

Stealth prejudice:
Puerto Rican college students' experiences of race-marking mapped onto language.

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Abstract: The most pressing language issue faced by upwardly mobile Puerto Ricans and other Latinos from strongly class/race-marked backgrounds is not their use of Spanish but the ways in which they find themselves linguistically marked in crypto-racial ways, in both Spanish and English. The origins of such marking lie in the historical processes in which Caribbean societies and linguistic practices form, and in the conditions that pulled people from those societies into migration to U.S. cities. As working class New Yorkers, for example, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans face linguistic prejudice in the form of pejorative assessments of their English and of their practice of rapidly code-switched Spanish. When they move to a substantially different environment, in which they are a minority, in the process of social mobility, new dimensions of linguistic prejudice emerge. A case in point is that of New York working class Latino/a, especially Puerto Rican, students with whom I have worked at Hamilton College, a small rural liberal arts college. Central to the college experience is the restructuring of class identity; at the same time these students are expected to showcase their ethnicity, to create and participate in performances of "Latinidad" that fit a middle-class standardized and sanitized notion of "diversity." Such performance involves a showcasing of Spanish but as these students are quite aware, the Spanish they grew up with and that makes possible a sense of community among themselves is often racialized, as are the linguistic practices in which that Spanish is deployed.

Introduction

This presentation is about the practical problems people face in the life-course of class mobility. The data are drawn from two sources. The first is the nature of class, race and language experience of New York Latinos, specifically New York Puerto Ricans. The second is the experience of students at my college who self-identify as Latino, and who, if they are from New York City, tend to be Caribbean or Central American. I am acquainted with the former because I did fieldwork with bilingual Puerto Ricans in Manhattan and the Bronx in 1978-79 and 1988; when I came to Hamilton in 1988 and started meeting New York Latino students, I realized a lot of them could have been the children or younger siblings of the people I worked with. Eventually I began a project on what it means to such students to reconstruct their social identity as liberal arts college Latinos. One dimension of this is finding out how behaviors, including linguistic behaviors, associated with that identity become marked. Accordingly, this essay is divided into three sections: the sociolinguistic background that these students came from; the construction of “diversity” at the college; and the linguistic markedness issues faced by students.

The sociolinguistic background

To understand how the college situation developed, we need to back up a bit and look at how the Puerto Rican migrations to New York originally developed. Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony for about four centuries, part of the Spanish Caribbean peasant economy and, to a lesser extent than Cuba, slave economy. By and large Puerto Rico was a small farm economy¹. Phonologically, Puerto Rican Spanish developed as did much of the rest of Caribbean Spanish (particularly *campesino*– rural– varieties) out of

the Spanish spoken by settlers, with much Andalusian influence (whence many settlers in Puerto Rico originated), with some African influence, (brought in by slaves, by freed and escaped slaves, and by free people of color) and with local variation. Puerto Rican Spanish is characterized by some features that are broadly Caribbean and some features peculiar to Puerto Rico. (Examples include: initial or intervocalic trilled /rr/ becoming the velar or uvular fricatives [x] or [X]; vowel preceding syllable-final /n/ becoming a nasalized vowel with, sometimes, that /n/ deleted or, if word-final, becoming the velar nasal [ɲ]; post-vocalic syllable or word final /s/ becoming [h] or deleted altogether; voiced stops between vowels, ordinarily realized allophonically as fricatives, becoming approximants or being deleted; /r/ before consonants or word-final becoming [r] or being replaced by a geminate of the following consonant; see Zentella 1997 and 2000 for extended discussion). In terms of relative status among all former Spanish colonies, that Spanish of Puerto Rico tends to be particularly stigmatized, to a large extent because of the way it phonologically indexes its history (lexically as well, but my guess is that the phonological variation is the key element). These linguistic indexes become an issue in New York Puerto Rican (henceforth NYPR) linguistic experience, and in terms of the argument developed in this paper, they routinely emerge in the voices of students interviewed in this project.

While Puerto Rico remained a Spanish colony, there was a strong polarity between what was identified as metropolitan, educated Spanish and what was spoken in the country. After the U.S. took possession of Puerto Rico, and the colonial administration instituted an English language program, that original polarity was overlain by a powerful sense of polarity between Spanish and English which remains to this day.

