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Communication

Linguistic Profiling and the Future of Spanish in the United States: A Sociolinguistic Analysis

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Abstract: In this essay, I would like to explore the intersection of linguistic profiling, sociopolitical dynamics, and the future of Spanish in the United States, to emphasize the impact of contemporary immigration policies on language use among Hispanic communities. Specifically, I aim to examine how anti-immigrant rhetoric, intensified under the 2025 Trump administration's policies, reinforces linguistic discrimination and creates a climate of fear for Spanish speakers and the use of their language in public. By analyzing the historical presence of Spanish in the U.S. and the challenges posed by linguistic profiling, I would like to highlight the erosion of linguistic rights and the broader consequences for social inequality. I will also consider the roles of schools and churches as spaces for language preservation and cultural expression, which are increasingly threatened by immigration enforcement measures. In advocating for sociolinguistic justice, this essay calls for policies that recognize and protect the linguistic rights of Spanish speakers, promoting multilingualism as a strength rather than a threat.

Keywords: linguistic profiling; Spanish in the U.S.; immigration policies; sociolinguistics; language discrimination; Raciolinguistics; linguistic rights; multilingualism; anti-immigrant sentiment; cultural identity

1. Introduction: The Sociolinguistic Relevance of Spanish in the U.S.

The 2025 election of Donald Trump brought a renewed wave of anti-immigrant sentiment, culminating in mass deportation policies that have instilled fear among immigrant communities. Hispanic immigrants, in particular, face high level of anxiety due to aggressive ICE raids and the widespread perception that speaking Spanish in public may mark them as "undocumented". This paper explores how linguistic profiling and discrimination contribute to the fear of using Spanish in public spaces, ultimately violating sociolinguistic rights and exacerbating social inequalities.

Spanish has been spoken in parts of the United States for centuries, long before English became the majority language. Spanish was the first European language spoken north of the *Rio Grande*, brought by Ponce de León in 1513 (Moreno-Fernández, 2019, p. 130), and is now the second-most spoken language in the United States, with a vast network of speakers across different generations and regions (Escobar & Potowski, 2015; Fuller, 2013; Jenkins, 2018; Lipski, 2008). However, recent immigration policies, particularly those focused on deportation and enforcement, introduce new challenges that extend beyond legal and social issues to linguistic ones, including linguistic profiling and language suppression. These concerns have intensified under the renewed immigration policies of the Trump administration in 2025, presenting scenarios like the one reported by Walker (2025) in a *Truthout* article, in which a Puerto Rican family was detained and taken into custody because they were overheard speaking Spanish and subsequently profiled as possibly undocumented immigrants. Such cases further shape the linguistic realities of Spanish-speaking communities in the U.S.

Spanish in the U.S. —like any case of linguistic contact— is deeply intertwined with historical migration patterns, socio-political movements, and the continual interaction between different speech communities. This contact has given rise to various regional dialects, whose convergence has led to dialect leveling and *koineization* (Moreno-Fernández, 2019), where speakers adopt more neutral

forms to facilitate communication, in a process of linguistic accommodation (Giles, 2016). Hence, the Spanish spoken in the United States exhibits particular linguistic features.

Following Otheguy (2022, p. 282), these characteristics can be categorized into two types: a) phonological or of arbitrary morphosyntax, and b) lexical and morphosyntactic. For example, phonological variations include the aspiration or deletion of /s/, while morphological features deal with the use of the clitic "lo". Lexical and morphosyntactic phenomena include the incorporation of English loanwords (e.g., *troca* for "truck"), calques such as *te llamo pa' atrás* (literal translation of "I'll call you back"), and variations in the use of personal pronouns like *tuteo* and *voseo*. According to the author, "[t]he speech of U.S. Latinos reflects conceptualizations unique to U.S. society, which are often different from those found outside the U.S. for equivalent referential situations" (Otheguy, 2022, p. 290); suggesting that Spanish in the U.S. is not merely a transplanted variety but has evolved to reflect unique sociocultural contexts within the country.

Historically, in the western U.S., Mexican Spanish has long been established. After the Texas War of Independence (1836) and the Mexican-American War (1848), "many Spanish-speaking Mexicans changed countries without ever moving an inch; as the popular saying has it, 'they didn't cross the border; the border crossed them'" (Lipski, 2008, p. 2). Furthermore, the Mexican Revolution of the early twentieth century brought thousands of additional Spanish speakers to the U.S., many of whom settled beyond the border regions.

