

UCLA

California Policy Options

Title

Three: The Changing Language of Work in Los Angeles

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/25q06486>

Author

Waldinger, Roger

Publication Date

2001

THE CHANGING LANGUAGE OF WORK IN LOS ANGELES

Roger Waldinger
Professor of Sociology, UCLA

In those urban centers serving as gateways for the new immigration, the newcomers' advent has produced a Tower of Babel. As of 1990, the foreign language presence was most marked in Miami – where 42 percent of the population reported speaking a language other than English at home, exactly three times the national average. The much larger Los Angeles region followed shortly behind – with 38 percent of the population speaking a non-English language at home and most of these speaking English poorly or not at all. Elsewhere, foreign language levels attained lower levels – as in New York, where less than a third of the population reported use of a foreign tongue at home – but even in these cases the 1990 data point to impressive foreign-language penetration and significant growth, compared to the previous decade.

Continuing, high levels of immigration are likely to increase the number of newly arrived, foreign-language speakers and slow the rate at which the foreign-born switch to English. And one suspects that the pace at which the immigrants and their descendants discard the mother tongue will be slowed for other reasons having to do with the characteristics of post-1965 immigration: its concentration in a limited number of urban places; the very large presence of a single national language group – Mexicans (28 percent of all immigrants as of 1996); and for Spanish-speakers generally, proximity and ease of travel to the home countries.

Nonetheless, the existing research suggests that today's immigrants will repeat the experience of their predecessors, following in a trajectory pinpointed by Joshua Fishman (1966; 1972) more than three decades ago. The first generation retains the mother tongue for most purposes, adopting the dominant language to get by or get ahead, and only for those domains where its use is required. The immigrants' children may be exposed to the mother tongue at home; but as the dominant tongue rules in all other domains – the neighborhood, schools, and work -- mother tongue usage lapses, increasingly reserved for the parental home, and then with diminishing frequency. With the advent of the grandchildren, the parents are at best passive bilinguals, retaining a scattering of mother tongue expressions for use on special occasions, but otherwise conversing exclusively in English. At the end of the chain, the third generation grows up as dominant language monolinguals.

In this account, shift is the result of long-term, collective language choice. Succeeding generations switch from original to dominant language with increasing frequency and across a growing number of domains; however, the process takes hold right at the start. Labor migrants in industrial societies furnish a workforce for the means of production controlled by members of the dominant speech community. "The language associated with the means of production" (Fishman,

1972: 104) provides the first occasion for mother tongue displacement. Newcomers to American society are more likely to switch to English at work or when talking about work. Yet how this occurs, under which work conditions, and with what relationship between work environments and linguistic outcomes remains an open question. This chapter, reporting on a survey of employers of less-skilled help in Los Angeles County, seeks to provide a modest beginning to that discussion.

The Linguistic Division of Labor

America enjoys an unparalleled track record for obliterating the languages that immigrants bring with them. But immigrant self-sufficiency can retard the process. Self-sufficiency means more than numbers and concentration; it also involves some degree of detachment from the mainstream economy. By implication, then, today's burgeoning immigrant economies should lessen the motivations to learn English, precisely because they reduce the level of interdependency on dominant-language customers, workers, and bosses.

Disparities in economic exposure to outsiders may yield divergent effects among groups of immigrant entrepreneurs. Whereas the owners of middleman-type businesses may have to "learn some English to carry out transactions with their domestic customers," business operators in ethnic enclaves enjoy "the possibility of conducting business in the mother tongue." (Portes and Rumbaut 1990: 217) Speculation, perhaps, but one for which studies of the sociolinguistic environment in cities on the U.S./Mexico border provide intriguing support.

Teschner's study of El Paso, for example, shows that growing Latino density has altered linguistic practices in the business sector, with more bilingualism in banks or doctor's offices than before, and increasing numbers of retail establishments owned and operated by Mexican nationals "who typically conduct all business in Spanish (1995:97)." Jaramillo (1995: 82) tells a similar story for Tucson, where Spanish is increasingly used in public contexts, making Spanish "an effective marketing strategy in reaching Spanish-speaking patrons or clientele." Granted, these reports merely point to a growing prevalence of Spanish in the business sector, *not* to the influence of such practices on language shifts among business owners, as the Portes and Rumbaut hypothesis would maintain. But if economic transactions in ethnic business enclaves on the border need little or no English, it follows that pressure for language shifting would decline. Ethnic economies provide a protected space for mother tongue use and maintenance.

Since getting a job remains very much a matter of whom one knows, those same contacts bring newcomers into the economy. Networks among immigrant incumbents and job seekers allow for rapid transmission of information from workplaces to the communities; they also provide better information within workplaces, reducing the risks associated with initial hiring. Consequently, ethnic hiring networks are self-reproducing: each new employee recruits others from his or her own group. They also sever the linkage to the outside labor market, with hiring opportunities rationed to insiders' referrals as part of a quid pro quo between incumbents and employers (Waldinger, 1996).

