

# Bilingualism, Cultural Transmutation, and Fields of Coexistence: California's Spanish Language Legacy

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## Abstract

This is an historical analysis of English Only programs in California and their impact on bilingualism as a natural acquisition process. Factors that propagate bilingualism such as a continual flow of Spanish speaking immigrants, and social, economic and ethnic isolation, are delineated for theorizing about key aspects of multilingualism, the persistence of Spanish/English bilingualism and cultural nuances of language behaviors as a foundation for cross-cultural understanding. Since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there has been a strong shift from Spanish as the official language of law and policy to English in the State of California. The most widely used language other than English has been Spanish. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has been projected that Spanish speaking Latinos in the State of California will constitute 43% of the States' population by 2020<sup>1</sup>. This analysis will posit a reconceptualizing of bilingualism for the States' Spanish language speakers and a redefinition of a multinational and global cultural identity that transcends boundaries of nationalistic constructs imposed historically.

## Introduction

This paper posits bilingualism as a natural acquisition process. Historically in California as well as in other parts of the U.S. the intervention of schooling, except in very few exemplary cases, has stifled the development and the use of two languages. In the case of Spanish, it is primarily due to the historical antecedents of relegating the language and culture to second-class citizen status in the schooling process. In California, there has been a public amnesia concerning the cultural and historical foundations of the Spanish-speaking Mexican population. The focus of this paper is on theoretical views of language and culture within a Spanish-speaking context in California that have not been dealt with sufficiently. Schooling as an institution has not provided adequate education and has served only to marginalize Spanish speakers. Present day advocates of English Only language policies only consider the Mexican population as a recent immigrant

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<sup>1</sup> Reported by the San Diego Union Tribune November 23, 2005.

and do not take into account the historical psychological foundations of the community or the intimate linkage of language and culture. The co-existence of a growing Spanish speaking population with historical change has impacted bilingualism. There is ample evidence that schooling for Mexican American children throughout the Southwest has been neglected and inferior but especially that the restrictive use of the native language has existed for more than a hundred years. (Attinasi 1997; Gonzales 1997; Macedo 1997; Menchaca, 1995; Ruiz, 1997; San Miguel 1987).

The tenets of my argument in this paper are that Spanish/English bilingualism persists and grows in spite of the lack of institutional support from schools and the deliberate attempt politically to set up Americanization and English Only policies. Bilingualism as a multifaceted process does not just include speaking two languages whether in a balanced way or in a fragmented manner (i.e., code switching between English and Spanish, inappropriate grammatical combinations, etc.), it may also include different degrees of comprehension and symbolic understanding in two languages. From this perspective bilingualism is also the ability to understand semiotic aspects of culture connected to language, nuances of social interactions that are cultural in nature and the appreciation of icons, symbols and practices associated with everyday life. Before expanding on this aspect, let's briefly consider an important dimension of California's Spanish language legacy.

### **California's Spanish Language Legacy: A History of Marginalization**

In California, for approximately one hundred and fifty years, generations of Spanish surname people use English and Spanish in everyday interactions. In the Southwest, where former Mexican regions became part of the United States, use of the English language was

enforced (Dickers, 1996:144). In most cases, English has overshadowed the use of Spanish as a native language depending on the generation of Spanish speakers, family situation or living conditions. These generations of monolingual English speaking individuals may also have knowledge of Spanish but not speak Spanish fluently. They continue however, to identify with the culture of the their families and may comprehend many of the terms and concepts embedded in Spanish language interactions within their communities, especially if they are raised in communities isolated from mainstream groups. In recent years California has led the nation in State policy for English Only. In 1986, California was the first State to pass an official-English measure by ballot initiative (Dicker 1996:162).

