

## **Spanish-English or English-Spanish in California: The Dialectics of Language in a Sociocultural Historical Context**

Sara Soledad Garcia, Associate Professor, Department of Education, Santa Clara University

### **Abstract**

This is an analysis of California history of the shifting of language policies from Spanish to English, as an Official Language. The focus is English as an imposed language that from the beginning of schooling policies stifle a process of language acquisition for the majority of Spanish speakers. In 1849 the California Constitution stipulated that all laws, regulations, and provisions be published in English and Spanish. Soon after in 1855 the use of Spanish for institutional purposes was prohibited by law. By 1879 provisions for native language use were abolished. California became the first English Only State in the union.

In spite of historical policies that impose English as an Official Language, which limits the use of other languages in institutional settings, the acquisition of native origin languages, in a dialectical fashion, meld into the fabric of culture and expression. Acquisition as a natural process of cognition is posited as the basis for English-Spanish bilingualism that continues to thrive in California.

### **Introduction**

In present day California schooling and bilingualism as opposing mechanisms, can be discerned as social political constructs that has existed since the formal institutions of schooling in English were implemented in California (1849-50). In the particular case of the Spanish language it is primarily due to the historical antecedents of relegating the language and culture to second-class citizen status historically and in the schooling process. Spanish/English bilingualism persists and grows in spite of the lack of institutional support and the deliberate attempt politically to set up Americanization and English Only policies for schooling. . 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 order to consider the events that have created the debate over language and the persistence of Spanish and other languages in the region that is now California, it is necessary to provide a cursory view of historical events that have propagated conflict over language use and the aggressive implementation of English as an official language. The shifting of official language from Spanish to English in California is an historic dialectic, which has served to repress the use of native language for generations of Spanish speakers.

### **The Roots of Spanish Language Culture in Early California**

English Only policies are not new to the State of California nor are the issues of immigration

recent. California in fact could be considered, just as the rest of the United States, an immigrant State. The exploration and colonization of California by the Spanish military, Franciscan missionaries and Jesuit priests follows a historical pattern that commenced before the sixteenth century. Most Spanish speaking Mexican Americans trace their roots to 1519, when the Hernan Cortez landed in Mexico and thus a unique tradition of mestizaje was initiated. Moreover, the majority of Latino and Mexican Americans trace their ancestry back much further than the Spanish Conquest. Latino identity is based upon not only mestizaje, but also pre-Columbian roots in the Americas, indigenous roots among Indian peoples who called the land home well before 1492. In modern day perspectives the meaningful differences that may distinguish a people—such as language, culture, religion, and the like—appear to be ignored or it may be that because in California history books adopted for schooling the history before the English language was imposed as the language of public schooling is not at all represented. For generations of Latinos growing up in California schools and possessing the capacity for being bilingual, biliterate it is indeed a complex cognitive process that requires a life long transition to overcome constant identity conflicts.<sup>1</sup> “In reality, Latinos have diverse racial and ethnic origins and are attuned to questions of class and wealth, not merely race or ethnicity” (Ruiz Cameron 1997:273).

It is imperative to recognize that the immigration model fails to account for the Latino condition in the U.S. As Ruiz-Cameron states,

The immigration model that evolved in the Southwestern United States is unlike the history of the Europeans who came “by invitation only” to the U.S. Many present-day Latinos are not the descendants of immigrants, at least as we commonly use the term; rather, they are the children of ancestors who had settled the New World centuries before Anglos first arrived in the Southwest. Whereas the ancestors of most European Americans voluntarily came to the United States, the ancestors of Latino Americans in the old California, New Mexico, and Texas territories for instance, involuntarily had the United States come to them through the forced annexation of their homelands. Even Latinos whose ancestors immigrated here after the Texas Rebellion of 1836 or the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848, which ended the Mexican-American War by transferring one-half of all Mexican homeland to the U.S., came not from Europe but from the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico or South America. (Ruiz-Cameron 1997: 274).

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard Rodriguez, 1982. *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. David R. Godine Publisher. Boston, Mass.

