessons that do not incorporate linguistic and cultural variations. Even the practice of translanguaging where Spanish and English (or other languages) are used concurrently in spoken language are rarely mentioned and not viewed as valid ways of speaking. These variations are not recommended as strategies to use in language acquisition (Rolland104). Overall, bilingual students view standard Spanish in high regard and as the variety of Spanish that is appropriate in formal settings.

Some of these students are willing to abandon their own ways of speaking in favor of learning the standard form of Spanish. This attitude is expected of college students who are motivated to succeed academically and in their future chosen professions (Rolland104). Having a strong grasp of Spanish is viewed as beneficial to one's career in American society with its many Spanish-speaking communities. This should not be surprising, given the rest of the sociolinguistic literature, especially since the students participating in this study are upwardly mobile and academically inclined. Nonetheless, as instructors, with the knowledge of the deleterious effects of such ideologies in society as a whole, should we simply facilitate their acquisition of the standard, their stated goal, without challenging them to think critically about the ideas that they already have about local and non-standard varieties of Spanish (Rolland104-5)? Rolland (2016) interviewed bilingual students in a New York City university who were learning standard Spanish. These students came from Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Columbia. They were first generation Americans who spoke Spanish at home to varying degrees. They all overwhelmingly articulated their desire to learn the universal and proper way of speaking Spanish. This desired demonstrated that the "idealized variety was contrasted with non-standard monolingual varieties spoken by certain groups (variously identified as the uneducated, all Dominicans, Dominicans from the campos, people from the 'street,' etc.), as well as with ways of speaking influenced by contact with English (use of terms like 'yarda' for 'backyard,' instead of 'patio')" (Rolland107). While it is important to formally study Spanish to "acquire a repertoire deemed acceptable for professional purposes" (Rolland 108), students should not be encouraged to discard their own variations and practices such as translanguaging and multilingual practices. These practices are the realistic way that Spanish is used in Spanish-speaking communities in the United States and is often the way to effectively communicated with others. By "continuing to insist on a monolingual model in the classroom not only results in an othering of the target language and its speakers; it also fails to reflect the ways in which bilingual speakers experience language. Furthermore, it fails to take advantage of some of the most important language-learning tools that monolinguals and bilinguals alike possess, namely, the ability to build connections between codes and construct their own semantic networks and theories of grammaticality based upon their existing knowledge" (Rolland109). Therefore, it is important to incorporate translanguaging and multilingual practices while teaching standard Spanish in the classroom.

This is similar to practices recommended by Helmer (2013), where the instructor requests input from students regarding vocabulary and language usage as experts in their form of Spanish. This would help them expand their repertoire and enable them to include standard Spanish into their own language repertoires in an appropriate way. By "allowing students to use English and employ met linguistic knowledge and cross-linguistic comparison does not imply a return to grammar-translation methods of foreign-language teaching and learning; rather, it involves facilitating acquisition through the construction of knowledge and skills by students, using tools that they already have at their disposal, namely, the diversity of linguistic experiences present in the classroom and their multilingual environment. Tasks would call direct attention too translanguaging practices and multilingual texts, emphasizing the usefulness of the full spectrum of multilingual competencies" (Rolland109). It is not useful to teach appropriateness because it would reinforce and continue the perception that their language is deficient and related to their identities as racialized minorities (Rolland109).

According to Leeman (2015), "in order to help students critically understand their own lives and worlds, develop agency in making their own language choices, and participate in the building of a more democratic society, educators must make the relationship between language and sociopolitical issues explicit, provide opportunities for students to examine and interrogate dominant linguistic practices and hierarchies, and encourage students to explore the ways language can be used to perform a wide range of social functions and identity work (36). It is apparent that there are correct and incorrect ways of speaking a language depending on setting and circumstances. It is important to differentiate when to speak formally and when to speak casually. Having the ability to do both increases the student's linguistic repertoire so that they have the ability to communicate effectively. There are situations when slang is an effective way to express group and cultural identity. Even though slang is associated with low socioeconomic status and low education level, it has its place in communication. Some ways of speaking are considered slang, such as the Spanish spoken by bilingual students, but this attitude is not conducive for these students to learn formal Spanish. By treating these students as experts in their way of speaking, it makes learning Spanish more effective. The result is these students having the tools to distinguish when to use formal Spanish and when to speak casually. Further study is recommended regarding the effectiveness of this kind of language teaching in Heritage Learning classes for not only Spanish, but for other languages that are viewed as marginalized or slang.

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