The Spanish language was the language of law and policy in what is now the State of California before the war with Mexico (1846). In 1848 the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo gives the United States approximately one half of the territory of Mexico, including Alta California (Beebe and Senkewicz, 2001:482). When California was annexed as a State English as a language of policy was imposed. Mexican people that lived in California and throughout the Southwest were guaranteed, under the Treaty that they could maintain their religion and culture. These guarantees were rapidly undermined: the instances of racial hatred and abuse of the native people of these regions are well documented. During the first half of the twentieth century Americanization schools emerged where the goal of education for Mexican children was assimilation (Gonzales 1997:163).

There are many examples that illustrate the shifting of official language use from Spanish to English and the origins of marginalization of the Mexican American community through colonization in California history. As succinctly stated by Hughes, “following the War of 1846, and up until the Civil War, *Californios*, or Spanish-speaking inhabitants of California,

experienced a decline in economic status, political power, and social influence (Hughes, 1976:3). Naturally with the decline of power, the language of the citizens was not valued and it was expected that all citizens speak English: the language of the new colonizer.

In 1883, Helen Hunt Jackson published *California and the Missions*, where she chronicles descriptions of the relics of the first school established in the City of Los Angeles half-century earlier. She writes,

It was on the old Lancaster system that Los Angeles set out in educating its children; and here are still preserved the formal and elaborate instructions for teachers and schools on that plan; also volumes of Spain's laws for military judges in 1781, and a quaint old volume called "Secrets of Agriculture, Fields and Pastures," written by a Catholic Father in 1617, reprinted in 1781, and held of great value in its day as a sure guide to success with crops."(Hunt Jackson, 1903:197).

Coincidentally, by the time Hunt Jackson documents the details of the California Missions and the Spanish language system of education through Mission culture, the first public school classroom taught in English in California had been organized in the Santa Clara Mission Gardens. In 1846 Olive Mann Isabell a pioneer with Fremont's party established a racially integrated school classroom. The students were Spanish-speakers, sons of landowners, Native American children and English-speaking Anglo children sons of the new immigrants. Olive Man Isabell was the first official English-speaking public school teacher in the State. It can be noted from documentation of Mrs. Isabell's career that she was indeed an English-speaker, a recent settler from the mid-west, and that two thirds of the pupils were Spanish- speakers and natives of California. The State was still operating with Spanish language policies. Integration was initially practiced but after the war there was deliberate segregation.

Of important historical note is that the English school was official at the on-set of the war and before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

segregated schools were indeed a common practice and the language shift in law and policy was the initial reason used to marginalize Spanish-speaking children. This continues strongly into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, as Menchaca (1995), asserts “In California the school segregation of Mexican students was widespread during the 1920s and 1930s. Several California case studies show that segregation of Mexican students was common and that language, hygiene and the “special needs” of Mexican students were cited as the main reasons why segregation was practiced” (Menchaca, 1995:77). By 1931, the California state government reported that 85 percent of California schools segregated Mexican students in some form (Hendrick, 1977:90 cited in Gonzales, 1997).

Another notable event in the history of language policy for Spanish-speaking students is the Lemon Grove incident, a 1934 case in San Diego California that was settled in court involving Mexican parents protest against segregation. This case exemplifies the complexities in Spanish language subjugation, history and community agency. The School Board felt that the Mexican students were deficient in the English language, had poor sanitation practices and lacked moral values. Robert Alvarez whom as a school child was personally affected by the harsh attitudes toward his culture and language, expresses the dilemma experienced, he states, “My father says to us, from the door outside you are in the US from the door inside you are in Mexico” (PBS video, 1987).

Mexican Americans throughout the Southwest were marginalized. Their culture and language was restricted at all levels of civic participation. According to Ruiz (1997), “not only did Mexicans not receive instruction in their own language, their language was actively suppressed. In some districts, Mexicans were prohibited from attending public schools; when they were allowed, they were prohibited from speaking Spanish, even outside class.” (Ruiz,

1997:326). In spite of this history of repression and lack of opportunity to develop their native language in a formal school setting, the Spanish-speaking Mexican communities still flourish in the Southwest. Ruiz, (1997) contends that “Mexicans had no reason to believe [based on history] that their cultural institutions would be supported outside their communities and turned inward for support, thereby strengthening those very institutions—the church, the family and neighborhoods—which would allow for long-term language maintenance” (Ruiz, 1997:326).