By implication, then, the language of industry is not constant, but variable; and so too, therefore, will be the mechanisms of linguistic adjustment. In the conventional view, the shift to English serves both as a sign of acculturation and as a tool for getting ahead, as immigrants who improve their mastery of English also better their prospects for employment and upward movement on the job. But one can imagine an alternative: the deep immigrant penetration into the economies of American cities such as Los Angeles brings a multitude of foreign languages into the workplace, in part due to customer demands and preferences for interaction in their mother tongue, in part because workers can't speak English adequately. Therefore, bosses and supervisors accommodate to the linguistic needs and preferences of the newcomers -- *and not the other way around*. Because work is a fundamentally social activity, the linguistic preferences of immigrant co-workers and customers may have the further effect of extruding native English-speakers. Anglophones can't do the work because the *lingua franca* on the job is a foreign tongue. In addition, entry barriers are raised as employers opt to hire workers who can speak more than one language. Thus, growing foreign-language densities can further diminish pressures for English-language use at work.

Methodology

But first a word on the research on which this chapter is based. It is an accidental by-product of a study designed to focus on the mechanisms of competition between immigrant and African-American workers at the low-skilled end of the Los Angeles labor market. Language was, unaccountably, of barely incidental interest. But the employers knew better than we, and they talked about language extensively, and long before we invited them to do so. Initially, their comments on language seemed relevant to an understanding of the proficiencies that employers demanded, and of the qualities they sought in their workers. As I worked with the data, it became clear that the discussion of language was sufficiently rich – and to my ears, novel – to provide material for a story in its own right. Hence, the paper that follows.

My study is based on in-depth interviews, conducted in 1993 and 1994, with managers and owners in 230 establishments in Los Angeles County, including 44 restaurants, 46 printers, 41 hotels, and 39 furniture manufacturers, 24 department stores, and 36 hospitals.¹ With the exception of the restaurant sample, which was drawn from the Yellow Pages, and designed to include chains (varying in size from 3 to 55 units) and single-owned operations, the sample was drawn randomly from directories.² The organizations were located in a variety of areas within Los Angeles County, both within the central city, and in more suburbanized areas. With few exceptions, our organizations were drawn from the “mainstream economy”, including few immigrant-owned firms.

¹ All employers are single-counted, even if they were owners or managers of multi-unit operations. Three of the hospital interviews involved persons not directly employed by hospitals; these were with the vice-president of a company supplying contract housekeeping services to hospitals; an official in a large public sector hospital workers' union; and two personnel officials in a local government department responsible for general health care services.

² The list of acute care medical hospitals in Los Angeles County was taken primarily from a local street guide, supplemented by a regional business directory.

The interviews were arranged with the highest ranking person involved in the hiring process and they were structured by an instrument involving a mix of closed- and open-ended questions. In the beginning of the interview, the largest category of “low-skilled” jobs was identified. The remainder of the discussion focused on those jobs and the workers who filled them. The interviews lasted from an hour and a half to three hours; in some cases, interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed; in other instances, detailed notes were made of interviewees' responses. Only one explicit question about language was asked, coming at the end of the interview. But queries about required skills and desired traits elicited much comment.

Isolation and Employer Accommodation

Though part of the “mainstream economy,” the hotels, restaurants, and furniture factories of Los Angeles seemed to be following the path of linguistic accommodation. Cleaning and cooking jobs “don’t require any English skills whatsoever,” noted a hotelier. The same holds for production work where “you could do it without knowing English. 50 percent of my workers have been here 20 years and they still have not learned English.” As employers see it, the nature of the work explains their encapsulation in a Spanish-speaking world:

"In the case of a steward or dishwasher who hardly has guest interaction, when you can't find someone who speaks English, we would waive the requirement, because let's face it, there aren't that many English language people who would be dishwashers."

And it was not only grunt work in the service sector that seemed to attract a similarly constricted labor supply. Factory managers had the same problem, as with one informant who had been searching for a driver, but “couldn’t find anyone who spoke English. All the applicants were Hispanic.”

Employers in these industries do grumble about the perceived linguistic deficiencies of their immigrant workers. Monolingual factory bosses, like the furniture factory manager who lamented that “the number one challenge for a white Anglo Saxon American is the language barrier”, were also unhappy with the situation. Some furniture manufacturers contend that problems arise with promotion:

"Here we are 99% Spanish and the supervisors are bilingual. Someone who can't speak English, it's not that big of a hang-up. But in a couple of years you could get in to position where they're communicating with engineers and design people who don't speak Spanish."

Another manufacturer discovered that “as the recession came in, we found it necessary to do more customizing,” which, in turn fed a demand for English. “All of a sudden we have to be able to communicate better with our employees. And we need to have a pool of qualified people that we could promote into pivot positions and these pivot positions have to be able to communicate with us, no problem.”

The greatest noises of discontent came from the hotel managers. "I don't want to sound like a nationalist, but this is America!" exclaimed one respondent while grouching about the inability of the housekeepers "to interact with guests because they don't know the basics." Many hotel managers were clearly in a foul mood about the linguistic ability -- or incapacities? -- of the hotel rank and file. In the past, LA's hotels had merrily hired an immigrant (and in years past, merrily and knowingly, an undocumented) staff, and now that clientele demands were rising, they faced a new reality -- namely, that "the days of being totally quiet are over." "If you can't communicate, you're dead meat", was the mantra we heard from personnel managers.

