Spanish and the Workplace:
How Language Affects Community Formation

Author: Ranata L. Reeder
Faculty Mentor: Beverly Davenport, Department of Anthropology, University of North Texas
Department and College Affiliation: Department of Communication Studies, North Carolina State University
Bio:

Ranata Reeder is a current undergraduate at North Carolina State University majoring in communication. Reeder’s academic interests include media message analysis, language's affect on community, and Spanish. After completing her communication degree, she hopes to pursue her doctoral degree in education in an effort to save America's youth one classroom at a time.
Abstract:
Communication is an essential part of life. Every community has a language or communication system. Through their language, people are often identified as members of a distinct culture, or community. It is the purpose of this research to evaluate the communication systems that arise between persons of varying linguistic backgrounds who are placed within a single workplace community. Custodial workers who are of Hispanic descent are the primary population under study. This research project will evaluate how language, identity, and messages aid in the process of community formation.
Introduction

¡Usted es despedido! You’re fired! According to the Equal Employment Office Commission (EEOC), lawsuits filed against employers regarding language discrimination in the workplace increased from 20 lawsuits filed in 1996 to 200 lawsuits filed in 2006. All plaintiffs in these cases claimed they encountered English-only stipulations in their workplace environment and felt discriminated against for speaking another language. The EEOC maintains that acts such as these go against Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which forbids employers to discriminate based on race, color, sex, religion, or national origin. Plaintiffs have made cases that discrimination based upon language violates this act because language, national origin, and ethnicity are interconnected processes. This study does not focus on language-based employer discrimination; however, it does indicate language as a salient issue in the workplace, one that affects community building, group identity, and discrimination among co-workers.

Language is an essential component of life. Language serves as a “symbolic code by which messages are transmitted and understood, by which information is encoded and classified, and through which events are announced and interpreted” (Witherspoon, 1992, p. 3). Every community uses a language or communication system. Through their language, people are often identified as members of a distinct culture, or community. The purpose of this research is to evaluate the communication systems that arise between persons of varying linguistic backgrounds who are placed within a single workplace community. The study will evaluate linguistic in-groups and out-groups within a workplace hierarchy. Employees are placed within this hierarchy based upon their ability to communicate in the dominant language, in this case English. Recent studies indicate that “[b]ecause of group processes and labels evoked by language use, the dominant (English) group will classify Spanish speakers as out-groups”
(Bergman, 2008, p. 43). However, there is limited information about if and why workers themselves form in and out groups within predetermined hierarchies.

In order to examine these processes, this study will also evaluate how shared group identity and communicative patterns aid in the process of community formation in and out of the workplace. Workers share the same workplace, and perform similar tasks; these functions contribute to group identity. Other qualifiers contributing to shared group identity are “culture, ethnicity, interests, language, minority status, nationality, personality, gender, and work roles” (Bergman, 2008, p. 56). These elements will also be analyzed as contributing factors to workplace community formation. Custodial workers whose first language is Spanish are the main population under study, but workers who have recently immigrated to the United States will also be included.

**Literature Review**

Every culture has a language system. By speaking a language one can be identified, and identify themselves as a member of a particular culture. If a person were to acquire multiple languages, then they could potentially identify themselves with multiple cultures. Language acquisition is greatly tied to an individual’s social identity (Ochs, 1993). A speaker’s knowledge of how language affects the receiver of his or her message is a contributing factor to the speaker’s language and communication choices. Language choices are important within a group setting because “membership in a social group or a language community depends on a member’s knowledge of local conventions for building social identities through act and stance displays” (Ochs, 1993, p. 289). Stances and acts serve purpose in conveying the viewpoint of the speaker through verbal and non-verbal communication. As a result, individuals are able to alter their social identity by intentionally making changes in their linguistic behaviors.
Cross-cultural similarities allow social identity to vary across different communities because of linguistics, acts, and stances (Ochs, 1993). These cross-cultural similarities indicate that “human beings share elements of universal culture” (Ochs, 1993, p. 300). In one study, Spanish speakers noted a common bond they felt with other Spanish speakers regardless of national origin (Bergman, 2008). This study also maintains that “individuals teach and learn about culture with others, including their families, their coworkers, their classmates, and their friends” (Bergman, 2008, p. 57) despite differences in national origin, which creates a collective group membership.

Social Identity Theory asserts that group memberships affect how persons view and identify themselves (Reynolds, Turner, & Haslam, 2000). From Social Identity Theory these group memberships can be further delineated into in-group (favored) and out-group (disfavored) relationships. Persons within the in-group receive positive messages, and thus perceive “their group membership as an aspect of their self-concept” (Reynolds, Turner, & Haslam, 2000, p. 64). Persons within the out-group serve as comparison groups that exist in conjunction to the in-group.