### **Cultural Transmutation and Fields of Co-existence**

According to the 2005 U.S. census bureau there are 41.3 million Hispanics in the U.S. One out of seven American citizens are of Latino descent. The ebb and flow of Mexican “migrants” establish a unique context for considering aspects of cultural maintenance through language. A very important aspect of this is the distinction between language and voice:

Language has a life of its own—it exists even when it is suppressed; when voice is suppressed, it is not heard—it does not exist. To deny people their language, as in the colonial situations, to be sure, is to deny them voice; but, to allow them their language is not necessarily to allow them voice (Ruiz, 1997:321).

The way that language has been used in designing programs for students that speak a language other than English through bilingual programs or English as a Second Language programs (regardless of goals and objective, i.e., transitional, maintenance, for the past three decades), with few exceptions<sup>2</sup> operate by excluding the cultural capital rooted in language: they ignore the ‘voice’ of the students. Voice promotes the most basic role of language and knowledge

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<sup>2</sup> There are few programs that actually achieve the promotion of bilingualism. I have observed several throughout the years and am convinced that if the attitude established from the beginning is that of enrichment of culture and language and English speaking students also participate to learn Spanish as a second language, then its an advantage for all.

acquisition: the life histories and experiences in everyday life and the dynamics of using language in context. Voice also enhances the development of positive self-concept. The importance of empowering students through language, coupled with enhancing the cognitive multiplicity<sup>3</sup> of symbolic language through voice cannot be negated.

Presently with the growing national importance of the Latino population there is ample opportunity for an ‘open’<sup>4</sup> cultural identity connected to bilingualism as an acceptable venue for Spanish-speakers to express themselves and not feel apprehensive about using Spanish in public places. Steiner’s (1975) notion of cultural ‘transmutation’ can be applied to the multitude of sensory data in present day California’s multilingual culture where the Spanish language and culture play a prominent role. An example of this transmutation is the Spanish language media (i.e., telenovelas, bilingual commercials, bilingual music videos and Hollywood movies) projecting notions of culture that permeate in a context where language becomes a “seamless bilingualism” that is taken for granted by the average Spanish speaker.<sup>5</sup> In particular, according to Steiner (1998), the hermeneutic notion of “understanding of understanding” which is a historical-psychological model, part deductive, part intuitive of the operations of language itself in common everyday practice. Language transmutation is not limited to the spoken or written word, it is every conceivable medium and system of signs and only one among a multitude of graphic, acoustic, olfactory, tactile, symbolic mechanisms of communication. This perspective of language translation is a constant of organic survival. Jakobson (cited in Steiner, 1998:436) labels this “transmutation” the interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs in non-

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<sup>3</sup> By this I am adopting Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) notion of *cognitive* that describes any mental operation and structures that are involved in language, meaning, perception, conceptual systems, and reason. It may also include aspects of sensorimotor systems that contribute to abilities to conceptualize and reason and the *cognitive unconscious*, which are unconscious mental operations, concerned with conceptual systems, meaning, inference and language.

<sup>4</sup> An “open” cultural identity as used in this paper, means a freedom to express oneself in ones language of choice and not be stigmatized for using a language other than English in public.

<sup>5</sup> I am not advocating that we view technology as a tool to advance language, it is merely fact that technology facilitates access to language multiplicity.

verbal sign systems (i.e., the curved arrow on the road sign). The verbal signs in the original message or statement are modified by one of a multitude of means or combination of means (Steiner, 1998: 436-437). In California in spite of English Only policies, a proliferation of media, commercial, sociopolitical, and economic aspects of society are generating bilingual production of Latino language, culture and art at a faster pace ever imagined twenty or thirty years ago. This bilingualism includes the psychological/historical evolutionary aspects of language in a real context, a holistic Gestalt that frames a natural process of acquisition.