On the East Coast, Puerto Ricans became a significant Spanish-speaking population, especially after World War II, which was a pivotal moment for globalization and saw an increase in global migration patterns (Eriksen, 2014, 2016; Vertovec, 2022). Many Puerto Ricans migrated to U.S. mainland urban industrial centers in search of economic opportunities, as exemplified by the Puerto Rican diaspora in Philadelphia (Vázquez-Hernández, 2005; Vitiello, 2022; Whalen, 2001) — though some Puerto Ricans were already in the city before this migration wave (Vázquez-Hernández, 2017). Similarly, Cuban communities were present in the U.S. before the Spanish-American War of 1898, but the largest influx occurred after the Cuban Revolution of 1959, when many fled political agitations.

The 1980s saw yet another wave of Spanish-speaking immigrants (Lipski, 2008, p. 3), as political instability in Central and South America prompted hundreds of thousands to migrate to the U.S., forming stable and lasting communities. This is the case with the Colombian diaspora in Philadelphia, which was the second-largest Spanish-speaking community in the city after Puerto Ricans in the 90s (Garbow, 2020), and whose traces are still visible in the city's linguistic landscape (Guarín, 2024); and Mexicans who "made up 30 percent of all immigrants in the United States" (Vitiello, 2022, p. 187) and whose presence resulted in a "semiotic transformation" of South Philadelphia (Niedt, 2020). These patterns of mobility show the enduring and dynamic presence of Spanish in the U.S. and its deep relation to historical and geopolitical shifts. As Lipski (2008, p. 5) notes, "[t]he staying power of Spanish in a given U.S. community is dependent on political and economic events outside the borders of the United States, as well as on changing currents of thought and demographic trends within the country."

The presence of Spanish in the U.S. is not merely the result of recent immigration but is deeply embedded in the country's history and sociopolitical landscape. From early Spanish settlements to contemporary diasporic communities, Spanish has remained a vital linguistic force, adapting to new contexts and generating new *koinés* and varieties (Lynch, 2022; Otheguy & Zentella, 2012; Potowski & Torres, 2023). While migration patterns and geopolitical shifts have influenced its distribution, Spanish is not solely an immigrant language, it is a fundamental component of the country's multilingual identity. However, despite its historical permanence and cultural significance, Spanish continues to be racialized and politicized in public discourse, often associated with undocumented immigration and perceived as a foreign presence, as a threat for "the supremacy of English and the national culture" (Zentella, 2014, p. 623), and as a scapegoat or common enemy for the dominant society. As Baran (2017, p. 92) notes, Spanish is frequently linked to the stereotype of the "illegal alien," reinforcing linguistic discrimination and exclusion. These perceptions, along with

contemporary immigration enforcement measures implemented by the Trump administration in 2025, raise pressing concerns about linguistic profiling and the suppression of Spanish in public spaces. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to addressing the challenges faced by Spanish speakers in the U.S. today.

Linguistic Profiling and the Fear of Speaking Spanish in Public

Despite its relevance, importance and the deep roots that this language has in the United States, Spanish –just like any other “minority language”– has often been stigmatized, with policies and societal attitudes pressuring speakers toward English monolingualism. As Zentella (2014) notes, “Linguistic prejudices based on ethnicity, race, and class are part of the baggage that immigrants bring with them to the United States” (p. 620). This historical marginalization of Spanish speakers has laid the foundation for contemporary linguistic profiling as a form of linguistic discrimination.

Linguistic profiling refers to discrimination based on speech patterns, accents, or language choice. Following Divchin (2020), linguistic discrimination focus “on the central role that language plays in the enduring relevance of race/racism, institutional/ interpersonal discrimination in the lives of people of colour, ethnic minorities, international students and Indigenous people, who experience linguistic disparity as an everyday lived reality” (p. 805). Historically, Spanish speakers in the U.S. have been subject to linguistic stigmatization, particularly in the Southwest in the 20th century, where they were discouraged from using Spanish in public and were labeled as “uneducated” (Grande, 2024; Lippi-Green, 2012). While attitudes toward bilingualism have shifted, contemporary fears tied to immigration policies and mass deportation efforts reinforce linguistic insecurity. In this climate, speaking Spanish in public may not just invite stigma but also suspicion, making linguistic expression a potential risk rather than a right.

