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'You Speak Good English for Being Mexican'

East Los Angeles Chicano/a English: Language & Identity

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ABSTRACT

East Los Angeles Chicano/a English (ELACE) is characterized by unique linguistic features that differentiate it from other varieties of English spoken in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. This paper will explore some of the more salient features that lead to many assumptions about the speaker of the variety, some negative and others potentially positive. Additionally, it argues that ELACE is not simply a sociolect reserved for communities of low socioeconomic status, but rather, it is an ethnolect that serves to represent the rich culture of the diverse Latino/a groups represented in East Los Angeles.

KEYWORDS: *Chicano/a English, identity, language ideologies, Latino/a in United States*

I. INTRODUCTION. The study of linguistic ideologies¹ is a relatively new area of scholarship within the field of anthropology. Nevertheless, this theoretical framework is an effective tool for analyzing human social interaction through a linguistic filter. Michael Silverstein defines these ideologies as 'sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use' (1979:193). In the present study I examine what social and ideological processes are being evoked when individuals utter statements such as, 'You speak good English for being Mexican'. Specifically, I analyze the assumptions that are being indexed about a speaker and his/her community with such utterances. These indexicals are important for analysis because they demonstrate the associations that utterances have with various features of context. Further, these associations—of terms, speech styles, or linguistic varieties—orient speakers in physical and social space. In addition, I attempt to shed light upon whether these assumptions

are negative or positive within particular contexts. Moreover, in order to locate the ethnic variety in its sociolinguistic setting, I also illustrate some of its formal linguistic features, specifically those that distinguish it the most from mainstream English. Chicano/a English (ChE) is a dialect of English that is characterized by unique features, many of which are attributed to a specific ethnic community that by extension are often attributed to a specific socioeconomic class—the latter which will be discussed in this article as problematic. The social situation of Chicano/a English can be paralleled with the social situation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and other ethnic varieties of English in the United States. Lippi-Green (1997) has illustrated how AAVE, a dialect of English, is often categorized as English *slang* and not a *proper* way of speaking English. These assumptions are false, as Labov (1972) has shown; AAVE is a dialect that is governed by its own set of linguistic rules and structures, much in the same way that other more ‘accepted’ varieties are (i.e. Mainstream US American English, etc.). The case is similar with ChE; it is an English variety that also follows strict linguistic norms of phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon and prosody, three of which will be described below.

In order to contextualize the present article it is important to recognize that the stereotypes associated with linguistic features are directly correlated with the perceptions of the speaker or community who speaks it. Language use is neither neutral nor apolitical (Hill 2008). Furthermore, ChE, as a dialect of English, is neither better nor worse (more proper or improper) than other varieties, dialects, or forms of English. ChE is simply a different variety of English, which is also privileged with social value in particular contexts—albeit, social value that may not be reserved for the highest echelon of society in the English-speaking world.

2. **CHICANO/a ENGLISH.** In this section I briefly describe the linguistic variety of the dialect in question (see Fought 2005 and Garcia 1984 for a more comprehensive description). It is important to note that Chicano/a English and East Los Angeles Chicano/a English (ELACE) are both used to refer to the same dialect. However, the term ELACE is more specifically used to refer to speakers of ChE residing in East Los Angeles, an unincorporated region in Los Angeles County. Due to this minor restriction, Fought (2005) notes that ELACE has been influenced by other dialects in its geography, such as California Anglo English (CAE), African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), and Valley Girl English

(VGE), which make it slightly different from other varieties of ChE in the country. Thus, ELACE can be subcategorized as a variety of the broader ChE dialect. In this study, however, I will use ChE and ELACE interchangeably since previous studies only make the distinction when the study contributors are from East Los Angeles. Nonetheless, because ELACE shares many of the same features of the broader ChE, with the exception of those features predominantly limited to Southern California like CAE and VGE, the assumptions and indexicals are also similar elsewhere. Finally, due to the constraints of the current analysis, only three features of ELACE are illustrated and these are inclusive of different linguistic domains: phonology, morphology and semantic/lexical.