At the same time, throughout this period, English borrowings came into Puerto Rican Spanish on a regular and surprisingly unmarked basis, largely through commercial channels (product references and proper names). This contributed to the general lack of status of Puerto Rican linguistic practice.

The first migrations to New York began not long after US occupation. Sánchez-Korrol (1983) notes the development, by the 1920s, of a sizeable, economically diversified colonia in Manhattan and Brooklyn. Much of this migration was the result of active labor recruitment by U.S. companies. Migration from Puerto Rico increased sharply after World War II, encouraged both by the Puerto Rican government and by recruitment from U.S. firms for unskilled labor (especially with working class white veterans going to school on the GI Bill). The 1950s and 1960s saw a major expansion of Puerto Rican working class neighborhoods in East Harlem, the Lower East Side and Brooklyn. To a large extent, these neighborhoods were demographically and socially contiguous with African-American neighborhoods, leading to the development of social connections among neighbors, in youth dyads, triads and cliques, (especially among boys and young men), and in romantic/sexual connections and marriage, linking the two demographic groups. From the point of view of speech community formation, this meant that while the focal point of a Puerto Rican speech community is readily located, it is much less easy to specify a sharp boundary between Puerto Rican and African American speech communities.

Why this level of detail? It is much too easy to refer to *bilingual speech community* or even *bilingual Spanish speech community* as if that classification said it all. *Speech community* has too often been used as an equivalent to *language community*,

without regard for the fact that, as early linguistic ethnographers were careful to specify, *speech* is a form of social action, and social history is part of the structure of social action. Social action is indexed by accent markers, as people interpret accents as signs of speakers' life histories, and indeed, as part of their 'natural' substance. Thus, class history and structural situation are as salient as language variety and cultural practice. What New York Puerto Ricans and African Americans share is similarity of position in U.S. racial and economic history. Experientially, this emerges as a powerful sense of "poor people" vs "white people" (as the people I worked with put it) which fuses an opposition of race and class. It also parallels a sense of opposition between "how we talk" and "how they talk" which is subsequently mapped onto varieties of English (if you're New York working class African American) or Spanish and English, if that English is not routinely heard code-switched with Spanish, i.e. if it is 'white' English.

There is a solid literature on varieties of Spanish and English in New York. I will summarize a few key points about the Puerto Rican Spanish (PRS) and Puerto Rican English (PRE) situation, noting that much of this applies to other Spanish/English codeswitching varieties, especially Dominican, a dominant Spanish-speaking migration since the 1970s.

1. The English spoken by people born and/or growing up in PRS/PRE bilingual neighborhoods is often marked by phonological and prosodic elements, which vary depending on gender, generation and age. The prosodic is most salient and least studied; people refer to it as a "Spanish tune" or "tone" and people told me it was the major audio clue (generally synergetic with visual cues, of course) that someone they did not know

was “Spanish” (the term in use when I was there). It was also a contextualization cue that it would be OK to “mix.”

2. People engage in abundant and generally unflagged codeswitching, at clause and often phrase boundaries, generally constrained in ways described originally by Poplack (1988). Knowing your interlocutor is bilingual isn’t enough though, s/he either has to “sound” (accent cues) “like a Spanish person,” and this is interesting, have become so familiar– a face around the neighborhood– that one might “forget” that s/he “isn’t Spanish” or “doesn’t know Spanish.” This leads to occasions of bilinguals switching to a non-bilingual black friend. Or even a white one if that person has been around long enough and often enough.

As I discussed at some length in *Exposing Prejudice* (Urciuoli 1996), people from this background routinely experience race-marking mapped onto language behavior, particular their accent and tendency to switch, in that accent is interpreted as a sign of person. The notion of Spanish bilinguals is for many non-Latino Americans conflated with notions of “broken” languages. For decades these elements were talked about by educators as problems to be solved. Now some educators at least have wised up but many, including have not, including many who tend to occupy positions in corporations and legislatures and media. The irony is that the co-existence of, on the one hand, the call for corporate diversity and, on the other hand, a flourishing industry in accent reduction. Why? U.S. notions of diversity are premised on an ideal middle-class *individual* with a set of pleasant, productive, unproblematic personal traits. Further, the individual should be able to edit and control self-presentation so as to erase any

problematic history, particularly an accent, through the purchase and use of accent-reduction products ².