Changing one’s identity through language usage is a critical analytical point with regards to in-groups and out-groups. For monolingual Spanish speakers in the workplace, not being able to speak the dominant language automatically places them in an out-group, which may foster discrimination, but speaking Spanish can also create inclusion among other Spanish speakers. If one is able to speak both the language of the in-group and the out-group, then their position in the overall workplace community is indicative of a conscious choice to be a member of the in-group or out-group. Bilingual persons possess the option of choosing which social identity they want to display (Goffman, 1963), thereby having flexibility in their in-group or out-group
Callahan (2005) conducted a qualitative analysis on the use of English and Spanish inside the workplace. The study analyzes what influences bilingual English and Spanish speakers to use either English or Spanish in the workplace. Most of the participants reported that English is the primary language used in the workplace, and Spanish is the language used at home. A participant reported, “If we have a job, we have a task, we’re talking English. But if we have some down time, and we relax, there’s no customers, and we’re just fixing the store, we start joking around, we talk Spanish” (Callahan, 2005, p. 284). In regard to customer interaction, the research participants stated that they mostly respond in the language the customer initiates, but “85% of the interviewees said that they would speak to a customer in Spanish if they spoke to them in non-fluent English” (Callahan, 2005, p. 278). Participants also reported that they are more likely to converse with older Hispanics in Spanish rather than in English.

Theory

The Whorf Hypothesis, previously known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, projects that language and thoughts are intertwined processes. According to the Whorf-Hypothesis, thought is affected by language since individuals cannot think outside the context of their particular language (Stafford, 2007). Consider snow as an example of this concept. Someone who lives in Hawaii, where the weather averages 75 degrees year round (Hawaii.com), has few words in their vocabulary to describe snow. Someone who lives in Alaska, where a city such as Valdez averages 326 inches of snow annually (nsidc.org), has numerous words for snow. Based upon the reasoning set forward by the Whorf Hypothesis, Alaskans are allowed to perceive the physicality of snow in various ways as a result of their language system possessing a variety of words to depict snow. This experience contrasts with Hawaiians who would be unable to conceptualize
snow in the same capacity as Alaskans because their language system possesses limited words to describe snow. Language confines how people think (Stafford, 2007).

Previous linguistic theorists have not only found connections between language and thought, but between language and culture as well. Similar to Sapir and Whorf’s projections on how language influences thought which re-influences language, Witherspoon posits that language and culture are interconnected processes that influence and develop with one another. Within the context of culture, language is important because it functions as a “symbolic code by which messages are transmitted and understood, by which information is encoded and classified, and through which events are announced and interpreted” (Witherspoon, 1992, p. 3). Analogous to language, “culture is a symbolic code through which messages are transmitted and interpreted” (Witherspoon, 1992, p.3). Based upon the given definitions, culture and language cannot exist without one another. Language is denoted as a system that allows “events” to be expressed, analyzed, and understood. Culture is denoted as a system that allows messages to be transmitted. Given these similarities, both language and culture are a “set of conceptions of and orientations to the world embodied in symbols and symbolic forms” (Witherspoon, 1992, p. 179).

Guided by these theories, the environment of the workers is viewed as contributing factors to community formation because of the effects that it has on the participants and their behaviors.

Context

This research study takes place at the University of North Texas located in Denton, Texas. According to the Denton Economic Development Partnership, in 2007 the City of Denton had an estimated population of 115,506. Hispanics comprised 20.1% of Denton’s 2007
population, Mexicans being 78.1% of that percentage. Refer to Table 1 and Figure 1.

The research population consists of female custodial workers, not originally from the United States. The women vary in age from approximately 35 to 60. The workers on this shift consist primarily of Spanish speakers. All the participants in the research immigrated from Mexico (5), Central America (1), or the Caribbean (1). All participants work the “graveyard shift,” which begins at 12:30 a.m. and ends at 9:00 a.m. Below is a graph depicting the ethnic population of the custodial workers who were located in my field site; blue represents the Mexican population (5), green represents the Hispanic population (5), dark purple represents the Caribbean population (1), orange represents the Central American population (1), and lavender represents the African American population (1). Refer to Figure 2.

Methods

This project’s research design incorporated semi-structured, open-ended interviews, participant observation, and social mapping in the form of a worker activity time log. Research participants were interviewed in their work environments, at a time that was convenient for them. The interviews were conducted during the break times of the participants. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed for a greater efficiency of data analysis. During the interview process, three research participants were asked 17 questions about their language usage, language preferences, job position, work environment, and social relationships formed in the workplace. The number of people that I interviewed from this population was limited because the majority of the custodial workers in this location on this shift were primarily Spanish speakers.