Drawing from what they have called “a raciolinguistic perspective”, Rosa and Flores (2017, p. 623) explain how linguistic perceptions shape racialized individuals’ experiences. Rather than being judged on their actual language abilities, racialized speakers—such as Latinos in the U.S.—are perceived through the lens of *whiteness*, which operates as both a historical and contemporary framework (p. 628). This means that the simple act of speaking Spanish in public could mark someone as an outsider or as a “threat”, fueling fears of being targeted as an undocumented immigrant.

Linguistic discrimination, as many scholars argue, does not exist in isolation but intersects with racial and ethnic biases. Rather than an issue of communicative proficiency, language becomes a proxy for racialized exclusion, reinforcing structural inequalities. For instance, research on linguistic racism (Divchin, 2020) shows that individuals who experience language-based discrimination often suffer from anxiety, social withdrawal, and even suicidal ideation. With this in mind, I would argue, the current political climate in the U.S., marked by increased deportation efforts and immigration raids, may be heightening linguistic insecurity among Latino communities, leading to self-censorship and further alienation.

Nowadays, despite longstanding critiques of deficit perspectives in sociolinguistics, these harmful views continue to shape public attitudes. As Rosa and Flores (2017, p. 629) highlight, bilingual Latinos can achieve high levels of education and navigate multilingual spaces effectively, yet their Spanish and English abilities remain stigmatized. This paradox is nothing but an example of how language discrimination is less about actual proficiency and more about the racial ideologies that determine whose speech is valued and whose is suspect. In today’s sociopolitical context, such biases are not just persistent but are likely to intensify, reinforcing exclusion and linguistic marginalization.

The combination of the current political climate and the United States’ long history of linguistic prejudice (Baran, 2017) has led to a widespread fear of speaking Spanish in public among Latino immigrants. Linguistic profiling and discrimination reinforce systemic disadvantages, affecting social mobility, mental health, and educational opportunities. As Baran (2017) states, “[t]hroughout these Latino-phobic discussions, the issue of language is frequently raised in ways that, again,

reinforce the idea that English is the American language and that immigrants are a threat when they do not speak it" (p. 72).

This perception not only stigmatizes bilingual speakers but also reinforces broader structures of exclusion. Recognizing linguistic rights as human rights is essential to combating discrimination and ensuring that all individuals, regardless of language background, can navigate public life without fear. The consequences of linguistic discrimination extend beyond individual experiences, shaping academic outcomes, limiting economic opportunities, and contributing to the psychological distress of those affected.

The targeting of Spanish speakers through anti-immigrant policies and rhetoric is not just an issue of individual prejudice but a direct challenge to sociolinguistic justice. The suppression of linguistic diversity reinforces existing power imbalances and restricts the rights of marginalized communities to fully participate in public life. If these patterns continue, they will not only expand social inequalities but also damage broader efforts toward linguistic equity and inclusion.

The Role of Schools and Churches in Language Maintenance

Increased ICE raids and deportation threats have led to a decline in school attendance among immigrant children, particularly those from Latino communities. When schools are no longer seen as safe spaces, families keep their children at home, fearing that attending could put them at risk of being targeted by law enforcement. Historically, schools and churches have been spaces where linguistic and cultural expression could flourish (Blommaert, 2013; Vitiello, 2014, 2022), but recent immigration policies have made them sites of concern, with law enforcement actions extending to educational and spiritual environments. As reported by Brian Mann in NPR news, "[t]he Trump administration says it will no longer consider churches and schools off-limits to agents tracking down and arresting migrants without legal status" ("Churches, Schools Are No Longer Off Limits to Agents Rounding up Undocumented Migrants," 2025). But what are the consequences of these actions taking place in schools and religious temples, and how can the inability to use one's language affect the Latino population?

Reyna Grande (2024) recounts her own experiences in the educational system, noting how bilingual students were neither praised for their skills nor taught the value of bilingualism: "We weren't praised for being bilingual, nor were we taught the value of bilingualism" (p. 28). In Grande's environment, speaking Spanish was often seen as an obstacle rather than an asset. This reflects a broader societal contradiction, as Baran (2022) points out: "Despite the increasing popularity of Spanish or Mandarin dual immersion programs among white, middle-class parents, immigrants speaking non-English languages continue to be constructed as a threat to traditional American ways of life" (p. 69). While bilingualism is celebrated when embraced by privileged groups, it is stigmatized when associated with immigrant communities, reinforcing linguistic inequality and cultural marginalization. This linguistic suppression –where students are mocked or rejected for using their native language– fosters a negative self-image and compromise academic success. The emotional toll of living under constant fear might result in anxiety, depression, and a lack of motivation to pursue higher education or career opportunities for Spanish heritage speakers, and kids who are currently facing this threat might start associating their language, culture and identity as "inferior."