The construction of “diversity” at the college³

In *Exposing Prejudice*, I argued that there is a kind of semiotic sliding scale between two poles: maximum racialization and maximum ethnicization. This is based on the notion of markedness, of being typical or fitting in (unmarked) or of not fitting in, being atypical (marked). Maximum racialization is a state of social being whereby certain people are origin-marked as not deserving to belong to the nation holding sovereignty over them, by virtue of the conditions under which they came under the sway of that nation. (Hence African-origin people, with a history of being enslaved, serve as the general model for U.S. racial markedness.) Maximum ethnicization is a state of social being whereby people are slightly marked as not quite typical members of the nation, but they do belong and they are in a position to manage (so to speak) their marking into signs of belonging. When I developed this notion, I was trying to get at a sort of asymptotic curve effect: however well one manages one’s un-marking (as a person or a group), it is never quite gone. The massive whitening of southern and eastern Europeans (the ethnicization, as it were, of people who had once been heavily racialized) took place most completely in the 1950s, as the effects of the G.I. Bill– the “rising tide” that lifted so many boats into the middle class– became massively dispersed throughout U.S. society. So people who were heavily racialized a century ago, in effect, have become white.

From about 1965 to the present (and possibly ending with the present, at least rhetorically), we have been in an era of what might be called origins accounting; for at

least the first part of that era, the dominant terms of reference were *racial minority*. The categories under which the accounting took place were federally mandated under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination by race, sex or religion. The first race categories were Black and White; the current set (*black, white, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American*) was established in 1978 by order of the Office of Management and Budget. In the 1980s, the cover terms started shifting, as *race* and *minority* were increasingly replaced by *multiculturalism*, which became an institutional hypernym for *black, white, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American*. In the 1990s, *diverse* became wholly or partly synonymous with *multicultural* (partly in that it is often used more inclusively, covering not just origin but gender and ability categories). Throughout this time, each of these labels took on increasingly sharp reality as a type of person. That sense had always been there in some way: U.S. culture has always been oriented toward *the individual* (Schneider 1968[1980]). The notion that race, nationality or any other form of origin category is a historical precipitate has no reality for most Americans. The specific variation on this theme that emerged by 1990 (to pick an arbitrary date) was the idea of *the multicultural person*: black or Hispanic or Asian or Native American (though the first three are the big three in most institutions). These took on an extraordinary degree of social reality as general referents and accounting terms, to the point of naturalizing 'culture' in ways peculiarly like but not quite the same as race. In corporations, these categories were realized in procedures for establishing compliance with federally mandated hiring guidelines. In colleges and universities, they became, for faculty, part of the affirmative action accounting system in the hiring process, and for students, a line to fill out on the application form and a particular category of desirable

recruit: *the multicultural student*. Since the early to mid 1990s, the term *diversity* had become preferred usage in the corporate world, which (along with education-school discourses), has influenced origin-category language for certain sectors of the academic world since 1998 or so. Diversity (we are told by diversity trainers) “sounds positive.” It resonates with the *individual* in ways that *multicultural* does not: individual inclusiveness, empathy for individuals, individual ways of being diverse and above all, diversity as an individual asset.

Playing around with labels by no means solves the problem: both multiculturalism and diversity discourses are, in their different ways, about patterning unmarkedness. The multiculturalism discourse focuses on groups made of types of person rather than groups formed through historical processes. The person in key ways becomes the group writ small. In this way, multiculturalism discourses pave the way for focus on deracialization by group-member achievement. Corporate diversity discourses discount the importance of diverse groups as historical formations, privileging instead the idea of an individual made up of a set of diverse traits, traits that individuals can and should deploy for the greater productivity of the his or her organization. Diversity thus becomes part of the market value of that individual as a source of labor. Thus, while multiculturalism and diversity discourses certainly differ, both are about strategies for not being marked. Here we see the contradiction that shoots through the structure of the contemporary higher-education institution, particularly nationally ranked liberal arts schools which puts them very close to the corporate sector indeed. For the corporate sector, liberal arts means acquiring transferable skills that prepare one to be a flexible member of the workforce; being “diverse” becomes such a skill. Judging from interviews I’ve done with a few