However much management wanted employees to "initiate conversation with the guests, to inquire about their stay, [to ask] if they needed anything," communicative skills, regrettably, could not be wished into existence. In one Santa Monica hotel, for example, the housekeepers had the unfortunate habit, when in the elevator "of bowing their heads, instead of saying 'good morning, how are you doing'". We heard the same complaint in a downtown business hotel:

"It's really important for our housekeepers to speak to our guests in English. But many of the housekeepers have very little English skills. If a guest walks by, the maids turn to look away and avoid making eye contact. They look away because they're scared that they may not understand if the guest needs help, and talks to them in English."

While adequate as long as trade was booming, basic problems in English no longer proved satisfactory when business deteriorated. "Customers increasingly expect people to speak English. When someone asks for a towel, they can't go 'huh'?" But this is not a universal occurrence, much to management's regret, and encountering non-English-speaking housekeepers makes for an unhappy clientele. "Our service suffers" if housekeepers don't speak English. "Guests interpret [avoidance] as rudeness."

One manager reported "customer complaints—a lot of them—because they can't speak with the maid". Another contended that "guest frustration is phenomenal because a lot of people are not very tolerant. They ask you something, 'excuse me can you tell me where the restaurant is or where the meeting room is,' and this person kind of looks down, you know what I'm saying, and walks off. The guest really doesn't understand that. No matter how much they're spending, whether it's \$59 or \$250, they really don't understand that." And to the extent that hotels were heeding the gospels of modern management, with efforts at greater involvement, or at least better communication with the staff, the linguistic, as well as the literary, deficiencies of the rank and file made progress problematic:

Field notes: Respondent tells me that English is important, so that the staff knows about house rules. He has them fill out an application and puts a notice of things that they expect of employees, in Spanish and English. This includes "worker's compensation procedures which they must read. If they can't read, it taxes other departments to translate. And if they haven't read documents, then there are legal issues that get raised in the event of a termination or a workers' comp case. It

raises the question of who filled out the forms? Was it me? (e.g., the HR director). We do employee surveys. If they can't read the survey, then I don't have a valid survey. How can I expect them to tell me whether they're treated properly?"

Thus, employers could not be described as enchanted with the advent of a largely, monolingual Spanish-speaking workforce; note further that the comments reported above describe employers' *attitudes* about language usage. But they also provide ample testimony to the prevalence of Spanish, pressures to use English notwithstanding. But for all their unhappiness with the linguistic situation, the employers in these industries appear to have taken the path of least resistance: "we would prefer that they speak English, but they speak Spanish," exclaimed one manufacturer; "we try to encourage the workers to speak English," noted another with resignation, "but it is very difficult."

The Latino preponderance in a steak house kitchen ensured that "English is the second language" in the back of the house. A maker of high-priced furniture, trying to make the transition to an English-proficient workforce, as part of an effort to upgrade the product, hoped that "soon everybody will be able to communicate in English," at which point they would be able "to hire an English-speaking foreman"(!) "While I say that they need to speak English," conceded a hotel manager, "the reality is that their English is very limited." One of the more technologically advanced of the furniture companies we visited gives basic skills test in Spanish; in a second, "all the interviews are done in Spanish". In yet another firm, the lead men—who provide the informal, on-the-job training, are Spanish-speaking; in a fourth, the relevant foreign language is English:

"...The job that we are talking about does not require communication of a foreign language, *meaning English*, they really don't have to read much because in many cases the information is given to them in Spanish."

But not only have employers hired foreman and other intermediaries who come from the immigrant communities, they have decided that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. In this case managers learn Spanish themselves, or else make the necessary adaptation. A furniture manufacturer told us that "both floor managers speak 'Mexican' (sic), so it is not that important that the workers speak English..." One hotel chain requires managers "to have basic understanding of Spanish," an accomplishment matched, if not bettered by a furniture factory in LA's industrial belt, where "everybody is bilingual," including the production manager who "is Caucasian and speaks perfect Spanish."

A restaurant manager thought that "language was not a problem. I learned 'restaurant Spanish' as a server." In an interview that focused on warehouse workers, a department store manager first told us that "English is not required, because we all had to take Spanish to communicate with them" and later commented that "If there were no immigrants, I wouldn't have had to take Spanish!" "I speak Spanish, so that is not a problem," said a company president. "Otherwise, everything would go through the production manager, and that is very awkward."

Speaking about the “tight Hispanic group” that works in the kitchen of one of L.A.’s best-known steak houses, our respondents reported that “English is the second language. Most of the communication in back is in Spanish.” One furniture manufacturer with the unusual practice of deploying several black foremen was asked whether these supervisors also spoke Spanish; the answer, “Yes, you have to in this workforce.” A third generation Mexican-American supervisor told us that:

"The language barrier is very important, that is why a lot of people in my position wouldn't make it. You need to speak the language. How could I make them do and understand what I wanted them to do? I didn't know a word of Spanish before I went to work. My parents, didn't."

Those managers who don't pick up Spanish-facility themselves, depend on others for intermediation. The transplanted midwestern manager, running the L.A. plant operated by a national chain, relies on his supervisors, “all of whom have to be bilingual because I have to communicate with them.” His similarly monolingual counterpart, running a plant producing a nationally known brand, uses a bilingual service “for everything that I put out and I have a company where I have to send all the information that I want the employees to know and they will then translate it for me.” Neither the owner nor the foreman of a family-owned factory in the San Gabriel Valley spoke Spanish. But not to worry: “Our forklift driver *who is the person who controls the plant* (italics added) is bilingual.”

