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Chicano English as Linguistic Reconstruction

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Abstract

New forms of English are rising in many parts of the world due to language contact and identity struggles. This paper examines linguistic reconstruction (LR), the process of a speech community creatively negotiating and adapting the syntax, semantics, and phonology of a particular language. This adaptation invests the language with patterns and idioms that express local culture, identity, and values. LR has previously been applied to post-colonial or periphery contexts, but this study examines whether it is also occurring within the native English-speaking United States in the Chicano community. The evidence gathered points to the possibility that LR may be in process within other language groups in core English-speaking countries as well.

Introduction

The English language has been rapidly spreading throughout the world, due to its increasingly dominant role in technology, education, government, media, and many other areas of specialty (Crystal, 1997). Some linguists, such as Phillipson (1992), view the spread of the English language as linguistic imperialism, a method of indirectly dominating other countries and cultures through language. According to Phillipson, English becomes a threat to the identity of these language users because it is invested with foreign values and replaces their native languages. However, the English language has not been reproduced homogenously across cultures according to the prescribed pattern of Standard English. Rather, the language has been subject to changes by the various cultures taking ownership of it. Such changes have pointed to the connection between identity and language, as studied by Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), Pennycook (2003), and Canagarajah (1999).

The term linguistic reconstruction (LR) was first used by Canagarajah (1999, p. 178-179) to describe a remedy for linguistic imperialism. LR allows language users to adapt English in ways that avoid the dominance of foreign ideologies. This paper defines LR as the process of a speech community creatively negotiating and adapting the syntax, semantics, and phonology of a particular language for the purpose of investing it with patterns and idioms that express local culture, identity, and values. A speech community is a group of people who share a particular pronunciation of a language and use and interpret language in the same way (Santa Ana, 1993).

Canagarajah’s (1999, 2005a) research has thus far been focused in post-colonial, “periphery” contexts rather than in core English-speaking countries. A core English-speaking country is one in which the majority speak English as a native
language, whereas periphery English countries are those which have been colonized in the past by English speakers who successfully implanted the language or those which depend on English for international connections and advances (Phillipson, 1992). LR is in process in many post-colonial and periphery contexts, and such a process has generally been acknowledged as an acceptable practice to preserve culture (Widdowson, 2003).

This paper extends the examination of LR to the core English-speaking United States, particularly in the Chicano community. Adopting Peñalosa’s (1980) definition, Chicanos are people of Mexican origin who live in the United States. Many Chicanos have been born in the United States, thus holding citizenship (Peñalosa, 1980). This paper proposes that LR is already underway among the Chicano people as they refashion their identity to connect with and make sense of the multiple cultures that define them. This study will look at the ways in which the Chicano community has adapted the English language to create an identity of their own, separate from both the dominant Anglo culture and the Mexican immigrant culture.

As a result of the data explored, this paper concludes that Chicano English (CE) is linguistic reconstruction that defines the identity of an entire speech community in a core English-speaking country. Some of the implications of this finding will be discussed as evidence for the need of further research and discussion.

**Linguistic Reconstruction Defined**

**Language and Identity**

In understanding the implications of LR, the first necessary connection to be made is the interrelation between language and identity. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) conducted an extensive study ranging over a period of thirty years on “creole” and “contact varieties” of English in the former British and French colonial empires. As they studied the various aspects of language in these communities, they saw that people tended to modify their language use based on the particular social group or role with which they wished to be identified. They claimed, therefore, that language is “a series of acts of identity in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles” (p. 14). An individual expresses his or her identity in speech.

Pennycook (2003) goes further and argues that the use of language actually creates identity, rather than merely reflecting it. People employ language to fashion their identity. He labels this process *performativity* (p. 528). For example, choosing to use a standard dialect in place of a local dialect would reflect the language user’s desire to adopt the identity of the mainstream. The connection between language and identity is clearly significant for the implications of the spread of the English language.

Phillipson (1992) and Widdowson (2003) argue that the core English-speaking countries have promoted the English language in the periphery English countries as a necessary commodity in order for them to function economically, academically, and in other areas. Up to this point, the sought-after teachers of English in many countries are native speakers from the core English-speaking
countries. The English they speak and offer, Standard English, creates a “product” that is owned by the core countries and patented to the periphery countries (Phillipson, 1992). An unhealthy dependency on the core countries is thereby created as the very definition of Standard English (the accepted English spoken by native speakers) gives the core countries the exclusive right to administer it (Phillipson, 1992).