### **Spanish as the Official Language in California**

Almost seventy years (1697) after the Jesuits establish the first of eighteen missions in Baja California, the Spanish language was declared the Official Language. According to Kevin Starr, one of California's contemporary historians, in 1768 long after the Jesuits were expelled from California, "Three Spaniards ... began the planning of an enterprise that had long eluded the colonial empire: the settlement of Upper California." (Starr, 2007:12). Thus, the history of the Spanish Language as an Official language starts in San Blas Nayarit, the Gulf of Baja California in 1768 by General Jose de Galves. This important historical event is followed by the occupation of the ports of San Diego and Monterrey and the erecting of the missions (1769) and the presidio in various parts of Alta California. The Spanish language would exist as the Official language until the middle of the XIX century.

When considering language constructs that often elude historical fact we diminish the importance of the concepts that make language dynamic, language creation and invention in context. In early California history there is much documented evidence (Perissinotto and Vazquez, 1998; Starr, 2007; Rosenus,1999), for the "semantic field that is history in its social, psychological, and material components." (Steiner, 2001:262). Perissinotto and Vazquez recount;

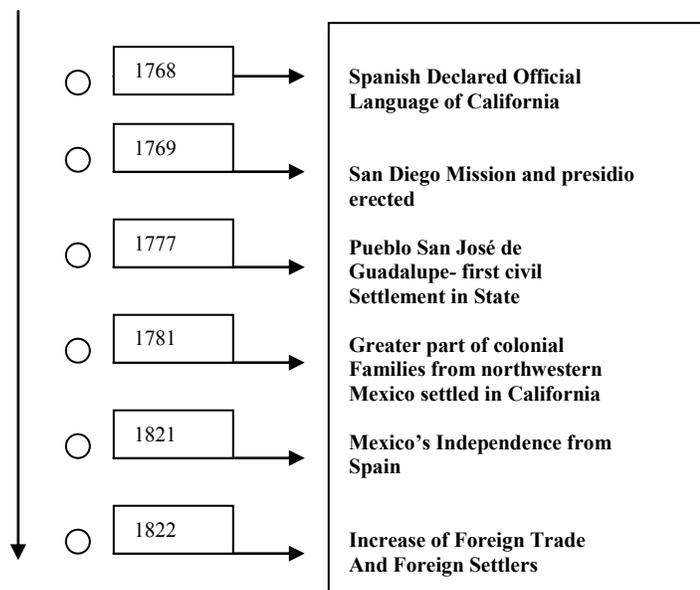
It is well documented that the colonizers of early California were a multilingual group. In addition to Mexican colonizers approximately 400 men were from other lands. In fact, one of the most important colonizers was Fray Junipero Serra who spoke *malloquin* a dialect of *Catalan*. Along the coast of California and its adjacent territories, Castellano, Catalan and a variant of the same, mallorquin were heard. In addition, there were many indigenous languages spoken. It is estimated that 150,000 indigenous people were in California at the time and they used 22 distinct linguistic systems that comprised 138 languages. (my translation) (Perissinotto and Vazquez, 1998:14)

Of special note is that although Spanish was the official language and the first civil settlement in Alta California was founded in 1777 in the Pueblo de San Jose de Guadalupe commencing the written language policies and laws to govern California, its shores were already receiving waves of activity in foreign trade. Starr posits that: "Despite the pastoral simplicity of the society and its frequent harshness,

the leading families of Mexican California lived lives of comfort and increasing civility, especially after a developing trade with New England, Latin America, and the Far East began to bring to California a growing number of domestic luxuries” (Starr, 2007:51).

A gradual spiral of change in culture, language and power continued in early California’s evolving society. Several historians and writers document the continual waves of different groups settling in California during the Mexican period (Northrop, 1976;Sanchez, 1993;Rosenus, 1999;Beebe and Senkewicz, 2001;Starr, 2007). There is no doubt that the colonial families that settled in California arrived from northwest Mexico between 1769 and 1781. San Diego was the first region where they settled. According to Northrop, “About 600 and 700 men women and children journeyed to California during this period. By far the greater part of the increase of population among the settlers was natural. The fecundity of the settlers allowed the population to grow at a goodly rate. From not quite a1000 souls in the census of 1790, the population had increased to nearly 3000 by 1820, on the eve of Mexico’s (and California’s) separation from Spain, ending the Colonial era.” (Northrop, 1976: introduction). Figure 1A, provides a cursory view of the major events that occurred in early California for a period of approximately fifty years.