dozen Black, Latin and Asian students (and I am not unconscious of the irony of using these categories as part of the organization of this research), they come to the college to acquire the cultural capital that they would not have had otherwise, and if that means building themselves an undergraduate multicultural/diverse citizen resumé, that is part of what they came to college for. Many come from working class urban backgrounds, and generally know that their path is not easy socially or academically but consider the outcome worth the investment. I began this project because I met so many such students who might be the children or younger siblings or nieces and nephews of the people I worked with in my study of working class New York Puerto Rican bilinguals.

How do they build their resúés? In addition to classroom performance and social affiliations, students practice being good citizens through very active membership in multicultural organizations. Multicultural students— U.S. citizens who self-identify on application forms with one of the above OMB categories— form the core membership and officers of the college’s Black, Latin and Asian student organizations. These organizations are in large part about the construction of an inclusive multicultural identity, one that showcases culture-marking traits as enhancements to one’s self-presentation as student-citizen and student-leader. Here I look at the situation of students at the small liberal arts school where I teach. Many such students become responsible for “educating the college community” which, in a predominantly white (85-88%, depending on the year) liberal arts college, means putting a lot of effort into constructing and demonstrating “their culture” to the school at large. Students learn these categories as they become part of the school, and a good part of their student life is about creating that fit. They work closely with the student life office and its programming and entertainment

budget; the organizations themselves are administered through the student affairs office. The organizations also become loci for sociality, for making friends and having fun. The reframing of identity that takes place throughout one's college career is thus an ongoing, synergetic process. Of particular interest is the way that group-identity terms take on cultural content through club members' activities channeled along the networks focused around the clubs. The culture that gets processed revolves around performance, celebration or commemoration of historical events, and fun stuff like food and dancing and music; with language an important dimension of identity performance. This culture is eminently consumable and subject to being organized, and thus, a vehicle for demonstrating one's worth in U.S. society. The organizing process is especially important for young women, many of whom were desirable recruits because of their high-school history as *student leaders*, a role they went on fulfilling in college. Patricia, a veteran officer of the Latino organization whom I interviewed shortly before she graduated, describes her history of involvement⁴:

Well at the beginning, my first year, the class of 1997 had a lot of Latino students, so they were pretty much in charge. I started helping them out, like little things. Like my first year they had the first Latino conference, so I helped them out with the whole thing, decorating the [office?], handing out flyers, whatever, stuff like that. My spring semester, first year, I became the historian. Pretty much that was just going to all the activities we had. Because I had been very involved, I was going to all the activities of the organization, but I was still taking more of a passive role, because I was still learning, supposedly, how everything was working, I was just taking pictures of the events. And then my sophomore year I

was more active, I became the treasurer. And the way that we scheduled activities was to try to have lectures, at least one lecture per year, parties definitely because I don't see having a Latino year without a party, because the music is very important in our culture. We have a lot of more intimate events among the members, like pajama nights, movie nights, let's decorate the office, workshops like having you coming to the meetings and talk. That's pretty much us. We try to have one major event per semester. The first semester, during the fall semester is Hispanic Celebration month, they use the term *Hispanic* because it's like a national holiday or celebration. And then during the spring semester we try to have Carnival, and that we do with (the Black/Latino student organization) and it includes pretty much a party, dancing workshops and food. My junior year was really tough because the class of 1997 left and the class of 1998 was only two people and they were gone too, they were away. So I was pretty much it.

She then describes how the first years have taken control and how the cultural activities have pulled in a wider audience:

And now the first years this year— I sat in on an E-board meeting, like last week and what impressed me the most was that most of the people involved in (the Latino organization) are not Hispanics, the first years, they're African American [who are really proud]. And I think it has a lot to do with the people on the E-board that are Hispanic, that are Latinos? They have reached out to every community, the white community, the African American— (the Black/Latino and Latino organizations) are tighter now than they were before. So that's been really good.