Interdependency and the Switch to English: Hotels, Restaurants, and Furniture

In hotels, restaurants, and furniture manufacturing, the networks have seized hold of the hiring process, detaching the organizations from the general labor market. As a result interdependency pushes employers to accommodate to workers' linguistic practices. Market is a facilitating factor: furniture factories sell to wholesalers and retailers, making the linguistic capacity of the plant workforce a matter of little import. While restaurants and hotels, by contrast, cater to a diverse, largely Anglo customer base, that clientele is entirely -- in the case of kitchen workers -- but only partly -- in the case of hotel housekeepers -- removed from needs for interaction with the Spanish-speaking staff. The nature of the job comes into the equation as well. Entry-level positions in restaurants, hotels, and even furniture manufacturing plants involve simple competencies that almost anyone could be expected to know. They demand little in the way of cognitive proficiencies for which English would be required.

Interdependency and the Switch to English: Printing

Elsewhere, differences in organizational complexity, workforce diversity, and market exposure yielded greater pressure for switching to English. Spanish is also the most prevalent foreign language in printing shops and dominates in certain low-skilled areas, such as bindery work. Outside of this one specialization, however, Spanish often competes with other foreign languages as well as English. One firm, for example, reported use of English, Spanish, Thai, Tagalog, and sign language among its employees. Another mentioned a Chinese supervisor from

Malaysia who speaks Malaysian, English, Cantonese, and Spanish with the workers; A third noted that “one challenge is the many different language spoken here -- English, Chinese, Spanish”. Finally, in a fourth case, English was used for business purposes, but Vietnamese and Spanish were employed on the shop floor, which also contained one person who spoke Armenian on the phone.

As in furniture or hotels, some printers went with the new linguistic tide, using more experienced, bilingual workers to “tell so and so exactly what we want.” Many employers felt that they were putting up with a situation where “sometimes it takes longer to explain things and you have to explain things simpler.”

"If they have a poor command of English, it's a problem. They have a tendency to say they understand when they don't. Or they look at you, smile at you, and do it wrong."

Employers made do as they could, but the effort did not create much joy (“I hate it when I have to have a translator”). Many resorted to translation, a stratagem that produced its share of hiccups:

Field notes: If she can't talk with them because of language differences, she gets her "best translator". One translator makes her seem more forceful, another makes what she says seem less forceful. She tries to communicate through a neutral translator.

“Most employers and workers resent being forced to deal with multiple languages on the job,” insisted one printer; as his shop ran all training programs on a bilingual basis, dollars and cents considerations undoubtedly fed his ill-temper.

The imperative for cooperation across ethnic and linguistic boundaries, however, generated a strong push toward English. Many departments had a mix of people and consequently, numerous printing firms insisted that English be spoken on the job -- a policy absent from furniture or hotels or restaurants. “They can't interview unless it's in English. English is for your work. If you want to speak a foreign language, you can do it on your own time.” Interdependency made effective communication an imperative, especially since the most skilled workers were most likely to be Anglophones:

Field notes: Respondent says that if he were in Indiana, the matter of speaking English probably would not come up. “If a pressman gets caught in the press, he wants to be able to tell someone how to get him out.” During the second day of the interview he added this comment: “It may sound anti-Mexican, but speaking English is important. Even when Mexicans become legal, they tend to drag their feet on speaking English.” Respondent says the equipment is expensive, but the safety factor is the most important. “You have to be very careful because it's a dangerous piece of equipment.”

One interviewee claimed that his was the first firm in the U.S. to post a letter on the bulletin board saying that English could only be spoken around the press, a move prompted by anxiety over the potentially dangerous equipment. But concern about "Hispanic workers talking in Spanish and one couldn't tell if the topic was ink or their girlfriend" also entered the equation. Foreign-language monolingualism also carried a cost in flexibility: a Spanish-speaking feeder, for example, could be successfully deployed alongside a bilingual pressman; but trouble was in store if the next pressman could only speak English.

Even a Spanish-speaking bindery worker "could not be left alone by himself without some sort of supervision. I couldn't supervise him," explained a manager, "because I don't speak Spanish. That would be a problem." The fact that jobs were not routinized and subject to unpredictable changes made precise communication all the more important. "There are times that I need something to, to say to them, the client calls me, they need something to get done and if I cannot tell them exactly what I want to say, it isn't gonna work right."

The preference for promotion from within had a similar effect. Language problems that might be tractable at the lowest levels were more difficult to manage when the linguistic context became more complex. The owner of a Westside printing shop praised immigrants as "good employees", but then complained that "some don't see that they need good English." As did many of the printers with whom we spoke, this respondent "likes to hire and promote from within", and language problems present challenges, especially since the ability to understand written and verbal communications in English substantially gained importance as one moved up the job ladder:

"The pressman is in charge of reading English; that's when it becomes important. For helpers, English is not so important. But to become a pressman, you better know English."