Widdowson (2003) explains that Standard English is monitored by a specific group of people who identify and label ungrammatical usage of English. This labeling prevents some speech communities from certain individual and societal benefits that come from the correct usage of the English language. Because of the economic and academic benefits, the priority for many people and communities falls on learning the English language in the form specified by the core countries. In the process of learning English, several countries are beginning to lose their native languages in spite of their desire to maintain their own language, identity, and culture. Africa provides evidence of such a process. The middle class speakers and some urban speakers are discovering that the language that comes quickly and easily is English, whereas speaking their native language requires much more thought and at times shows lack of fluency (Okara, 1990). When native languages are lost, the identity of a group of people is threatened because their very means of expressing themselves is taken away from them.

Linguistic Reconstruction: A Proposed Solution

Some linguists (Canagarajah, 1999, 2005a, 2005b; Crystal, 1997; Okara, 1990) have attempted to find a solution to this problem that would allow the benefits of the English language to be attained while avoiding the loss of identity implications. In order to counteract language and identity loss, the ability to maintain or create identity must be restored to the linguistically dominated countries without losing the ability to communicate with other English speakers. Attempts have been made toward this end by the bilingual education movement, which seeks to develop both the native language and English equally within students. However, as will be discussed below, many times the true identity of the language users in such countries falls somewhere in between that of the local culture and the global culture. Therefore, using English or their native language somehow falls short of expressing their full identity. Canagarajah (1999) creates a practical proposal for the future of English in classrooms, a third option in between the extremist views of complete rejection or complete acceptance of English. This third option is linguistic reconstruction (LR), which provides a way to combine their local and global identity into one language (Canagarajah, 2005a). Okara (1990) develops this concept with the African community in mind. He believes the process is a continuing quest, through experimentation, for a mode of employing the English language, which we have appropriated, to give full expression to our culture [italics added] and our point of view, our message, without our seeing ourselves, or others seeing us, as through a distorting mirror. If, therefore, an African wishes to use English as an effective medium of literary expression, he has to emulsify it with the patterns, modes and idioms of African speech until it becomes so attenuated that it bears little resemblance to the original. (pp. 16, 17) In this context, the final product will be a local literary language
adopted by the Anglophone countries in Africa in those speech communities that have been affected by the spread of the English language.

LR is not solely a literary phenomenon but is found in the vernacular of speech communities as well as it provides a way to maintain cultural values. For examples, in India, the rules of polite behavior place a tight rein on spoken norms. Standard Indian English grammar, the form of English closest to British and American English, came across too harshly to maintain this politeness (Canagarajah, 2005a). Therefore, Vernacular Indian English makes use of undifferentiated tag questions and the auxiliary modal may to adapt English to fit these norms. In Standard Indian English, a tag question merely reiterates what is said in the preceding statement (Bhatt, 1995), such as in the following example: You said you’ll do the job, didn’t you? However, Vernacular Indian English has adapted this version to the following: You said you’ll do the job, isn’t it? (Canagarajah, 2005a). In this way, the tag questions provide the context for an indirect, unimposing way to ask a question, allowing the Indian cultural values of politeness to be upheld.

Canagarajah (2005b) also provides an example of how a Chinese-Malaysian student changed a particular grammatical form in writing due to a perceived western connotation. The student created a new adaptation that allowed the insertion of his or her own beliefs and individuality. The initiative taken by this student was appreciated and adopted by other students who used the adaptation with quotation marks or with a footnote explaining its use in their writing (Canagarajah, 2005b). Another writer, Xiao Ming Li (1999), was marginalized when using either the formal Chinese or the individualistic American style. However, when she combined these two styles and created a unique third space, she found greater academic acceptance (Canagarajah, 2005b).