**Figure 1A. Early California Historical Events: the Spanish Colonial Period**



After 1822 when Mexico was no longer govern by Spain, California (Alta and Baja) became Mexican territories. Situated too far from Mexico City access to the outside world came in the form of foreign trade and foreign settlers. These activities rapidly changed the fabric of history for this region. People from other parts of Mexico also came to settle in California in greater numbers. Even before the American Conquest of the territory there were several with non-Spanish surnames in California, of whom a large number were married to Spanish-surnamed women. There is much evidence of filtration of Britons, Americans (for the East coast) French, German and others (Northrop, 1976: introduction).

Language use was shifting very rapidly. The multiple indigenous languages were disappearing just like the many groups of indigenous cultures. Starr states that for “twenty five generations, Native Americans had lived harmoniously in their own cherished places under the terms of the cultures they had evolved. The Native American population dropped precipitously –was more likely halved, in fact—by the end of the Spanish-Mexican era”(Starr, 2007:41). At this point, it is certain that Spanish was the first European language spoken in the New World, which included North America and California. “The establishment of cities fundamentally based on policies and laws begun a centuries-long tradition in which Spanish remained the principal language, even after the territory had become annexed to the U.S.” (Ruiz Cameron, 1996:274).

What some educators refer to today as a mosaic of diverse cultures from around the world represented in the communities in California evolved gradually over the span of approximately 200 years with regard to the European cultures. Before that it was a mosaic of indigenous cultures and after the colonizing of these, many of their cultural elements blended with Mexican culture but mostly from the blending of cultures in Mexico in the characteristics of those that immigrated north. The historical events were contextualized in a milieu of rapid change.

The Spanish Colonial period imposed a European language, which evolved in multiplicity, as California became “mexicanized”. According to linguists, “the study of historical documents leads to the conclusion that the language of California was decidedly “mexicanized”, given that most settlers came

from New Spain, and also that about that time it was already linguistically different than other Spanish language regions. The archeological excavations around the presidios and missions point to a decidedly hybrid ethnography that was markedly Mexican.” (my translation) (Perissinotto and Vazquez, 1998:15).

Leading into the Mexican period in history the events lead to others that can be considered collateral episodes. Multiple agents change the fabric of multicultural, multilingual California in the evolving societies through constant and aggressive change. Although we can represent the actual historical events in a linear fashion, the constant change was not at all linear but complex, at times even appear chaotic. Such is the case with regard to Official Language and the transitions from Spanish to English. A concrete example of this is the documentation of women’s voices compiled in a recent volume *Testimonios Early California through the Eyes of Women, 1815-1848*. The researchers of this volume document by translating letters from Spanish to English, Mexican women’s perceptions of their changing society. A predominate theme in these testimonies is the apparent constant flux, thus continual integration of added conditions and historical events that alter the context for events to come. Confirming this abrupt change Starr asserts that,

In the brief span of Mexican California by contrast from 1822 to its annexation by the United States in 1846 the canvas is crowded with important events. The central narrative of Mexican California revolves around the effort to create a civil society through secularization of the mission, foreign trade, and land grants. Even as Mexican California tried to do this, however, a fusion of forces, international commerce, a growing population of non-Mexican residents, the collapse of local politics, the threatening presence of foreign posers in the Pacific, and more subtly, the emergence of Enlightenment ideas in a generation of California-born Mexican leaders, was coalescing to make the desired civil society less and less feasible in purely Mexican-Californian terms (Starr, 2007:45).

Through this vortex of rapid change, the various generations of Spanish language Mexican people testify concerning their changing world in written documents. In the above-mentioned *Testimonios*, women wrote letters attesting to the turmoil in their lives. In *Testimonios*, “Teresa de la Guerra disputed the American claim of having brought progress and civilization to the west coast of the continent, arguing forcefully that Mexican California has already been civilized by

the time the foreigners arrived; those who thought that the Californios had “lived in the woods” were arrogant and mistaken” (Beebe and Senkewicz, 2006:xxxv).