I asked if there was more white participation than there used to be, and she replied:

Definitely. It's a combination of the two. It's more Hispanic– Latino– the members are more involved with it, I don't see a lot of Latino students not participating. They might not go to the meetings all the time, they might not be on the E-board but they go to the activities, and in the Carnival, there were a lot of white students. I was just like, Ah! We've been trying to get white students since I came here and now it happened. So it's really changed.

I met Patricia when she started in 1995; she graduated in 1999. In our first interview, eight weeks into her first semester (fall 1995), she was still learning the terms. She came from Ecuador to the Bronx when she was thirteen. As a high school student in New York City, she defined herself as *Hispanic* or as *Spanish people*. She encountered the term *Latino* in documents, especially when applying for scholarships but it did not become a term of self-identity until she got to college and then, as the above interview suggests, it took on specific meaning in the context of the student organization and its activities. It became a cultural definition, the culture having been processed through the organization's affiliations and activities, and through the friendships winding through that organizational activity. The critical point here is the *Latinidad* she worked out is institutionally contextualized and does not readily transfer “as is” out of that context.

This ordered construction of *Latinidad* presupposes that each trait defining one's identity makes a positive contribution to one's individual and community persona. It fits the general pattern of “good students” recruitment and student-citizen expectations. In college recruitment,

multiculturalism figures into application and recruitment processes aimed at selecting “good citizens” for the college community. Good recruits are *achievers* and achieving only good grades is not considered good enough for the community. Ideal recruits must also be (to provide linguistic examples from ‘recruitment register’) *student-citizens, leaders in the classroom and community*. The idealized student is both a well-ordered individual achiever and a productive community member. The idealized multicultural student, then, has a neatly laminated set of traits that can frame or enhance but never interfere with the ideal U.S. citizen qualities. This is where one’s language and one’s culture fit into the idealized *multicultural student* configuration. Bilingual multicultural students “have” language parallel to “having” culture. But the “culture” they “have” exists in a frame of racialization, growing from the historic opposition of white and non-white; hence the OMB categories. Thus, there is an inherent contradiction about the ‘culture’ in multiculturalism. Moreover, the language that the bilingual Latino student ‘has’ is ‘had’ because that student’s classification is part of a historically marked opposition, a markedness that emerges in actual practices, such as one’s accent. So then what?

Linguistic markedness: contradictions within the notion of the *multicultural student*

Students admitted through the HEOP (Higher Education Opportunity Program) program take a five-week summer preparatory course that introduces them to college-level work. One summer, one of my students told me that some of New York Latino HEOP students had been “diagnosed” by a faculty member for “language interference” from Spanish. This “interference” allegedly caused problems with student writing that could be fixed if students took more English and no Spanish. This was an introduction to

college that they did not soon forget. Celia, New York born with parents from Ecuador and Cuba, summarized her experience as follows:

. . . last year I would have said that I think they think that all of us don't know how to speak English properly and can't write and all of these negative things. . . . but now I mean, not that I don't care but it's more of thing like I'm Latina but that's nice but I'm also a human being and I'm also an American citizen. . . . I think for some people on this campus, they do say "yes they're all this way." . . . it could have just been that I just didn't have a good English teacher in high school and didn't learn how to write properly or didn't learn how to do something. But (that professor) automatically associated it with language which then is culture.

She later elaborated:

The only thing that bothered me is automatically it was assumed that just because my writing wasn't very good it had to be because I'm Latina and because my first language is Spanish, which is not true. It could just mean that I didn't learn the proper way to write an essay or something or that day I was just like whatever about the paper. It could've been so many other things.

Two other students, both Puerto Rican— Ely born in New York and Rosa in Puerto Rico— had a similar experience. Ely noted:

Yes, at one point, when I was a first year, or before I even got here I was constantly being nagged about how my writing skills are very low and I should do something about it. I understand it was true, and it was just associated with being Latina and how you speak Spanish and you think in Spanish, which is false because the first language I learned was English. And all my life I've taken

English in school, so there was no reason for me to think in Spanish. If that's what I was thinking, that's what I was taught to think to begin with. So this specific person used to write on my papers that I had to see him because I didn't speak proper English or I didn't write proper English because I was too busy thinking in Spanish.