2.1. FORM AND FEATURES OF ELACE/ChE.

1. Phonology

Lowering and backing of [ɛ] in stressed syllables followed by /l/, so that *yellow* sounds like *yallow* and *elevator* sounds like *alivator* (García 1981).

2. Morphology

The is conventionally pronounced with a schwa [ə] before consonants, but a tense [i] before an initial vowel, for instance [ə] in *the bus*, but [i] in *the ocean*. Speakers of ELACE variably retain the schwa pronunciation before vowels (García 1981).

3. Semantics/lexicon

Barely is used to mean 'just recently' or 'only'. In colloquial American English, *barely* is often used to mean 'just did', as in, 'she *barely* passed her math exam', which seems to be restricted to verbs with achievement to a specific goal. In ELACE, *barely* is used to emphasize timeliness or scarcity. For example, 'he *barely* came yesterday' meaning, 'he *just* got here yesterday' and 'I *barely* have two pieces' meaning 'I *only* have two pieces' (García 1981).

Although the features listed above are neither comprehensive nor exhaustive of ELACE, they help contextualize the variety and differentiate it from other varieties of American English, especially those with higher social and economic privilege. Additionally, the above features are some of the most salient when assuming speakers are of Mexican origin or that the first language of the speaker is Spanish, two of which are very common assumptions. These beliefs go both ways, and when a speaker identifies himself or herself as being of Mexican origin or having spoken Spanish before English, the interlocutor by extension expects to hear

these features because the perception is that that is how ‘Mexicans’ speak English. These assumptions will be described in greater detail below.

3. **ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE SPEAKER OF ELACE.** In 1957, Sawyer conducted a study on bilingual speakers in San Antonio, TX, and she found that ‘the English spoken by the bilingual informants was simply an imperfect state in [the] mastery of English’. She strongly favored an interference interpretation of ChE; that is, one that assumed that ChE was the product of a bilingual’s Spanish influencing his/her English. The Southwestern community was not the only to have this assumption. Linguists at the time also made such assumptions, which is evidenced thoroughly in research by Galicia (1985). Nevertheless, this ideology is prevalent today by non-academics, as can be witnessed in the general media and other social media outlets such as YouTube, Twitter, or Tumblr, etc. This reality is disturbing because these detrimental assumptions prevail despite contemporary scholarship and research proving otherwise. Some of the more prevalent assumptions made about Chicano/a English and their speakers are listed below, along with the reality⁴.

Assumption 1. ‘Chicano/a English is only spoken by people whose first language is Spanish and whose Spanish introduces mistakes into their English.’ This is a common assumption about speakers of ELACE. Due to the fact that the majority of speakers of ELACE are Latino/a, many assume that these speakers are also Spanish speakers. Consequently, it is perceived that Spanish influences the unique pronunciation, lexicon, and prosody² of ELACE. Though the substrate of the linguistic variety in question is Spanish, it is not necessary for a speaker to speak Spanish in its current form. Many speakers of ELACE, if not most, are not Spanish speakers. In addition, those who are Spanish speakers are English dominant, which is a common phenomenon in 2nd and later generation Spanish/English bilinguals in the United States, as witnessed by countless authors (cf. Parodi 2010, 2011; Zentella 1997).

Assumption 2. ‘Chicano/a English is a dialect spoken mostly by gang members and not used by other members of the Latino/a community.’ This is a common stereotype associated with members of the Latino/a community who do not readily assimilate to broader mainstream US American culture. Moreover, there are countless examples that disprove this assumption, not all Latino/as or speakers of ELACE are gang members or associate with that specific social enclave. Further, the speech community of gang members in this community surely have

a specific linguistic repertoire, repertoires that have been documented by Mendoza–Denton (1998) about Latina gang social groups in Northern California. Nevertheless, this assumption persists and is deeply detrimental to speakers of ChE and Latino/s alike.