The structure of interaction again shaped linguistic needs, since "customers come in for a press check and if the salesmen's not here, the pressmen have to talk with the customer. I haven't run into pressmen who can't speak English: most are bilingual."

Interdependency and the Switch to English: Retailing

Pressures to use English are stronger still in department stores. To be sure, the retail sector is swept by the same currents of linguistic change at work elsewhere in the region. Managers made clear that there was no shortage of foreign language speakers among their employees, and not just the usual mix -- "associates who speak Spanish, Farsi" or "lots of Armenian" -- but the complete Tower of Babel itself: "English, Spanish, Tagalog, I have a whole mix of all of the Baltics, Russians, we have some Yugoslavs, Czechs, a little bit of Dutch...."

Retailers are far less encapsulated than the manufacturers and service a mixed public, even if the composition of that public varies across the geography of the L.A. basin. The retailers also respond to the region's shifting ethnic mix in such a way as to attract the newest Angelinos,

seeking to “pick up more and more Hispanic customers,” by advertising in Spanish and “using the Spanish-speaking (radio) stations”. The changing clientele leads them to conclude that “the employee base has to reflect the customer base.”

In one instance, that employee base may be “white, because it matches the demographics of the area.” But that same consideration of seeking “to match our store to the people who come to the store” motivates managers to “try hard to have Spanish speaking people, and the middle Eastern language group (Persians, Iranians, Afghans, Armenian).” “We do have associates who speak to customers in Spanish, Farsi, etc. if the customer feels more comfortable that way,” noted a manager with a mainline department store. A discounter “catering to a high degree of an ethnic background” while also trying to “hire from the community” felt that persons with “strong Spanish accents or whatever” could easily fit into the store. Numerous interviewees agreed with the assessment of one chain store manager who thought that “if the associate speaks a language other than English, that helps.”

So speaking non-English languages was frequently allowable; speaking English with an accent was also acceptable “if I can understand them and they can understand me.” Still, the stores wanted English to remain the *lingua franca*. But they were not always successful in this regard:

Manager: "Language is a major problem. If I went to the North Hollywood store, I would not be able to survive there. The majority of their workforce is Spanish-speaking, and I cannot speak Spanish."

Interviewer: "Then what does your certificate mean?"

Manager: "That I went to class! I didn't say I learned anything there. They have a personnel manager who's bilingual. They couldn't just put any personnel manager in there."

As this comment further suggests, department stores were also making organizational adaptations to the new linguistic environment, though often with a lag. “We have bilingual management for the most part,” a discounter told us, “pretty much all Latino, although not as much as our customer base.” Managers also thought that it was appropriate to “have a lot of bilingual people” interacting with “a lot of Spanish speaking customers.”

Most, however, contended that “we wouldn't have people working here with no English ability.” “They need to know the English language”, exclaimed one manager; “on the selling floor, they must speak English,” noted another. As with the printers, English facility had a bearing on successful task completion: thus while a store might conclude that “it helps if the person is bilingual, that's better than just speaking English,” the same retailer would still insist that “the most important thing is an understanding of the English, it underlies other skills, such as interaction and reading.”

Customer diversity provided an even stronger reason for the insistence on English: “We need them to speak English. We have a very diverse ethnic population in our company and in the stores”. Clearly, the mix of languages among workers and customers is a source of tension, and one that many managers want to alleviate. “We have customers complaining (using a whining voice) that ‘they can’t speak English and they live in California.’”

Part of this customer dissatisfaction is undoubtedly related to ethnocentric feelings among Anglos. But Anglos are not the only customers prone to sentiments of an ethnocentric sort: “The Baldwin Hills store is definitely an African-American population,” noted a regional personnel manager. “From a language standpoint, there have been situations when I’ve had to tell workers to speak English on the floor.” Moreover, the adverse reaction goes beyond an allergy to Spanish.

One manager fretted about customer complaints “In the downtown stores, [where] the Filipino workers would speak to each other in Tagalog.” Another griped about “the Middle Eastern, who is intent upon using their native language instead of English.” And when immigrant sales people speak Spanish, Farsi, or Tagalog, adverse reactions arise for reasons that have nothing to do with foreigners or foreignness as such. Sometimes, “other parts of the work force doesn’t (sic) know what they are talking about.” In other instances, there is always “the American customer who gets offended when he or she hears associates speaking in another language, and gets offended, thinking they’re talking or laughing about them.” Consequently, managerial tolerance of linguistic diversity often had its limits:

“I give them a bad time about (talking other languages), but I realize that you’re always going to go back to your natural source. And Tagalog is spoken heavy here, but I always go up to them and pinch them or tease them and say, ‘This is an English speaking country’I give them a bad time about it, but not on a negative level. I will get angry, though, if they’re conversing amongst themselves in the cashier environment.”

Interdependence and the Switch to English: Hospitals

The linguistic environment in hospitals at once resembled and differed from the evolving situation in the department stores. In contrast to employers of seemingly similar low-skilled help, hospitals require more — and more complex — information to be communicated. Likewise, communication is more likely to require two-way exchange. In contrast to comparably low-level workers employed on a factory floor or in a kitchen, where contact is limited to co-workers, the least skilled members of the hospital workers labor in a very different interactional structure.