During this period there were also a number of intermarriages between early Anglo business traders and Mexican women from well-established families such as , Rosalinda Vallejo with Jacob Leese, Adela Vallejo with Levi Cornell Frisbee and Teresa de La Guerra with William Hartnell (Pitt,1966;Beebe and Senkewicz,2001). Historians document the birth of the first California child born to American parents, Thomas Oliver Larkin Jr. born on April 13, 1834 before the war with Mexico. “Indeed Rachel Larkin became the first American Woman to live in California. She was a widow whom Thomas Oliver Larkin<sup>2</sup> of Massachusetts met and married on board ship en route to California”(Starr, 2007:59).

Throughout the second half of this period there is much evidence that California was a multilingual, multicultural society. By the time the State was annexed by the United States there was considerable influence from other cultures and languages beside the Spanish language and culture. It is for certain though that even today we see the continual influence of Spanish language heritage. The language of the Spanish settlers and founders of the major California cities though was relegated to second class with the decline of power of the Californios. The language and culture were not valued and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was expected that all citizens speak English: the language of the new colonizer. The shifting of official language was aggressive.

### **Language Transition, Community Resistance and Agency**

Despite the aggressive takeover of California society by English colonizers there was continual agency and resistance to continue the language and customs of Spanish culture. The root metaphor upon examination for interpreting human action is the historical events that serve as the context for language transmutation. There were a myriad of protests through the publications of newspapers in the Spanish

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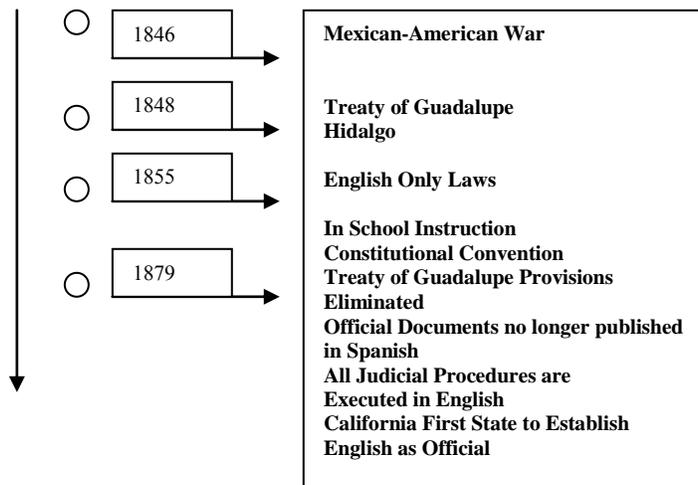
<sup>2</sup> Tomas O. Larkin was the first American consul in Monterrey California when the war with Mexico broke out. Larkin played a prominent role in the transition of Mexican California to annexation by the U.S.

language. From the beginning there were also class distinctions in the population and this continued into the U.S. period. The society was divided between the literate and non-literate with the former being the largest group. Nonetheless, several newspapers served the Spanish speaking populace. Leonard Pitt recounts that “La Union succeeded La Voz de Mejico in San Francisco in 1873; La Cronica in 1972 took over in Los Angeles the role vacated by El Clamor Publico” (Pitt, 1966:267).

Of special note but not recognize until recently, there emerged writers that were bilingual in Spanish and English. One such writer was Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton (a native Californian who married and Anglo English speaking military man). Ruiz de Burton wrote in Spanish and English since 1850 and later published an important book in English, *The Squatter and the Don: A Descriptive Narrative of Contemporary Occurrences in California* (1885). This was the first narrative in English from the perspective of the conquered Mexican people. The lack of acknowledgement that there were talented individuals literate in two languages was common in spite of the fact that the Mexicans were promised the all rights of citizenship after the war with Mexico and the United States; this was not evident in the society’s recognition of talented individuals who spoke and wrote in two languages.

Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821 and the war with the United States in 1846-48 violently shook the relative social and linguistic stability of California with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed on February 2, 1848. Mexico ceded 55% of its national territory to the United States and received a compensation of 15 million dollars. In article IX of this Treaty, states that the Mexicans that did not conserve the character of the citizens will be incorporated in the Union of the United States. In the meantime they will be sustained and protected in full liberty, of their properties, and of the civil rights that they presently have according to Mexican laws. In addition with concern to the linguistic rights of Mexican, among other dimensions mentioned is Article XI (miscellaneous provisions, section 21) of the California Constitution of 1849: All laws, decrees, regulations, and provisions, which from their nature require publication, shall be published in English and Spanish. (my translation) (Perissinotto and Vazquez, 1998:15-17). These written declarations however, were never kept. Figure 1B illustrates the major events leading up to the enactment of English as the official language in California.