I asked Rosa if she had also encountered this diagnosis.

Yeah. Like "when you write, do you think in Spanish or in English?" and I'm like, well, if I'm writing in English I would have to be thinking in English. What I'm thinking is what I'm writing. So yeah, I had the same problem.

Ely added,

A lot of us did. And now professors just ask me now, not "is it that you think in English" but more "did you come from a public school?" Then they try to see the root of the problem, maybe, "how much English did you take in high school or junior high school? Did you take grammar?" and the questions and answers are there. I'm like, "well, not as much, I only took one year of grammar in elementary school and I don't remember most of it." So people who are trying to help me would ask questions like that, they won't automatically assume that they know what the problem is.

The issue here is that of linguistic order. In the U.S. ideology of language and nation, bilingualism is acceptable so long as the non-belonging language leaves no trace in English, the belonging language. Strict linguistic partition is taken as evidence of self-control and self-improvement, which are evidence of acting like a middle-class

American. So, in effect, when these three students were “diagnosed” for interference, their language partitioning was being monitored.

What these students experienced is a specific manifestation of a more general feeling that a lot of Spanish-speaking Latino students have about fitting in linguistically at the school. Ana, who grew up in the Bronx in a Dominican family, compares attitudes she has encountered at college with people’s attitudes back in the Bronx:

Ana: And also there are racial differences sometimes, like in what we do, how we talk, especially like us, with me I think it’s a lot the way I talk. There’s nothing wrong with the way I talk but I find it harder, still, to speak English here? Not harder but I guess I’m so aware of it that sometimes I say words wrong.

Bonnie: You hear yourself–

Ana: Wrong! Because I guess I could kind of see the difference so much between my accent and other people, and that kind of stops me from talking a lot.

Ana also talks about how she has internalized these judgments:

Well sometimes I think that people judge me but sometimes maybe I think it’s myself, that I’m so aware that I speak differently that sometimes I kind of say to myself, they’re judging me. And they’re not. So sometimes– I just have to get over it. I just have to get over it and– but sometimes it’s difficult because I just can’t– you grow up, you’re home, they’re like, “you should learn English,” it’s better you’re practicing more because you speak better. But I’m just saying, what is better? . . . How can I change the way I talk? I can’t. I can’t. I mean, this is just my accent, I can’t change it and why should I want to change it? I guess it would be easier if– I don’t know, I guess because of the way I talk, it’s kind of

hard for me to say words? And I don't know why it has to do with that? But I guess if I didn't have so much trouble saying the words maybe I wouldn't think myself that I speak a little wrong.

Bonnie: Interesting. Do you think of this in terms of writing? Is it something you're aware of when you're writing?

Ana: It sometimes pisses me off when I kind of want to say something and I don't know how to say it and how to write it? And I'm like maybe if I was always brought up speaking English it would be easier for me. And I get so frustrated because I'm like— sometimes my vocabulary is like fffff— it just shrinks! And I'm like, God, I'm not going to do well in this paper.

The language issues these students face are not limited to their English. I asked Ana if she had run into comparable issues in a Spanish class:

Ana: Yeah, because especially Latin American countries, they all have different, what is it, dialects? So it's especially, even in the Dominican Republic, within the country, they're like, oh, you're from the campo, because you speak with the [ay] or whatever, whatever. And I'm just like, people are so prejudiced against each other for that.

Bonnie: You speak with a what?

Ana: It's like with the [ay] and you forget the [s] or you know in Spain *para*, you say *pa*. And a lot of the words are just like cut off and totally . . . when you get like with Puerto Ricans and different type of people from different countries, like Guatemala and whatever, they all judge each other “oh, you speak kind of too fast or too this or too that.” Or you forget this or you forget that. And nothing's ever

proper if you're speaking to a Latin American, [xx xx] you always think that if they're different they're wrong. Or either you're putting yourself as wrong.