Hospital work involves a great deal of incidental contact with people, whether customers or co-workers, a generalization that holds true for those workers whose jobs do not formally have anything to do with customer service. For example, “environmental service techs are asked questions all the time”. Food service workers “see so many kinds of people, doctors, patients ... it's important that interpersonal skills be high.” A janitor in a public sector hospital is expected to

“be polite to the patients, make them feel comfortable.” With a broader range of contacts came greater demands for some level of English proficiency.

Moreover, hospitals emphasize skills involving formal communications, mainly because workers need to understand written instructions of a complex sort. Reading English is of major importance, because if the housekeepers “can't read what the doctors or the nurses said about this patient's room, that could put them in danger as well.” Consequently, hospitals want their bottom-level workers to have at least some proficiency in reading English. Dietary workers, for example, who “fill orders, fill trays,” have to do so with “attention to detail” frequently doing so “without direct supervision.” Those low-level workers who lacked the ability to read English spelled trouble, as noted by the food service manager who told us that “I've got some illiterate people and it's very difficult.” And with hospitals downsizing and the consequent requiring of a more multivalent workforce, there appears to be less tolerance for monolingual workers. “There used to be a time when we could hire someone who could not speak English, but that changed four to five years ago. The system is too fast, there's no time for hand-holding.”

Factors related to the diversity of the clientele and of the staff also yield strong pressures for workers to know and use English, even for the most unskilled hospital jobs involved in cleaning or food preparation:

“We're encouraging more and more people to speak English, we really are. Especially in, as it deals with business. Conduct everything in English, is business, if you have private conversations you can speak whatever language you are comfortable in. But we're really trying to promote and encourage people to speak English for business reasons. Cuz many times, in the hospitals, people do get apprehensive, they don't understand what other people are talking about. And a lot of times nurses they will communicate with us in English, doctors will communicate with us in English, and or even patients will communicate with us in English, and you know, people would get apprehensive if they don't understand English. And if there's an emergency situation, you know, these instructions are more often than not given in English.”

While emphasizing the importance of English, many hospitals made allowance for the language shifting that might occur when workers move from public to more private settings:

“If they talk Tagalog or Chinese, say, on the job, we will not tolerate it long. This is an English-speaking facility. On break, in the cafeteria, I don't care what language they speak, but in patient areas, they should be speaking English.”

The typical policy allowed for a distinction among domains, granting legitimacy to foreign language use in workers' truly private interactions. English was demanded as the only language spoken by employees in work areas, “so that patients don't feel that they're being talked about”, and because English is the “language spoken in the Medical Center, and by customers and supervisors”. Even the best efforts, however, do not always produce satisfactory results: “we have

so many different thick, thick accents that sometimes somebody, say that it's Filipino talking to somebody of a different nationality, [they] have difficulty understanding each other's feelings. Both of their accents are thick. They may be speaking English but it's thick."

As in the other industries, hospital English-speakers, whether on the staff or the patient-side, evince "a lot of dissatisfaction with people who speak another language". To some extent, management's complaints can be read as a barometer of more general reactions to shifts in the regional, not just occupational, linguistic environment. Consider, for example, the manager who told us that "When I see people walking in the hallways speaking Spanish to their kids, it's just one thing that drives me nuts" or the following comment made by an otherwise liberal personnel officer, who worried that "pretty soon people like myself are going to be required to be bilingual."

"And I'm thinking here I am in my own country and I'm having to accommodate you know learning something else and accommodate these people because I have really strong feelings because I've seen it walking in the hospital and somebody can't talk to somebody and it gets real you know frustrating."

But the grouching was also motivated by the real problems involved in managing the Tower of Babel, where neither workers nor customers could take communication for granted:

Manager: "When you're working with your employees and English is supposed to be the language in the workplace, that has been a very difficult thing to try to enforce. "

Interviewer: "Because people are talking to each other in other languages?"

Manager: "Oh yeah, and you know, here it's Tagalog, and here it's something else and you know I've approved it in situations to try to clarify something but you need to get back to English."

Given its symbolic importance, language also serves to crystallize resentment and anxiety:

"The Filipino workers that work here are, I would consider them rude, because they get in a group, and they speak their language, and no one else around can understand. And I've heard that throughout the hospital. They just find that to be rude. They're saying it's just part of their culture."

Thus, a workforce of at least minimal English-proficiency is desired, but it is not a universal imperative. Experienced workers evolve their own alternative methods for getting by, as in the case of these housekeepers in a for-profit hospital, who "have done their own little skills like if they see this color, they communicate it once in Spanish with somebody and if they saw a sign with this color that it meant that they had to be really careful if they go in without masks or gloves or whatever." Likewise, limited fluency is often enough — "English: they should at least be able to understand a written note that a nurse might leave for them, like 'this patient is in

isolation.” Still, there is little question that hospitals expect far more in terms of English-speaking ability than do the other institutions and individuals who also employ people who clean floors and make beds.

But in sharp contrast to the situation in the retail sector, hospitals’ needs to service a growing non-English speaking population — “we have a lot of Spanish speaking members that come in, and we call for translation a lot” — yields a countervailing pressure. “We desperately need bilingual people,” reported a manager in a facility with a very large black workforce. Many hospitals viewed bilingualism as a plus.