It is not within the scope of this paper to elaborate on the complexities of co-existence with regard to natural language acquisition and a holistic evolutionary Gestalt, but a clarification of co-existence is in order. This co-existence, which I posit as an important contextual dimension in bilingualism, takes into account a Lewinian “field” model based on a psychology that views the individual as negotiating perceived obstacles and resources to attain a goal. In the case of being a potential bilingual in a social/political world that does not value the use of two languages, the negotiating external process requires the person to exist on two levels of consciousness; the “inner” world of needs and resources and the “outer” world of resources and demands that become dialectical in nature. This interactive view, according to Wheeler (1998), necessitates that every action on the part of the individual be perceived as a reaction to a field condition and the need to take into account one's goal in relation to the value placed by society (Wheeler, 1998: 36). Consider the following example, children as they develop in bilingual communities, use both English and Spanish constantly, fluidly shifting from one language to the next when appropriate. They are the translators of the message for the parents—they translate from English to Spanish. Although at one point in their development (ironically) they may lose the fluency in their native language as a result of the pressure placed by schooling to become

fluent in English and to subtract or reduce their fluency in Spanish. Historically this was believed to be necessary in order to succeed academically and to become culturally assimilated into the mainstream. In spite of this, these children are influenced by early language practices that are “internalized” in the development of cognition in two languages. This “internalization” is a semiotic cultural constant that continues to shape the lived experience and becomes culturally transmuted as the context changes. Unquestionable in the process are the personal advantages of cultural enrichment and heightened self-esteem.

Language is social in nature, as seen in classic studies of children learning two languages simultaneously (Imedadze, 1978; Leopold, 1978). The external social world of today’s Spanish-speaking child in California does indeed provide the contextual social elements to promote bilingualism. Furthermore, children during the early developmental stages of verbal fluency, when raised by Spanish speaking parents or caregivers (as in preschool environments, First Five<sup>6</sup>, etc.), and in contexts that consistently induce culturally different rearing patterns, internalize the non-verbal aspects of environment, (i.e., smells, foods, body language, etc.) which promote a basic cultural understanding that is distinct than mainstream culture.

A corollary example of what I am proposing can be made with a study conducted by Steedman (1985), who examines speech play in children across cultures. She found that children who are in the process of becoming bilingual may well combine both language [understandings] in their speech play and supports the notion that there are cognitive advantages of bilingualism. The child in her study, with great specificity, continually provided evidence that the more a child knows about one language, the more she can transfer that knowledge to acquire and understanding a new one. This is in fact what bilingual children in California have been doing

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<sup>6</sup> Personal interview with Yolanda Garcia Director of Center for Professional Development and First Five Wested and based on findings in *Neurons to Neighborhoods*, National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council 2000.

for more than a hundred years in a Spanish language, and an English Only context. Amorite the child in Steedman's study found means of manipulating and transforming the meanings that two linguistic systems presented. (Steedman, 1985:157). If this is considered in a context where being bilingual is valued, this process of transformative thinking can continue throughout life and serve to acquire higher order cognitive skills.

California, from a multilingual perspective is perhaps a very distinct context in comparison to the rest of the United States not only historically, but also politically and economically. Bilingualism develops naturally as a result of everyday interactions. The new freedom of expression to choose the use of two languages, where language shifting is an acceptable mode of expression among Latino youth, frames a dynamic language phenomenon. The multiple dimensions and intricacies of culture coupled with language and the internal and external forces from holistic aspects of cognition evolve as a result of development in two languages. In this sense, central to the notion of 'internalization' cognition is not a process that copies the external reality at one internal level that already exists, instead it is a process whose nexus develops first at an internal level of consciousness (or unconsciousness)—then the external reality by nature, becomes social-transactional. In bilingualism, this is done via two filters. This vacillation between the internal cognition and external stimuli becomes the basic functional mechanisms in the dominance of external semiotic forms; and the internal level of consciousness, attributed to its origins, is by nature quasi-social (Wertsch, 1988:83).