These examples provide evidence of the freedom opened up for language learners if they are allowed outside the constraints of Standard English. By having the choice to create their own form of language, learners are given a voice and can use it when they choose. Hall (1999) highlights the need for balance between using the standard forms and created forms of English. When learners understand the effects of their decisions to use one form or the other, they realize they have a choice. The possibilities of their language use allow them to gain ownership of the language instead of being dominated by one standard form. Ownership of language is a concept that Bakhtin (1981) explored. He posited that a language is owned only when it is populated with a speaker’s own intention and accent (p. 293). Otherwise, the language belongs to someone else. It is not a true expression of self and of the speaker’s own identity. Ownership of language allows for a dual identity, local and global, within a language.

As the above examples show, LR has been explored within post-colonial and third world countries that have lost either their own languages or aspects of their culture due to the spread of English. In some cases, they have lost both. As Widdowson (2003) notes, ideas of reconstructing language are becoming more and more accepted in the periphery countries because of the increasing concern for their
loss of identity. However, this same concern and tolerance is not shown in core
countries. Language creativity among immigrants and minorities in core contexts,
which is occurring because of the same need for identity, is “generally dismissed as
quaint regional deviation” (Widdowson, 2003, p. 41).

As minority groups struggle to find identities that allow them to maintain their
own culture while embracing the new culture, is it possible that linguistic
reconstruction is the avenue they choose to maintain this balance? Are they using the
English language to construct their new identity? And is this acceptable in our culture
today?

**Chicano English as Linguistic Reconstruction**

**Spanish Language Loss in the United States**

It is not a far stretch to compare the Spanish-speaking community within the
United States to a post-colonial group facing language loss overseas. They also
increasingly use English at the expense of their native tongue. The 2002 National
Survey of Latinos found that 72 percent of first-generation Latino immigrants are
primarily Spanish speakers. This number drops to four percent by the third generation.
During this time, the use of English has been increasing. Only four percent of the first
generation are English-dominant, but by the third generation, 78 percent are so (Suro
& Passel, 2003, p. 8). While the minority groups discussed above are placed in
overseas and postcolonial contexts, Spanish speakers in the United States are situated
in a core English-speaking country. This loss still potentially poses a threat to their
communal identity or to the individuals within this community. However, some within
the Spanish-speaking community, the Chicanos, have engaged in linguistic
reconstruction (LR) to create Chicano English (CE), a dialect that reflects their unique
identity.

For some people of Mexican descent, this loss of Spanish does not mean a loss
of identity; rather, it leads to the creation of a new identity, Chicano. Neither Spanish
nor English can fully express the Chicano culture, a mix of their Mexican or
indigenous heritage and their life in the U.S. Through the creation of CE, Chicanos
have negotiated and adapted the syntax, semantics, and phonology of English in order
to express and define their identity. This dialect serves as a clear in-group marker,
distinguishing them from the mainstream Anglo culture and from Mexican immigrants.

Past research indicates that for many Chicanos, CE is the chosen language to
express Chicano identity. Through CE, the language of the U.S. becomes their own
and expresses their experience and identity as Americans of Mexican or indigenous
heritage. Chicano speakers “have set out to affirm pride and ethnic loyalty by
maintaining their Chicano English or even by increasing the Spanish-like features of
Chicano English to mark their identity even more strongly” (Penfield & Ornstein-
Galicia, 1985, p. 71). Their English dialect is invested with their cultural values and
contains both ethnic and acculturation markers (Santa Ana, 1993). Whereas English
was once the second language of Mexican communities, they are increasingly
adopting and adapting it as their first language (Martinez, 2006). For some Americans
of Mexican heritage, English, rather than Spanish, is being used to express their individual and community identity. As a unique creation, CE defines the Chicano identity by distinguishing its speakers from recent Mexican immigrants. CE is most often spoken by native English speakers (Fought, 2003; Santa Ana, 1993). In fact, Fought notes that in the Los Angeles community, the division between those born in the United States and those who immigrated from Mexico is socially significant (p. 38). CE speakers use linguistic differences as a means to form clear distinctions between the two groups. Thus, Chicanos’ conscious use of language distinguishes them from Mexican immigrants, forming two distinct identity groups. CE also differentiates speakers from mainstream American culture, and, as such, is often pointed to as a form of resistance to assimilation and acculturation. Penfield & Ornstein-Galicia (1985) note that CE “serves as an in-group marker of ethnic identity and brotherhood…. This symbolic function is especially true for those sub-groups with high ethnic loyalty” (p. 17). Much of the CE dialect shows Spanish influence and is used as a medium of celebrating Mexican heritage. Thus, CE is fundamentally linked with Chicano identity.