“Many of the positions that we have is (sic) bilingual. So I will look at, “do they speak Spanish?” Yep, well then they go into another stack. Not that I discriminate based on bilingual, but it's something that is a skill that is used here, required of many jobs.”

A manager in a county facility told us that “to a large extent, people who have bilingual abilities are wanted, because our patient mix is heavily non-English speakers at certain of our locations.” The same point emerged several times in our conversation with managers at one of the largest public hospitals: “We have a high Hispanic population; we need to have people to communicate in it. [Being bilingual is] a big consideration.” Interest was still greater at an HMO which was avidly trying to develop a niche servicing the area’s new, multiethnic population. “Bilingualism is the big thing,” we heard, though our respondent also conceded that it’s “hard to find.”

“Many of the positions that I have are bilingual, so I would look if they speak Spanish,” recounted a manager as she explained the criteria she would use when assessing an application. One hospital offered a premium to bilingual employees:

“If you translate for 50% of your job, we give you like \$0.60 extra an hour. You get a lot of money for that. And the badges say, “Yo hablo Español,” so if they can't find something they know you speak Spanish, so ... It's a plus if you're bilingual.”

Unlike the situation with English, however, bilingualism was a preference, never a rule, “Being bilingual is not required,” reported a manager in an Eastside hospital, “but it is an asset.” Similarly, a manager who noted that “it is important to be bilingual” when filling a clerical job also reported that “I have not had a requisition come down that requested a specific person who was bilingual.” Further, because hospitals view bilingualism as an add-on skill, it is unlikely to work to the benefit of the least-skilled Latino immigrants, most of whom are in any case not fully bilingual.

Conclusion: Network, Market, and Language Change

The material on which this chapter is based provides reports both on language change at the workplace and on employers' views of that process. Only the former issue connects directly with the analytic question at stake -- namely, how organizational characteristics -- both internal and external -- affect language choices at work. The information on employers' attitudes needs to be treated with care, as the forces affecting those attitudes derive from factors exogenous, not endogenous to the workplace itself. But employers' attitudes are nonetheless illuminating, as they highlight the deep embedding of Spanish (and other foreign languages) within the workplace in Los Angeles, notwithstanding employers' wishes to the contrary.

For the most part, the linguistic shifts are both a product of and a contributor to those closure processes that push less-skilled, native-born workers out of the labor market. The tendency to rely on referrals to recruit workers -- "our guys...send a stream of people that don't speak English", exclaimed an unhappy manufacturer -- detaches furniture factories, restaurant kitchens, and hotel back-of-the-house areas from the general labor market. With little in the way of demands to service English-language customers, the networks powerfully reinforce linguistic isolation. "Since the supervisor is Hispanic you have to speak Spanish to get hired," explained a hotel manager. "You cannot get hired if you only speak English." Employers in immigrant-dominated industries like hotels, restaurants, or furniture manufacturing have to make deliberate efforts to widen the linguistic spectrum of the applicant pool. One factory switched over from a reliance on referrals to newspapers, in a deliberate effort to avoid undocumented applicants, and specifically advertised for workers who could "read, speak, and write English." However, others have all but given up any effort to obtain English-speakers, even when they recruit from the open market:

"We tend to go to the Spanish papers like the *Opinion* because a lot of these people are Spanish that work in these furniture factories."³

Demands for higher level skills would increase resistance to use of Spanish on the job. In some cases, those firms engaged in upgrading skill levels have also sought to diversify the workforce -- at least by acquiring a staff bilingual in Spanish and English. That option, however, hinges on a determination to either alter established recruitment practices and/or pay the freight in the form of higher wages, a possibility before which many employers blanch.

But Anglophone exclusion is not simply a by-product of the referral process; for those non-Spanish speaking workers who find their way onto the shop or kitchen floor, membership in a linguistic minority is a source of even greater and continuing trouble. Advertising can attract a more diverse applicant pool, but outsiders then have trouble fitting in.

"Even when we advertise, or we put through the department of employment, we rarely get either a black or an Asian. I'd bet you in the last twelve months I've had

³ The respondent referred to *La Opinion*, Los Angeles' largest, and oldest, Spanish-language daily.

one or two Asian applicants, but that's it. And then it usually becomes a language problem, because I don't have bilingual foremen for them."

Interdependency in a situation where most workers spoke Spanish left English monolingual workers out in the cold: "because of the language barrier, there are two jobs here [for blacks], if they are unskilled: shipping and sweeping the floor" "Unless the blacks speak Spanish," noted one furniture manufacturer, "we have a major problem." Another reported that language was an issue, not so much for management, but for "blacks dealing with Hispanics". A third, who emphasized the need for cooperation and communication, went on to tell us that "the fact that our workforce is homogenous" – they were all Mexican – "helps towards this communication."

Explaining why it was "difficult to hire blacks when you have a predominantly Hispanic workforce," a hotel manager pointed to "discomfort with Latino influence. They don't understand the language." To be sure, language is only part of the problem in many of these immigrant-dominated establishments, but as the vice-president for manufacturing, overseeing a plant in the San Gabriel Valley, it is an impeding factor of no small import:

Manager: "It is also the case that when a young black man come in, even though we interview him for the job, he is going to look at all the Hispanics around him and feel very uncomfortable. I've had that happen."