**Figure 1B: Transition from Spanish to English**



Less than a decade after the Mexican American war there was continual controversy regarding the language of schooling. The linguistic issue debates were between the two largest religions in California the Protestants and the Catholics. Only communities like Santa Barbara were able to justify the use of Spanish for schooling over English. This was because in 1855, out of 1,200 inhabitants three fifths spoke only Spanish. The same year, 1855, the state Bureau of Public Instruction stipulated that all schools must teach strictly in English. This was propelled by “the linguistic purism that went hand in hand with the nativist sentiments expressed in that year’s legislature, including the suspension of publications of state laws in Spanish” (Pitt, 1966:226).

### **The First English American Teacher in California**

Of important historical note is that in California English schooling was official at the on-set of the war and before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848). Olive Mann Isbel is on record as being the first American schoolteacher in California. Ms. Isbel and her husband Dr. Isbel arrived in the influx of a considerable number of emigrants via the overland route in 1846. In 1955, an autobiographical sketch was published, many years after her death. The following are Olive Mann’s Isbel’s very words;

My first teaching in California was commenced in the month of December 1846 in a room about 15 feet square, with neither light nor heat, other than that which came through a hole in the tile roof. The room was in the Santa Clara Mission, near San Jose. There most of the families that crossed the plains that year were housed by Colonel John C. Fremont. I taught the children of my fellow emigrants under great difficulties. We had only such books as we chanced to bring with us across the plains, and as superfluous baggage was not to be thought of, our stock of books was limited. I had about 20 scholars. When our soldiers were disbanded, some five or six families moved to Monterey, California, where the first American consul, Thomas O. Larkin, engaged me to teach a three months' term. They specially fitted up a room for me over the jail. I had 56 names enrolled, at \$6 each for the term. Part of the scholars were Spanish and the other part the children of emigrants. Those were the first American schools in California. I came to California first in 1846, and started on my return to Ohio May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1850, In 1857 I went to Texas to live, but left there in 1863. I went to Santa Barbara on Dec. 28<sup>th</sup>, 1864. I lived in Ojai two years and came to Santa Paula in March 1872, where I have resided ever since. I am a Buckeye, born in Ashtabula, Ashtabula County, Ohio. I have been a widow since January 1886. My only support is a Mexican pension of 8\$ a month. Olive Mann Isabel, March 17, 1893. (Ventura County Historical Society, 1955:2)

In 1846, it was the English-speaking students who were referred to as the “emigrants”. The Spanish-speaking children were the native children. Olive Mann Isabel also states that she herself was an emigrant. The interesting fact that she was paid a pension from the Mexican government is rather strange given that by the time of her death, as some records state was in 1899, California has been annexed for fifty five years and everything was govern by the U.S. Why a pension from the Mexican government? This an other strange practices where elements of the melding of two distinct cultures, two distinct languages and events in history that created a steady and strong dominion for a English language society that to the present day cannot tolerate the use of any other language but English as the language for schooling and law. During the Californios period the citizens and the governance of the State of California were open and tolerant to the new cultures and influences in their daily lives. They appeared to be too trusting however, since the future brought only turmoil, marginalization and generations of discriminatory practices. In general, “Mexican Americans in the last half of the nineteenth century tried to escape the anti-

Mexican attitudes of public school authorities by attending Catholic schools or nonsectarian private schools. In California, some members of the Mexican community were interested in providing a bilingual education for their children.”(Spring, 1994:179). For generations to come the Americanization process in schooling for Mexican children was to eliminate the use of their native language. For the most part, educators felt that speaking and learning in English was an essential element for assimilation into American mainstream culture.