Intricately linked to the complexities of cognitive processes influenced by the external world and bilingualism, the social status of vernacular language plays a significant role. As John Attinasi states, "The vitality of vernacular language has increased as a result of institutional support from the electronic media and through the eloquent verbal language of orators who speak

compellingly without compromising dialect features” (1997:289). One bilingual example of these orators was Cesar Chavez who through the power of vernacular language mobilized a movement in the struggle for justice for Farm workers. He placed great importance to the newspaper *El Malcriado*, the official voice of the Union. *El Malcriado* was published for over twenty years in both Spanish and English. The Spanish language version contained folkloric, historical symbols and metaphors of the Mexican community that helped to rally migrant workers to the movement. In fact, even the name of the newspaper, *El Macriado* has symbolism dealing with vernacular language and voice since it means a child who talks back or has not been reared “properly”.

## **Conclusion**

Historically as well as in present day California, in spite of obstacles imposed from language policy and inferior education, Spanish-speakers are shaping a reality based on transactional notions of linguistic culture. The dimensions of external stimuli shaping cognition contribute to the cognitive flexibility of a natural bilingualism, in modern culture. This is occurring at an astounding pace. “Language as a psychological tool with a function, such as memory, causes a fundamental transformation of the very function that it alters” (Wertsch: 95). Furthermore, as Steiner declares, “Language is embedded in its cumulative past and in a manifold present, it is physiological, temporal and replete with social modifiers. These modifiers persuade and enlist, consciously or not, instruments attached to word and sentence not necessarily linguistic. The purely semantic leads into semiotic, into the surrounding phenomenology of making and communicating sense” (Steiner, 2001:155). To reiterate, global culture, and the use of technology, is changing the very notion of language interaction (both

written and spoken) with popular culture, (i.e., music videos, television, the internet and capital consumption). The Spanish-speaking market is one strong example of a thriving enterprise; this very fact is changing everyday life.

Throughout history Americanization as well as English Only proponents seldom discuss the pedagogical structures that will enable English as Second Language students to access other bodies of knowledge separate from the skeleton of language. Instead proponents such as Imhoff (1990) on behalf of a nonprofit U.S. English organization propose the use of English in the political, economic, and intellectual life of the nation to operate within the American political mainstream, and reject all manifestations of cultural or linguistic chauvinism such as what they contend is occurring by the proponents of Bilingual Education (Imhoff 1990:48). Bilingual education however, was never about eliminating English. The initial goals and objectives were to facilitate the acquisition of bilingualism in order to learn to succeed in two languages. A more humanistic approach for education of linguistic minority (soon to be a majority) students as proposed by Macedo (1997), is to “provide a meaningful education situated in a theory of cultural production and viewed as an integral part of the way in which people produce, transform and reproduce meaning—it must be seen as a medium that constitutes and affirms the historical and existential moments of lived culture” (Macedo, 1997:274).

To end, as I have argued, bilingualism is a natural phenomenon, which is evolving rapidly within a unique context of cultural pluralism in the State of California. This rapid cultural transmutation requires the institutions of schooling to revolutionize restrictive language policies. In spite of the advances made since the Civil Rights in the 60s by the Spanish-speaking communities and programs for students that speak another language other than English, there is a constant regression to resort to “sink or swim” approaches for instruction. Lets not

forget that the Spanish language is the most spoken language in the whole American continent. Cultural constants linked to Spanish give voice to a linguistic system rich in literary traditions. Transmuted linguistic constants, in the U.S. Latino communities, many from oral traditions, are continually generated from manifold embedded aspects, which span more than five hundred years. Presently, in addition to the rich historical and linguistic roots of Mexican culture in the U.S. we have many cultural contributions from a massive population of Central Americans and representative groups from all the Spanish speaking countries of Latin America. From a political and economic stance, a better-educated bilingual co-existing in a “field” which requires negotiation of obstacles and resources globally, Spanish/English bilingualism is a part of a common future of understanding and splendor in the U.S. and the continent of the Americas.

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