Assumption 3. ‘Chicano/a English is what Mexicans speak.’ This is a common assumption of Latino/as in general. It is true that Mexican-heritage Latino/as make up the largest population of Latino/as in the United States; however, it is not the only Latino/a heritage represented in the identity. In Los Angeles County 75% of the Latino/a population is composed of Mexican-heritage individuals (Census 2010)—much higher than the national average. Nonetheless, these numbers coupled with the constant mentioning of Mexican-heritage Latino/as in the media often triggers the assumption that most, if not all, Latino/as are of Mexican-heritage, though it is not necessarily the case. ELACE is often attributed as the speech of Latino/as, but more specifically Mexican-heritage Latino/as. However, ELACE is not restricted to Mexican-heritage speakers; for instance, East Los Angeles is composed of many other ethnicities such as Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans etc. These other communities within East L.A. may also be speakers of ELACE. Moreover, it is highly probable that many non-Latino/as also acquire the variety, which is a phenomenon overheard throughout the city of Los Angeles.

4. **THE IDENTITY BEHIND ELACE.** There is a plethora of research on AAVE and the role that it has on the identity of Black US Americans. In the same paradigm, ChE plays a very important role in the identity of Latino/as who speak it, and even those who do not. In Los Angeles, for instance, ELACE serves as an identifying marker of an individual’s membership to the Latino/a community of the region. I informally interviewed several contributors who no longer speak a very marked variety of ELACE. I asked them to give me some of the reactions of their community if any to the way they now speak. All contributors interviewed reacted similarly, citing family and other members of the community having an active reaction to their speech style. Here are some examples of the reactions cited by the contributors to their non-ChE variety:

1. ‘ya se cree muy muy’ [‘(s)he thinks (s)he is all that’]
2. ‘ira ya habla muy profesional’ [‘look, she speaks so professional now’]
3. ‘you speak so white-washed’

The above are only a small portion of the comments the informants had received from family and other community members. The reactions are not very varied, as they all somehow dislocate the variety into a more privileged space and clearly outside of the community. First, it is important to note that there *is* a reaction. Members of the community rarely stayed totally passive about the linguistic variety spoken, further showing the prevalence and saliency of linguistic varieties.

Secondly, one can argue that most if not all of the comments can be seen as compliments by the speaker himself/herself (and even by other interlocutors). The first and second comments show where ELACE is placed on a hierarchal scale. Though it is presented as a jest, it does show the indexicals of the speakers' variety at the moment vis-à-vis ELACE. ELACE now becomes a dialect where you 'can't be all that' and/or it is not a 'professional' variety. Further, the last comment briefly sheds light into the hierarchy or perceived hierarchy of other racial/ethnic identities with regard to language. If ELACE is not a high variety, as denoted by other comments, then to now be speaking 'white-washed' would translate as to now speak 'professional', or in other words, better or proper. These brief conclusions are important and will be discussed further in the discussion.

Nevertheless, the attrition of ELACE is associated with otherness and with a loss of the speaker's authenticity to the community who speaks the variety. Though the speakers may surely still have other identifying markers that link them to the given community, other members of the community still blatantly note this language variety attrition. These slowly become minute motivators that eventually lead to the escalation of assimilations into US American mainstream society, in these and other ethnic communities, as is argued in great detail elsewhere (cf. Ong Hing, 2000; Wu 2003; Ruiz & Sánchez Korrol, 2005).

Moreover, as mentioned above, ELACE is a marked variety of American English. Though linguistically marked as different and bearing lower prestige, it still has prestige within the speech community that speaks it. As illustrated in Bucholtz & Hall (2004), the creation of identity is not arbitrary and there are reasons for the social process. Despite the attrition of ELACE (and even of ethnic languages) being associated with upward mobility, it is still symbolic and it is linked to overlooking the community's roots or struggles. This is synthesized in the few responses listed above.

Further, the perils of the Latino/a community do not cease even as they approach a linguistically more White/mainstream variety in the United States. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, I have illustrated some of the indexicals in the statement: ‘you speak good English for being Mexican’. The aforementioned statement is detrimental because it is a synthesis of the assumptions mentioned above entangled to somehow become a compliment. First, the statement assumes or indexes that the individual is of Mexican heritage; however, as mentioned above, in general, this is a common misconception of Latino/as in the United States. Nonetheless, it is important to note because it calls into the question the common negative assumptions/indexicals that others have of the Mexican-heritage community—these are discussed elsewhere (Fought 2003, 2005; Garcia 1984; Wald 1984).