### **The Persistence of English Spanish Bilingualism**

In present day California the Spanish language is central to identity for native Spanish speakers. A fundamental aspect of ethnicity for generations of Mexicans in California is the importance of a primary language. Ethnicity serves as both the sense and the expression of collective, intergenerational cultural continuity. The Spanish language is the vehicle by which meaning is conveyed and intimately connected to culture. Spanish-speaking bilinguals associate the use of Spanish with family and friendship and values of intimacy regardless of their level of fluency in either language. In fact, there is constant flux in the way that primary language is retained and acquired and how the second language is developed. This is because acquisition is a natural process and the context of language use, of whatever language, is an important condition for the development of language. One thing is sure though, bilingual skills are continued regardless of how English is “privileged” in formal settings. Yet, Spanish-speaking ability is the historic basis upon which Anglo society discriminates in schooling and other civic practices. Prejudice against the language is recognized as a cause of the low esteem with which Spanish is often regarded. Indeed, long before English-only became a rule in the U.S. workplace, Latino children, especially children of Mexican descent, were routinely humiliated, disciplined, or beaten for speaking Spanish in school (San Miguel, 1985;Gonzales, 1990; Menchaca, 1995)

To suppress the speaking of Spanish is to suppress an essential component of identity for millions of Latino citizens in present day California. Indeed, with the passage of English-Only legislation in the State many generations of Spanish speakers are reminded that, as descendants of the native peoples of the

New World, “Latinos have lost their language twice. First, they lost their language rights when Spain conquered the Americas and substituted Spanish for the Indian languages and second, when the U.S. conquered the Southwest and substituted English for Spanish. This is a process that continues to the present day.” (Ruiz, Cameron, 1996:279-280).

## **Conclusion**

California history is dynamic and complex. At the turn of the century the English language Anglo Saxon society has firmly established a social order that did not include the language or culture of the people that had founded the major cities and systems of government in the State. In dialectic fashion though the remnants of a bygone past are still evident and present day California is replete with a constant dynamic growth of Spanish speaking communities in spite of adverse attempts to control and even stop the regeneration and reproduction. One such attempt is the passage of Proposition 227. The aim of Proposition 227 is to teach children English as rapidly and as effectively as possible. Throughout the 20th century there is much litigation and policies concerning language for purposes of schooling in California. It is not within the scope of this paper to conduct an analysis of the distinct waves of law and policy for English as an Official language and the dialectics of Bilingual Education legislation. The complexities of these policies for schooling of bilingual children are the theme of another study.

The principle theme of the present paper is the language and cultural transition of Spanish California to English Only. However, we can end by reviving the notion of *Fantasy Heritage* first proposed by Carey McWilliams (1948), which is a mythical and romanticized view of the sociocultural history of the Spanish speaking people of the Southwest. The fantasy heritage, practiced since the mid 1800s, exists today and is epitomized by the Spanish Days Fiesta held in August in Santa Barbara California, and similar events throughout the Southwest. The fiesta is sublimated pastiche of stereotypes: Spanish costumes, flamenco, castanets and horse-riding *caballeros* mostly impersonated by Anglo Americans. This fantasy heritage serves to subordinate the Spanish-speaking people of California. A technique used to effect his subordination has been to drive a wedge between the native-born and the

foreign-born and to cultivate the former at the expense of the latter. To a great extent elements of the native-born have encouraged this strategy by seeking to differentiate themselves from the immigrants. By emphasizing the Spanish part of the tradition and consciously repudiating the Mexican-Indian side, it has been possible to rob the Spanish-speaking community, as an ethnic group, of the legitimate representation of their heritage. The cultures of the Southwest, before the Anglo American settlements were a trinity, a whole consisting of three intricately interwoven, interpenetrated, thoroughly fused elements; Native American, Spanish and Mexican (Garcia, 1997:118-119).

Recently, with the xenophobia created with the border of Mexico this differentiation between native born and new immigrants is exacerbated. We return, in dialectic fashion, to the original themes of this paper, the shifting of power, colonial endeavors and either loss of language or retention of a new form of expression and language transmutation. Throughout three centuries what we can see is what Wertsch (1991) refers to as the organization of mediated means such as social language as being “privileging” in contrast to dominion which is closely tied in to social structure and psychological processes. “Privileging assumes a more dynamic process that in sociocultural settings does not mechanistically or unilaterally determine mediated action; instead participants define the situation in new, unexpected or creative ways. This includes a degree of dynamic negotiation in which patterns of privileging are accessible to conscious reflection and change.” (Wertsch, 1991:124). The mediated action and agency in language use and generation of symbolic forms in everyday life of millions of Spanish-speakers in California uses a sort of “privilege” that continues in spiral fashion to generate historical language reproduction in two or more languages but for certain strongly in English and Spanish.

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