As a dialect, CE has its own syntax and structure, lexicon and semantics, and phonology and prosody. These unique features show how Chicanos have reconstructed English, artfully blending elements of English and Spanish together and adding aspects that are uniquely Chicano to express their identity. While differences exist at all levels of the dialect, this paper will only briefly give examples of the phonology of CE. For further examples of phonological, syntactical, and lexical distinctions and identity markers, see Pasquale, Pearson, and Ferwerda (in preparation).

Chicano phonology is what most clearly distinguishes CE from the mainstream Anglo culture (Fought, 2003; Penfield & Ornstein-Galicia, 1985). It most clearly demonstrates their continued link to their Mexican heritage as it shows the most influence of their Spanish substrate (Fought, 2003). Their phonological adaptation “involves the systematic reconstitution of the social meaning of linguistic variables. Whereas the pronunciation of fit as feet might signal imperfect or accented English in an Anglo speech community, this pronunciation is supplanted by different meanings in the Mexican American community” (Martínez, 2006, p. 84). For the Chicano community, this pronunciation celebrates their heritage. A feature of CE is the hyper clarity of /l/ in both word-initial and intervocalic positions (Frazer, 1996; Pick, 2007). This may result “from their contact with Spanish and therefore acts as a Mexican-American identity marker in their speech” (Pick, 2007, p. 41). Similarly, the vowel in words such as mom and caught is fronted like the Spanish [a] (Fought,2003, p. 66). This makes daughter pronounced as [darə], talk as [təl], and law as [lə]. Moreover, there are phonological traits that cannot have arisen from Spanish. As such, they serve to distinguish CE from the speech of Mexicans, standing as unique Chicano features. Wald (1980), in a study of L1 CE speakers and Mexican English learners in East Los Angeles, found a variation of the pronunciation of [ɛ] preceding [l] between the two groups. Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia (1985) attribute these pronunciation differences to students’ “identification with different social groups within the Chicano community…In fact, it is quite possible that native-born Chicanos try hard to distinguish themselves linguistically
from ‘foreign-born’ Hispanics with whom they may share the same community via Chicano English” (p. 20-21). Fought’s (2003) study also shows that CE has developed clear phonological distinctions of its own. She notes less frequent vowel reduction, frequent lack of glides, and glottalization of final voiceless stops as some of the unique distinguishing features. Chicanos have clearly created a space of their own.

Further Questions and Research

The idea of linguistic reconstruction (LR) within the United States raises a plethora of questions and thoughts. For the Chicanos, an ethnic sub-culture, Standard English (SE) is not able to express their identity. Yet can the exclusive role of SE and the monolingual norm be questioned in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom and in the U.S. society at large? How should the ESL teacher respond?

The ESL classroom is based in a larger sociocultural context that seems to uphold an imbalance of power. Although the standard of the monolingual English native speaker has been questioned as an appropriate goal overseas, it domineeringly prevails in the United States. Many may even wonder if it needs to be questioned. Yet continuing cases of linguistic discrimination within the United States on the basis of accent (Lippi-Green, 1997) suggest that something needs to be changed. There are those, such as Hall (1999), who see this native speaker standard as an injustice within the United States and as a form of linguistic imperialism (Hall, 1999). Thus, there is “an abstracted notion of an ideal speaker of English from which ethnic and linguistic minorities are automatically excluded” (Norton, 1997, p. 423). Immigrants, English language learners, and ESL teachers interact in a context of imbalanced power and linguistic discrimination.

Another question which needs to be addressed is: Are ESL teachers within the United States implicated in the perpetuation of unequal power systems by teaching SE? Canagarajah (2005b) argues that “continuing to use [established discourses] uncritically only serves to uphold their power. [They] colonize other communities, providing inferior status to their forms of writing and shaping their thinking” (p. 935). A critical look at ESL teaching in the U.S. will not ignore the questions that apprising teachers overseas, but examine these questions in their own local context. In periphery English-speaking countries, these questions have placed an emphasis on respecting students’ chosen identities as they are expressed in local appropriations of English.

