

## Chicano English Goes to College

The value of a third-wave approach in the study of ethnic dialects

Concerns about what constitutes ‘authentic speech’ and who is an ‘authentic speaker,’ have been central to sociolinguistics since its inception (Bucholtz, 2003; Coupland, 2003). In traditional sociolinguistics, authenticity is operationalized through a continuum of formality, with authentic speech assumed to increase as formality decreases (Labov, 1966). When the behavior of groups of speakers is organized within a social class framework, a space is opened for the behavior of individual speakers to be judged as *more* or *less authentic* with respect to how their linguistic behavior correlates with that of their social class peers (Coupland, 2003).

For better or worse, this methodology was directly applied in early studies of ethnic dialects, as was the notion that a speaker could be more or less representative of *the authentic speech behavior* of their particular ethnic group (Labov, 1973; Morgan, 1994). Within this model, moves away from the theorized ‘true ethnic vernacular’ were not infrequently characterized as both inauthentic and assimilationist. In one stunning example of this, Mary Pratt relates an instance of a researcher who denounces a black middle-class subject for showing accommodation to the prestige dialect of a white interviewer (Pratt, 1987). In the researcher’s analysis of the interaction, the subject “‘fails to speak in BEV’, and instead produces the ‘turgid, redundant, bombastic and empty,’ English of the American middle class” (Pratt, 1987, p. 57). The desire reflected here for examples of *authentic ethnic speech*, all too often result in an essentialized portrayal of ‘real’ ethnicity—one that is, by and large, poor, rebellious, urban and male (Bucholtz, 2003; Morgan, 1994).

Undergraduate students at research universities are among the most studied of all speaker demographics. Unsurprisingly, given the above, this does not hold true for speakers of Chicano English (ChE). Sociolinguistic work in ChE often focuses on poorer communities and on individuals affiliated with ethnic gangs—demographics considered less likely to assimilate to mainstream or White cultural norms (Fought 2003; Mendoza Denton 2008, Labov 1972).

The present study challenges the historical assumption that upward mobility and education are at odds with authentic ethnic speech by examining linguistic ideologies and behavior within the Latino community at a top-tier university. The focus of the study is, Chris a high-achieving Latino student in his final year and his use of a Latino English light /l/ in two very distinct social situations – a dorm-room discussion with a close friend and a formal presentation of his master’s thesis.

All files were recorded onto an Olympus VN-960PC 128 MB Digital Voice Recorder, via a Sony ECM-C115 lavalier microphone. The VN-960 was set to record in HQ mode that corresponds to a sampling frequency of 16.0 kHz and an overall frequency response of 300Hz-7200Hz. All /L/ tokens were extracted using Praat, excluding tokens where the recording quality was poor. The resulting data set was 419 tokens extracted from approximately 1h20m of audio recording time, with the number of tokens split fairly evenly between the two settings—244 casual and 179 formal. Tokens were coded for phonological constraints as well as via a perceptually-based coding system corroborated by two other phonetically-trained sociolinguists.

In contrast to robust phonological effects, the effects of situational context on Light /L/, the variable of most interest to the theoretical concerns of this study, were statistically insignificant. This insignificance held when situation was run as a dependent variable with respect to other /L/-favoring categories, whether or not light and very light /L/’s were considered separately or together, and regardless of the presence or absence of the 20 or so Spanish tokens

Lisa Tittle Caballero  
University of Washington

in the data set. Despite a linguistic repertoire that *does* include more standard variants of /l/, Chris does *not* reduce his usage of light /l/ in the formal setting, and meta-linguistic commentary reveals that it is critically important to him that he not cease to “sound Latino” even in highly formal situations. But, is it possible for a formal master’s thesis presentation to qualify as an authentic performance of an ethnic dialect?

If the historical model is left unchanged then the answer is, overwhelming and definitively, no. In this framework the lack of statistical significance within our social variable constitutes a flaw in the research design which can be corrected through better controls for situational and topical formality, a focus on a more socially salient/meaningful variable, and or the selection of a more ‘typical’ subject, perhaps a speaker of a less standard form of Chicano English. In a strict variationist context we are left with a case of incomplete assimilation and not the most interesting case.

The zero-sum game between authenticity and assimilation is hard to escape without the use of third-wave methodologies in sociolinguistics (c.f. Eckert 2002, 2005). But, by shifting focus from the behavior of groups and onto linguistic variables themselves, we are able to afford linguistic complexity to speakers without getting lost in that complexity. We can understand dialects as *constructed varieties* in which ethnically and non-ethnically defined features may combine in any number of *equally authentic* linguistics styles, and we are finally able to stop discarding speakers like Chris and to allow ethnic speech to exist *authentically* in a college setting.

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