

THE LOSS OF A LANGUAGE THAT I NEVER HAD: A STORY ABOUT LINGUICIDE

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The loss of a language is a complicated process. When the loss occurs because of linguicide, it is profound. This narrative talks about linguicide as a form of cultural genocide, and the author's experience with losing the Spanish language. The importance of keeping the language alive is discussed, and the author offers ideas as to how social work students should be encouraged and provided with experiences where they could learn or re-learn the Spanish language.

It is 2:05 pm in this affluent city located against the mountains in Colorado. The sky is clear but it is chilly. I enter McDonalds; the restaurant is almost empty. The smell of french fries permeates the air. I see only one man; who spends a moment looking at me and then continues eating his hamburger. There is no one at the counter; I hear several conversations that seem to be going on at one time, all in Spanish, coming from the kitchen. I make an immediate assumption that they are mainly Mejicanos/as (Latinos/as from Mexico)*. When I first hear the words in Spanish, before the sounds change to understand the content, they sound like music. It is as though listening to an Italian opera; I don't understand the words but the music is beautiful and creates images in my mind. This "opera moment" lasts only a few seconds and then I begin to understand the words. A young Mejicana comes to the counter to take my order. I order in Spanish and once she hears my words, she begins speaking in Spanish. I imagine that she is laughing at me because of my broken Spanish.

I begin to wonder why I am embarrassed about my Spanish fluency. I look out of the window and see two Mejicanos picking up

the trash in the parking lot. I remember the several "dirty looks" that were thrown at me in a community meeting when I said that the Mejicanos/as were the new servant class for this community. Despite the strong reaction to my statement, I stand by it. One would have to be in strong denial or completely naïve not to see the Mejicanos/as being the servants – they clean the homes, work in the fast food restaurants, work in the kitchens of major restaurants, serve as the janitors. The Mejicano/a servant class is not isolated to this community; it occurs in many communities across the United States. Despite the public outcry about immigration, we don't hesitate to use their labor and to recognize the market value of this population. It is estimated that in the United States, Latinos/as have 350 billion dollars in purchasing power.

The number of Mejicanos/as has increased in this community to about 10% of the population, but there is general agreement that this may be a low estimate. Besides providing the labor, they are introducing the Spanish language to the community. Like in McDonalds, you can hear Spanish spoken in stores, restaurants, in most parts of the community. I think that when a new language is

* The term latino/a is an umbrella term which is used to describe the different groups from Latin America who now live in the United States. The term Mexicano/a means that the population are from Mexico.



introduced into a community, it should be a vibrant experience. But historically the United States has not been fond of languages other than English. I wonder how the community will accept the Mejicanos/as. Will they be able to keep the language and teach it to their children, or will it be lost?

I make some notes of my thoughts in the small 5 by 3 inch notebook that I carry with me at all times in case an idea comes to me. I have filled up many of these notebooks on daily observations, a habit I initiated when I began my dissertation, a grounded theory study of the Latino/a family. One of the principles of grounded theory is the idea that "all is data," so, as we live our everyday lives, many important things occur that could be considered data. I find documenting the day-to-day experiences keeps me alert and helps me read the world.

As I write my thoughts in my small notebook, I reflect on my dissertation. I defended in August and it was one of the best days of my life. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to complete the process, but it was by no means easy. My experience was profound. In gathering my data, I interviewed Mejicanos/as from Colorado and New Mexico and did participant observation in New Mexico. The intensity occurred from the power of the stories of many participants. The stories of poverty, racism, and ethnicism were overwhelming, and at times I would cry. All of the participants talked about the importance of the Spanish language and their concern about the loss of the language in their families.

I notice the time and begin walking home. In the hour that I spent in the restaurant the temperature has dropped. My apartment is about a ten-minute walk, and I walk briskly, looking at the mountains, which are spacious. I remain in deep thought and actually walk past my apartment until I come back to reality, retrace my steps, and as I enter my apartment, turn on the lights. The apartment is al-

most dark since the sun is now gone, the sky is white, and it looks as if it might snow. I immediately turn on the computer and then go into the kitchen and boil some water so I can make a cup of instant coffee. I turn on the stereo and put in a disc of Roberto Griego, a well-known singer from New Mexico whose music is distinctively Mejicano/a New Mexico. I was introduced to his music during the dissertation process. The first song on the disc is called "un pobre nomas," a story about a poor man who wants to marry the woman he loves even though she has the attentions of another man who has money. I sit down, take a sip of my coffee, and begin with four magic words, "Once upon a time." By writing this, a cessation of present time occurs and I enter another time (Maestas & Anaya, 1980).