In the participant observation portion of this study, I began by discretely observing the participants. It was during this observation process that I developed an employee time log. The
time log includes the type of employee, the day and time the employee was seen, and what the employee was doing, including both work-related and social activities. I also engaged in participant observation by working an entire graveyard shift, shadowing employees in one of the buildings on campus. While working the shift, I performed all the tasks and duties that entail being a custodial worker. Working this shift allowed me to fully observe the daily routine of the workers, observe the social and communication patterns of the workers, and examine parts of the workplace community that cannot be divulged in the interview process alone.

Findings

Question: Describe Your Workplace Environment?

In this portion of the interview participants were asked to describe their workplace environment. Having the participants describe their workplace environment divulges the climate and inter-workings of the workplace as they view it. In both interview excerpts, the participants describe the effect that working this shift has on their physical state. The effects of working the graveyard shift on scheduling arose in all of the interviews. The interviews were conducted in the break locations of the workers. Interview Excerpt 1 took place in a supply closet. Trashcans, cleaning supplies, and brooms served as the background of the interview. Interview Excerpt 2 was conducted in a department front seating area.

*Interview Excerpt 1:*

(Researcher) Like do you sleep before work, or after?

(Participant 1): You see we get off, well it depends. Because sometimes I get off and I go to sleep from like 10 to one or two and. then in the afternoon from. Like 9 maybe ‘til 11:30. But she sleeps (laughter); she hardly sleeps in the daytime.

(Participant 2): Well yes, because I go and I prepare lunch and such and I got to bed at sometime three, four.

(Researcher): Mmm, hmm.
(Participant 2): And get up at 8, 9.

(Researcher) Does it affect, like what you can do in the day and stuff?

(Participants 1 & 2): Oh yeah.

(Participant 1): Yes it does. It affects it a lot. You see it affects me the most because I have a six year old so I don’t spend much time during the day with him, not even at night because he’s sleeping. So, only on the weekends but the weekend goes by so fast you don’t even feel it.

(Participant 2): And when we’re here they’re still sleeping.

(Participant 1): Yeah.

**Interview Excerpt 2**

(Researcher): Okay, Can you describe your workplace environment?

(Participant 3): Pauses

(Researcher): Mmm hmm, el ambiente es (the environment is)?

(Participant 3): Mmm el ambiente es (the environment is) no good. A lot of sleepy because I, I start the work at 12 o clock medio (mid) night

(Researcher): Mmm hmm.

(Participant 3): Yea, the ambiente es (environment is) no good.

(Participant 3): Everyday, I a start workday 12, 12:30 to 9 o’clock.

(Researcher): Mmm hmm.

(Participant 3): El ambiente (environment) ah, no, no good, a lot of sleepy.

(Researcher): When do you sleep?

(Participant 3): Ah, when I go home, I asleep 10 o’clock and sleep to two in the afternoon.

(Researcher): Mmm.

(Participant 3): Yeah. Two in the afternoon, I go work in my house go sleep at two o’clock to 11:30 pm. 11:30 wake up again and come in 12:30.

Question: What Do You Talk About?
In this portion of the interview, research participants were asked about the topics of conversations that arise between their co-workers and themselves. By conducting interviews and performing participant observation, I observed a pattern in the conversational exchanges of the custodial workers. Most all the conversations center on work-related topics. One set of custodial workers frequently discussed the topic of food. They discussed food because the building they work in does not possess a refrigerator or microwave for them to use so their food choices are limited to foods that can go 8 ½ hours without refrigeration.

*Interview Excerpt 1*

(Researcher): What do you talk about?
(Participant 1): Well we talk about everything.
(Participant 2): Food.

*Group Laughter*

(Participant 2): We need food.

*Group Laughter*

(Participant 1): The different types of food…
(Researcher): How do you eat? Do you have to bring your lunches and put them in the refrigerator? Do they drive you somewhere?
(Participant 1): We have to bring our lunches. And see, like, you can tell they don’t keep a refrigerator in here or anything. So we end up packing sandwiches or whatever, like all the time.
(Participant 2): Of course (*said matter of factly*), it’s not good.
(Participant 1): So we don’t have it to heat up, we have no where to heat it up, so.
(Participant 2): This is the whole room.
(Researcher): This is like your work base?
(Participants 1&2): Yes.
(Participant 1): This is where we stay at. Like on our breaks we stay here because there is nowhere else to go.
While working with Participant 3, I also encountered the same situation regarding food in the workplace. There was no refrigerated area to place our lunches so we had to place them in the supply closet wrapped in trash bags. The trash bags are necessary because of the prevalence of roaches and crickets. On our lunch break while getting a plum from my bag I saw a roach crawling near my lunch sack. Participant 3 immediately responded by killing the roach, and moving both of our lunch bags to different shelves of the supply closet.