Bonnie: When you use Spanish at home it's just like part of the environment, you know, you're talking to your family, whatever, whatever, or you mix English, whatever. When you come here, when you use Spanish, are you conscious of different things about how you use Spanish here?

Ana: I think if it's with people who are Hispanic, I kind of speak the same way. But then if I'm speaking— even if I'm speaking with someone that's Hispanic and I see the people around me, sometimes I'm kind of aware of that, because people kind of get upset when you're speaking another language and you're around. But I guess in class it's also different because there's also like students who are white and you're Hispanic so it's like there's so much difference the way you talk. So then you're kind of saying— you're kind of thinking, which is the right way? And there's some that come from Spain and they talk differently also. And then you're kind of like, you know, how do I speak? And then even if you live in the Bronx, your Spanish is kind of different, it's never like supposedly the right Spanish. So even . . . even in the Spanish class where we Latinos know more Spanish, you kind of feel a little uncomfortable sometimes.

Ely relates her experience of linguistic prejudice in Spanish class, but with a little payback:

Well, I've been taking Spanish since my first year. And my first Spanish class was horrible, my professor was a visiting professor from Spain and he actually criticized us (a fellow student and herself) for speaking like that, because he was

saying that it was unfair to the rest of the students, they don't understand a word you're saying and we're like we understand that but why are they in a 200-level class? And then we kept arguing about that the whole semester, because "oh you speak too fast, you don't speak clear," and so the white students were getting really annoyed because "oh you know they speak too fast." So we had to modify our speech to accommodate them. But when it comes to their language, their Spanish, it's very slow, and— you know I even tried to tutor one girl but— I think . . . There's a huge difference, and it not only has to do with the accent but intonation also, like where you see the highs and the lows, and then we hear the white students, well at least the ones that haven't gone to a Latin American country for a semester, and we're like, why is this person speaking like this? And it sounds funny and it's rude and it's bad and it's harsh but— (we laugh).

Conclusion

My point here is that these students are faced with a couple of dilemmas. On the one hand, they came to the school to be class mobile; on the other hand, part of class mobility for them entails a performance of group identity, through participation in multicultural organizations and what is in effect resume building. So they do it. Then comes the next dilemma. A lot of what attracts them to the clubs is a chance to be with other kids who not only aren't white but who come from backgrounds like their own— the comfort factor. Part of the comfort factor is shared language. But though "having" Spanish is part of the diversity resume, the Spanish they "have" indexes a sociolinguistic history that is racialized. And there are plenty of linguistic authority figures in both languages ready to let them know it.

This raises basic questions as to what language *is*. Americans overwhelmingly have a folk notion of language as *thing*, packaged in words, that one can acquire. So long as that package is unproblematic and unmarked in any way that reflects non-middle-class/non-white experience – “correct” is the folk-term – then language is an acceptable accessory to the multicultural/diversity performance. (Foreign students tend to be idealized this way– many coming from well-off, highly education, and often white European backgrounds.) Such neatly packaged language can be paired with food and music as “part of culture” and accepted by outsiders without judgment. As soon as language becomes marked by an accent signaling a personal history outside the protection of class/race privilege, it becomes a “problem” to be “diagnosed” and “fixed.”

Endnotes

1. The same principle applies to Puerto Rico as applies to the Spanish settlement of *ranchero* land in Mexico as outlined in Marcia Farr’s paper in this conference set: the land is not particularly flat or otherwise good for large-scale hacienda agricultural production, so it went to small landholders.
2. Silverstein (1987) argues that the American cultural concept of ‘standard’ English is monoglot, an imagined language variety that excludes any perceptible influence (except for select borrowings) from other languages and, thus, other social histories.
3. Material used from here to the end of this essay is drawn from and developed more fully in Urciuoli 2003. See also Urciuoli 1996 and 2003 for further discussion of *racialization*, *ethnicization* and *multiculturalism*, drawing in particular from Omi and Winant 1986, Williams 1989, Oboler 1995 and Newfield and Gordon 1996.

4. In the following interview material, I use brackets where I cannot quite understand what the interviewee said; I use parentheses to indicate a descriptive substitution for the actual club name.

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