Interviewer: "Even though you have a foreman who is black?"

Manager: "Yes."

Interviewer: "And they feel uncomfortable because of what?"

Manager: "Because language has a lot to do with it and they feel that they are trying to break down a barrier rather than 'o.k., here you are, go to work.' And the other workers have a very negative attitude towards them to start with."

Linguistic encapsulation is not on the horizon in industries or work situations involving contact with an English-speaking clientele or labor force. Here, interdependency links entry-level work to a linguistically diverse population, in which English-speakers retain dominance, if only for the moment. Thus, demands for English may actually work to the benefit of less skilled, native-born workers, as explained by one of the human resource hospital managers with whom we talked:

"The only real difference is that with black men...I typically don't need to worry about English as a second language. Whereas with somebody from a different country, I need to be concerned with their ability to speak English. So I might put, um, I might choose a black man for an area that is more accessible to the public, so that...because our environmental service techs are asked directions all the time

in our hospital. So I must put somebody with better English in a position where they're going to deal more with the general public.”

Moreover, most jobs demanded a modicum of English-language speaking and, often, reading ability, with even the lowly “environmental service technicians” -- hospitalspeak for janitorial work – expected to communicate with doctors, nurses, and patients and absorb written information relating to hazard and threat of disease. Printing departs from both the hospital and department cases, involving much lower levels of client interaction. But like the hospitals, the printing plants had an elaborated division of labor, arranging jobs in such a way that workers at varying levels of the hierarchy labored in tandem. Entry-level Spanish-speakers thus fell under pressure to conform to the linguistic practices of the more skilled, generally Anglophone, workers. In some cases, Mexican-origin workers occupied the most demanding blue-collar positions, but expectations for effective communication with Anglophone clients made bilingualism a condition for occupying such jobs.

Although hospitals, department stores, and printing shops maintain a continuing demand for English-speakers, they nonetheless operate in an increasingly multilingual environment. That fact inevitably adds another item to the list of skills which black and other low-skilled, native-born applicants generally lack. The impact on monolingual African Americans, as they slowly become an English-speaking minority in the lower level occupations, is likely to be frustration and alienation:

“I see it in hospitals, like in one hospital we have, you see, the blacks on one side of the room, the Hispanics are on the other side of the room, at one of these general meetings. And you can hear in it some of the questions that come up, and some of the answers that come up, the representation from the unions. There's a certain amount of animosity because the union representative is speaking in Spanish. So it comes up, there's an attitudinal thing. I think the blacks feel probably threatened because there's so many Hispanics here.”

Further, while demands to service non-English speakers will only grow, so, too, will the availability of bilingual speakers. Managing the multilingual selling force of Middle Easterners, Filipinos, and Spanish-speakers has not always proved easy for L.A.'s department stores. But on balance, it is a plus, since otherwise stores could not service the clientele that they need to attract. In hospitals, the children of immigrants with the baseline skills needed to work as dietary aids or housekeepers are entering the labor market in growing numbers, and to the extent that they have some facility in two languages, they will increasingly have an advantage over native-born blacks and low-wage whites:

“We have a large ethnic patient population, and to an extent our patients' access to medical care has improved with having people that they can communicate with. So one of our objectives is having a diverse workforce which mirrors our diverse patient population.”

The need for bilingual speakers is particularly acute in precisely that sector where blacks are more over-represented — namely, the public hospitals — since these are the facilities most heavily used by Latino immigrants. Though dominated by poorly educated Mexicans and Central Americans, the region's foreign-born population is very diverse. Higher skilled newcomers from Asia or the Middle East are more likely to have adequate competency in English and also possess other skills that hospitals want. Moreover, the demand for English is more of a soft than a hard constraint in its impact on the influx of the foreign-born. The hospitals already abound in the use of languages other than English. That trend that will only increase as the demography of the region increasingly reflects the presence of the foreign-born, yet another factor weakening African Americans' hold on this traditional niche.

In the end, this chapter essentially confirms the conventional wisdom: exposure to influences outside the immigrant community propels the process of language shift. But the paper does suggest one revision: work need not be the domain of initial change. The massive entry of immigrants into the Los Angeles workforce, combined with the dominance of immigrant networks over the hiring process, yields a type of social closure that yields linguistic accommodation with a twist. Bosses and supervisors accommodate to the linguistic needs and preferences of the newcomers -- *and not the other way around*.

References

- Fishman, Joshua, 1966, *Language Loyalty in the United States*. Hague: Mouton.
- _____, 1972. *The Sociology of Language*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Jaramillo, June A., 1995, "The passive legitimization of Spanish. A macrosociolinguistic study of a quasi-border: Tucson, Arizona," Pp. 67-91 in *The International Journal of Sociological Language*, no. 114, 67-91.
- Portes, Alejandro and Ruben Rumbaut, 1990, *Immigrant America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Teschner, Richard V., 1995, "Beacheheads, islands, and conduits: Spanish monolingualism and bilingualism in El Paso, Texas," Pp. 93-105 in *The International Journal of Sociological Language*, no. 114, 93-105.
- Waldinger, Roger, 1996, *Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in PostIndustrial New York*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.