Just as with schools, churches –long viewed as sanctuaries for community and linguistic expression–, are also being impacted by the current political landscape. Churches have served as important shelters for maintaining cultural identity and linguistic practices among newly arrived immigrants, supporting them and helping them navigate a new country and culture (see Vitiello, 2022 Ch. 1). For many Latino communities, the church has been a place to gather, pray, and communicate without fear of discrimination. However, with the increasing presence of law enforcement in public spaces, including religious institutions, these once-safe spaces are now under threat, forcing speakers to retreat from open linguistic expression.

The disruption of these safe spaces due to immigration enforcement not only disrupts linguistic practices but also impairs community cohesion. As individuals and families feel the pressure to self-

censor, the role of the church as a support system weakens, leaving individuals isolated and cut off from vital cultural connections. This mirrors the experience in schools, where bilingualism is not nurtured or respected but instead suppressed.

The broader emotional and psychological consequences of this linguistic suppression are significant. As Reyna Grande (2020) reflects, the trauma caused by educational and social institutions that shamed her into speaking only English is something she is still dealing with: "I am still dealing with the damage caused by educational and social institutions that shamed me into speaking only English" (p. 37). This self-imposed linguistic silence has long-lasting effects, including diminished self-esteem, alienation from one's cultural roots, and the erosion of identity. This psychological toll extends beyond the individual to communities, where linguistic and cultural loss further deepens feelings of marginalization. However, as Lippi-Green (2012) reminds us, the push for English-only movements is symbolic rather than practical, as language cannot be legislated out of existence.

The U.S. is a multilingual nation and attempts to enforce monolingualism not only ignore this reality but also threaten the rich linguistic diversity that defines American society. Zentella (2014) emphasizes the real-life consequences of *linguistic profiling*, which can lead to social exclusion and diminished opportunities; the suppression of Spanish in schools and churches, along with the broader societal marginalization of bilingualism, puts the value of linguistic diversity in jeopardy, erodes community cohesion, and damages the cultural fabric of the U.S., in synthesis, "the real-life consequences of linguistic profiling are no laughing matter" (Zentella, 2014, p. 621).

Advocating for Sociolinguistic Justice

As I have argued, the current socio-political situation in the United States might result in a profound linguistic crisis that threatens the fundamental human right to linguistic expression. The fear of being labeled an "illegal immigrant" based on language use highlights a dangerous reality: linguistic profiling has become a tool for exclusion, reinforcing raciolinguistic ideologies that devalue the language practices of racialized communities (Rosa & Flores, 2017).

The targeting of Spanish-speaking communities by institutions like ICE creates a hostile environment that threatens linguistic diversity and cultural identity. The fear of speaking Spanish, even in traditionally safe spaces like schools and churches, represents more than linguistic discrimination; it is an assault on human rights and social cohesion. Language is not merely a communication tool, but a profound expression of identity, history, and culture. Just as Spanish has been marginalized, so too have the languages of Indigenous and other immigrant communities (Baran, 2017). This pattern of linguistic discrimination is part of a larger system that devalues the language practices of disadvantaged groups, reinforcing systemic inequalities. Yet, language is deeply tied to identity, and reclaiming it is an act of resistance. As Troncoso (2024, p. 22) emphasizes, rather than devaluating bilingualism, we must encourage speakers to embrace and refine their heritage languages as a way of understanding who they are.

Protecting linguistic expression in schools, churches, and public life will ensure that Spanish continues to evolve as a dynamic language in the U.S. Instead of allowing fear to dictate linguistic choices, advocacy for sociolinguistic justice must center on fostering policies that value rather than suppress this linguistic and cultural diversity. As Fuller & Leeman (2020) argue, "knowing the history of Spanish and Spanish-speakers is crucial for a full understanding of US history" (p. 34). A nation that truly values diversity must recognize that its strength lies not in linguistic conformity but in its multilingual heritage. Ultimately, language rights are human rights. The preservation of Spanish in the United States is not just about maintaining a language, but about protecting the fundamental dignity of communities, recognizing the value of linguistic diversity, and challenging systemic mechanisms of exclusion.

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