Moreover, I now focus on the more substantive portion of the statement, ‘you speak good English’. Here there is an assumption that the speaker would otherwise not speak GOOD ENGLISH, but rather some other NOT-SO-GOOD ENGLISH or an approximate to what a non-Mexican would speak. This seems to be the perceived norm of someone of Mexican-heritage or quite possibly the perceived norm of someone who phenotypically looks Mexican or Latino/a³—much like the assumption that all Latino/as speak Spanish, which is one of the main reasons why ELACE is so marginalized. These statements further the saliency of otherness of the Latino/a community, and do not really align with the US American rhetoric of embracing cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity. Such statements illustrate the perceived image of Latino/as and of peoples of Mexican-heritage with regard to language—even those that are of 2nd or later generation and are as US American as any other native-born US American. It is clear that there needs to be a shift in mainstream US American culture, one that is truly inclusive of the diverse population of the country. First, we need to embrace the self-identification of these marginalized groups and the unique linguistic varieties that are representative of that identity without stigmatization.

6. **DISCUSSION.** As mentioned earlier and illustrated throughout this brief investigation, ELACE is a variety of English with its own unique linguistic characteristics. These characteristics make it different from other varieties of English, particularly that of Mainstream US American English. Like AAVE, ELACE has a very rich ethnic cultural history that contributes to the substrate of the variety. Additionally, like AAVE, ELACE also

has a history of being a marginalized language variety. Consequently, the variety is often not even considered English, but rather, taken to be more closely related to Spanish or, even more detrimental, a denigration of *PROPER ENGLISH*. This of course, is used to further show the perceived deterioration of the speech of many, many marginalized people; which by extension continues to oppress them.

Moreover, though ELACE is often perceived negatively, as shown in section 3, it still has high social value within the speech community. In the community, it is often regarded as a marker of identity and could be seen as a *MEMBERSHIP CARD* to that community. When a speaker does not speak or ceases to speak the variety, it is something that is quickly noted as *THE OTHER*—however, it is important to note that this *OTHER* is usually perceived as more prestigious on the macro level. This demarcation of *OTHERNESS* can lead many to assimilate quicker to mainstream society, as many won't try to maintain the community's variety if they don't feel there is sufficient social value—more often than not, many will choose assimilation for its perceived overall higher social and/or economic value in the United States. These values are superficial and go beyond a linguistic analysis. The hierarchy of language and language varieties is commonly directly correlated to the social hierarchy of a given community. Thus, it is imperative that we begin to unmask the false assumptions of marginalized communities and that we do not continue to perpetuate folk theories about these peoples—with regard to language and other social phenomena. Finally, a good point of departure is to advance the idea that ELACE, and other cultural language varieties, are not fossilized as sociolects reserved for speakers of a particular social class, but rather rich ethnolects that should be preserved and maintained—they are, after all, part of the palpable history of these communities. It is necessary to promote the maintenance of these minority varieties because despite their low social value in mainstream culture, they still enjoy high social value within their communities and to an individuals' sense of identity to that particular community. Nonetheless, it is equally as important for US mainstream culture to truly embody the often 'sermon-like' rhetoric of inclusivity and diversity. Ethnolects are not a deterioration of our culture, but an enrichment and true embodiment of our diversity.

NOTES

1. Linguistic ideologies and language ideologies are used interchangeably by different authors (cf. Hill 2008, Silverstein 1996)
2. These assumptions have been compiled from personal experience as well as the experience of a small group of informants. Additionally, they have been witness in a variety of social media outlets.
3. Not discussed in the current study.
4. The informants for this study did not discuss any racial profiling. They have mentioned that statements such as ‘you speak good English for being Mexican’ were common but those individuals making them already knew they were of Mexican-heritage.

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