*Interview Excerpt 2*

This interview also seeks to uncover what custodial workers talk about. As in the previous interview, the conversations held between custodial workers are described as being work related.

(Researcher): So I know in the morning when you come in, everyone meets there, so are they all coming from different buildings?

(Participant 3): *Yea es (are) coming, yea, too many people working pero (but) everyone es (is) working a different building.*

(Researcher): So do y’all get to talk to [co-workers] before or after work?

(Participant 3): I talk to before a little bit, and after work, I talk to everybody a little more.

(Researcher): Mmm hmm. Okay what do you talk about?

(Participant 3): I talk to about sometimes the family, ah, more the work.

(Researcher): Mmm hmmm.

(Participant 3): *Porque (Because I) no have supplies.*

*Participant 3 and co-worker look and laugh at each other in agreement*

(Participant 3): Everybody say, oh I have sleepy, or I no have supplies or something and then off to work.

I performed my work shift participant observation with Participant 3. Participant 3 and Participant 4 both talk about the lack of supplies, and how it affects their ability to perform job task. They also talk about the difficult nature of their work, and the effects the work has on the body. During a work break, a conversation was started by Participant 4 discussing how her knee bothers her while she is working. The conversation then continues with Participant 3 interjecting how both her back and her knee bother her as a result of working too much.
Question: Is Language an Important Builder of Community?

After I had formally concluded my interview Participant 1 wanted to add her views on how language affects community formation.

*Interview Excerpt 1*

(Researcher): Is there anything else you want to add?

(Participant 1): No, well since it’s about language. I don’t really think that it matters what language you speak. I mean she gets along with the lady that works on the 3rd floor and she only speaks Spanish. She don’t speak no English. She gets along with her well so, it doesn’t matter.

(Participant 2): As long as you can understand one another. *(Chuckles)*

(Researcher): How do you um, communicate with her?

(Participant 2): There are a few words that she knows in English.

(Researcher): Mmm hmm.

(Participant 2): And I make signs. *(makes gestures with her hands)*

*Group laughter*

(Researcher): Okay, that’s good because I thought that doing stuff together makes and builds community but all the articles said no language builds community and if you can’t understand someone you can build like a bond with them.

(Participant 1): No, because she bonds good with her.

(Participant 2): Yeah.

(Participant 1): I’m telling you, they’re friends. They have different languages, she speaks English, she speaks Spanish. She don’t know what the hell she’s saying.

*Group laughter*

(Participant 1): But they get along good

(Researcher): Awe, yay!

(Participant 2): Yeah she will come to me and say a couple things and I understand.

(Participant 1): And when they don’t understand, they just point at stuff.

*Group laughter*
(Participant 2): We don’t have no problem.

( Participant 1): I don’t think language is what really builds community I think it depends on the people and that you’re willing to build a community and get along with your co-workers or whatever. And it doesn’t have to be coworkers it can be outside of your job area, like in a store. Everybody understands the word hi or a smile.

(Participant 2): Signs, everybody understands signs.

Discussion

In the literature review section of this research paper articles were introduced that proposed language and shared group identity allowed community to form. Through research and data collection, it was also found that messages exchanged between co-workers build community. Workplace community is allowed to form because “through conversations, speeches, and messages people build a share view of reality” (Shields & Preston, 1985, p. 102). The workplace environment affects the communicative messages exchanged between the research participants and their co-workers. The research participants in this study have management-given identities as custodial workers. This identity, along with the task and functions of the workplace, infiltrate into casual conversations that occur in the workplace. These exchanged messages between co-workers are fantasy themes, which “may vary in length from a phrase to a sentence or two to a paragraph in length” (Shields & Preston, 1985, p. 102). Although linguistic differences may occur in the workplace, cultural commonalities are participant-described ways to communicate through a language barrier. Fantasies are used to express thought; “fantasy theme functions to allow individuals to present or show to the group-mind a common experience and serves to shape that experience rhetorically into social knowledge” (Shields & Preston, 1985, p. 105). Sharing fantasy themes contribute to an overall group consciousness, which then leads to community formation.
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Table 1. Latino Origin of Study Participants

| Population     | Hispanic Latino Origin |
|----------------|------------------------|
| Mexican        | 78.1%                  |
| Puerto Rican   | 1.5%                   |
| Cuban          | 0.6%                   |
| All Other Hispanic or Latino | 20.1%                   |
Figure 1. Race and Ethnicity of Denton County, Texas Residents
Figure 2. Ethnic Origins of Study Participants