1 Available from the author
When asked in the American context, questions are plentiful and real. What if a student desires to learn Chicano English (CE) or African American Vernacular English instead of SE because he or she desires to identify with a particular group? What about a CE speaker who is placed in a remedial ESL class? By teaching SE, are teachers limiting students’ expressions of identity—and does anyone have the right to do that? Is it sufficient to say that students will learn their identity dialect from their home community? Should students be allowed to choose, especially elementary and high school students who may lack the cognitive maturity to make long-term decisions? Or would teachers do their students a disservice by allowing students to choose to learn their identity dialect over SE in a society that often discriminates against those with a non-standard dialect? On the other hand, Mey (1985) raises the question of whether knowledge of SE truly helps minorities or whether the power imbalance is already too unequal (as cited in Pennycook, 2001, p. 39). Or is bi-dialectalism in ESL classes a viable option (Canagarajah, 2005b, p. 94)? These questions need to be placed in the larger sociocultural context which still demands standards, standardized tests, and SE. Perhaps teachers can help students become proficient code-switchers, and develop the ability to know when to use a dialect. Due to the existing power balance, it seems that ESL students need to know SE. Yet, can this be taught in an environment that fosters and encourages the development and expression of their own identity? Can teachers help students critically use code-switching and communicative competence to know the appropriate contexts for SE and a non-standard dialect? Would this not be truly empowering, where students are able to own the language to express their identity, and be able to use SE that allow greater economic and academic opportunities? Morgan (1997) declares that, “All local options of language should be made available to newcomers in our society—if not for personal use, then at least for scrutiny and recognition when their interests as newcomers are at stake” (p. 446). In short, does LR affect ESL in U.S. classrooms? And if so, should it?

There are a few intriguing examples where students in the United States engaged in actively reconstructing the target language in ESL classes. Ricento (2005) conducted research in a Dominican community in New York. The Dominican students did not want to assimilate to the degree of losing their native language and desired “enriched bicultural bilingual programs” (p. 96) rather than the traditional assimilation-oriented ESL classes. Ricento states that teachers “need to understand that the identities of their L2 learners are deeply connected to their status as members of distinct, but interrelated, communities, in which bilingualism (as opposed to monolingualism) is the norm” (p. 96). In Canada, Ibrahim (1999) studied immigrant African youth in an ESL class. These students desired to learn a “marginalized linguistic norm” (p. 365) because of their desire to be identified as black. Ibrahim asks, “should we as teachers not couple [our students’] word with their world?” (p. 365). These groups of students sought a language that would allow them the freedom to express their identities.

Conclusion

Chicano English (CE) provides an example of linguistic reconstruction (LR)
in the United States. Chicanos have created their own space in the United States; they identify neither as Mexican nor as American. To express their unique identity, Chicanos have adapted the syntax, semantics, and phonology of English with an artful blend of Spanish and unique creativity. This allows them to express their unique culture and identity. CE is a reconstructed dialect. Yet, like other “non-Standard” American dialects, CE is often seen in a negative light. It is, in short, portrayed as being sub-Standard and sub-intelligent. However, CE is not less than, but a creative appropriation of, Standard American English. It is clearly a dialect in its own right that artfully melds two worlds together. Chicanos use their language to carve out their own place and create a third space in a world that tries to paint in stark black and white.

Perhaps by viewing minority dialects within native English-speaking countries as reconstructed dialects that are as valid as World Engishes, the inequality of linguistic discrimination can begin to be corrected and American ethnic minorities’ identities can be respected. Perhaps instead of seeing CE as non-Standard, it can be appreciated for its creative adaptation of the English language. Can U.S. society be convinced of that? In other words, why should the changing attitudes toward World English dialects not also include American dialects? Pennycook (2001) urges teachers to encourage students to develop their own voice as a means of addressing the inequality and marginalization in schooling. He writes:

Voice in this context is understood as far more than just speaking; rather, it is a broader understanding of developing the possibilities to articulate alternative realities. And since it has to do with gaining the agency to express one’s life, it is less about the medium of voice (speaking, writing, etc.) and more about finding possibilities of articulation. (p. 130) Using CE, Chicanos give voice to the reality of their world and their lives as both Mexicans and Americans.

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