"Once upon a time" in New Mexico, Spanish was a major language along with the languages of the Native Americans. In 1848 after Mexico lost the war, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed. The spirit of the treaty was that the culture of the residents would not be disturbed. However, this did not occur and a process of cultural genocide began. Part of the cultural genocide was the attempt to get rid of the Spanish language. This is called linguicide, not a common word but a powerful concept. It comes from the human rights literature and is one part of the cultural genocide, which is defined as "Ideologies, structures, and practices that are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups that are defined on the basis of race/ethnicity or language" (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1995, p. 105).

Linguicide is important because the importance of language in any group of people is profound. Language is a code of communication, but it is more; it is the basis of human existence as social reality. The human condition is grounded in belonging to a particular linguistic community (Valdes, 1998). As Sabine Ulibarri, a writer, a poet, a man of letters stated:

"In the beginning was the word and the word was made flesh. It was in the beginning and it is so today. The language, the word, carries within it the history, the culture, the tradition, the very life of a people, the flesh. Language is people. We cannot even conceive of a people without a language, or a language without its people. The two are one and the same. To know one is to know the other." (Quoted in Sisneros, 2000, p. 103).

The enduring concern of this story is the loss of the Spanish language or, more specifically, the taking away of a language by the process of cultural genocide. Language is also tied to identity construction (Molinero-Mar, 2000). As one of the participants in my dissertation research stated, "If we don't preserve Spanish to some degree, we will be in trouble in terms of cultural identity" (Sisneros, 2000, p. 103).

My own experience with linguicide is told within the geographic reference of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. This is important because the experiences with the Spanish language vary in different geographic locations. My story begins in northern New Mexico in the early 1940's where my parents met. They lived in two small villages located next to each other. They were raised in large families (my father was one of 20 siblings; my mother was one of 10 children) and were rural poor. They moved to southern Colorado after my father returned from overseas after serving in World War II. After their

marriage they moved to southern Colorado in order to work in the fields, which they did for a period of years until my father found employment in a steel mill where he remained until he retired. Both of my parents grew up speaking only Spanish. My father was introduced to English when he went to the military; my mother learned English when they moved to southern Colorado where English was already the main language in the community.

My first world, my first geographic reference (Freire, 1997), was a small barrio located on a hill next to an industrial plant where rock wool was manufactured. It was also located next to the railroad tracks. My mother would at times feed the hobos who would come to our door looking for food. Our home had four rooms, with running water but no indoor bathroom. The neighborhood consisted of people who migrated from New Mexico plus some Italian immigrants. I remember playing outside and smelling fresh bread that my Italian neighbors made. When I was nine years old, we bought a parcel of land and moved to the country. My father, my older sister and I, along with some of my father's brothers, built our home. It took several years to complete, working everyday after work and school, including weekends. The house was built with no blueprints, and when the home was finished it looked uneven. We made the roof of aluminum and when it would rain we could not hear each other speak. I remained in this geographic reference until I left home at 18.

I attended Catholic schools in both worlds. The schools were located in barrios and English was the main language. Catholic nuns staffed the schools and Catholic values were taught. Although no signs or rules stated that we should not speak Spanish, we just knew it was not allowed. Our Mexican names were changed to the English translation; my name was Joe, not José, and my friend's name was Mike, not Miguel. We knew that when

new students came to school who were monolingual Spanish, that they were from Mexico and probably extremely poor. The Spanish language was seen as tied to poverty. One of my dissertation research participants stated:

"When I was in grade school my brother and I were a year and a half apart in age. He might have been in kindergarten, and I was not yet in school. I remember us making a conscious decision not to sound like dumb Mexicans." (Sisneros, 2000, p. 97).

The Spanish language was associated with being a dumb Mexican; in contrast, English meant being a smart White.

During those elementary years, our family would make visits to New Mexico to visit my grandmother who lived on a *rancho* (small ranch) near several small villages in northern New Mexico. My grandfather died before I was born (I was named after him, including my middle name). She lived with one of my uncles who was unmarried and remained on the ranch. To make these visits, we would get up at midnight, pack our 1953 blue and white Chevrolet, and begin the journey, usually arriving around daybreak. As soon as we would enter the car, the children would fall asleep. We would sleep until we were close to the rancho, then my mother would wake us up. We had to drive several miles over rough dirt roads with large gates that needed to be opened, and this was my job. My grandmother, an impressive woman in her seventies with long white hair that fell to her waist, would be waiting for us. We would get out of the car and stand in line. My parents went first to greet her and then the children would kneel before her and she would bless each of us by making the sign of the cross on our foreheads. Her home was made of stones and kept together by adobe; there was no running water or electricity.

Kerosene lamps lighted the house at night



as we sat around the table and talked. As I remember, there were three different variations of English-Spanish conversations: one in Spanish by the adults; one in English among the children; and one in English between the adults and children. The exception to this was my grandmother who never learned to speak English, although I think she understood it because we would talk to her in English and she would respond in Spanish. Despite the variations, one experience remained a pure Spanish language experience, the nightly saying of the rosary. Every night after dark, the family would gather around a small home altar that had a cross, a statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and many candles – votives in small jars. Before the rosary was said, all the candles were lit and the kerosene lamps in the rest of the house were turned off. We would all kneel down in front of the altar with our individual rosaries. For a moment, time stopped. Then my grandmother would start with the words, "Santa Maria, Madre Dios...." and then the rest of us would answer in perfect cadence. It was as if we had rehearsed. This experience always remained in Spanish; there was not even a suggestion of saying the rosary in English. In the rosary experience, the language was not negotiated. It was such an important event that none of the children would even dare to misbehave.

My first memories were of English, not Spanish. By the time I was born I had already lost the Spanish language. The adults would speak Spanish to each other but not to the children. It may have been that they knew that if the children were to succeed,

that they would have to know English. There was also a strong external pressure that the Spanish language should not be spoken in public. What was confusing was an expectation that we should know the language. It was as if it should be natural, that just because of the biology, we should have the language. When we made attempts to learn the language, they would laugh at us. This remembrance is not comfortable; it weakened our attempts and it tied the language to shame. When I asked my parents about this, they stated that they did not mean to tie it to shame; it was just that our attempts were humorous. One of my dissertation participants felt that is a form of internalized oppression. It may also have been that we were hypersensitive because of how the Spanish language was seen in society. We were in an impossible bind: Spanish was not spoken at schools or in public, it was spoken at home but not to the children, but we were expected to know the language. The “not knowing” was given symbolic meaning, that it was tied to essence and identity.



In high school I transferred to a public school where English was spoken everywhere for everything. My parents continued to speak Spanish to each other and to continue the practice of laughing at our Spanish. I was becoming involved in marginalized activities and spent as much time out of school as in school. My friends and I would make up Spanish words such as the word “scagz” to refer to ourselves. It was a derogatory term and self-defeating. There were clear separations of groups in high school; the Latinos/as hung around with Latinos/as and the Whites would hang around with Whites. I took Spanish in high school and received a D; none of my friends did well in Spanish class. The Latino/a kids were made fun of by the Whites for taking Spanish!

After high school I tried to find work in the steel mill but was not accepted because of my poor eyesight. To this day I realize that

it was probably the best rejection that ever happened to me. It kept me out of the cycle of factory work. I entered the local college at the time when the consciousness raising of groups of color was taking hold. The Chicano movement was in force and the Spanish language now was given new life. It was tied to our identity and Latinos/as were now encouraged to speak the Spanish language as a way to counter the cultural genocide.

The “not knowing” became even more important because it became a point of reference of who was Latino/a and who was not. It was again an essence point. One of the dissertation participants stated, “My parents asked me how I could be involved in the Chicano movement if I did not speak Spanish” (Sisneros, 2000, p. 98). Another participant who did not learn the Spanish language and started taking Spanish classes was disappointed after she was told by her father, “*!Que verguenza!* (what a shame) that a Mexican has to take Spanish classes” (Sisneros, 2000, p. 98). Another of my participants took Spanish in college, but she received a D (Sisneros, 2000).

After undergraduate school, I was drafted into the military service. The Vietnam War was coming to an end, but I was high on the lottery list. I had to present a copy of my birth certificate, which clearly stated that my name was José. I had never really seen my birth certificate so as I entered the military I reclaimed my name and began signing all my documents as José. What I didn’t realize was that the name would also be a racial marker, and I was viciously made fun of because of it. In basic training, the drill sergeants would call me Mexican. In my assignment, which was a mental hygiene clinic, the professional social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists also delighted in telling Mexican jokes. They said these were only jokes, not realizing the power of negative words.

I went to a graduate school of social work in an area close to Mexico where some of

the Latino/a students were products of different geographies and spoke Spanish fluently. They had not lost the language like I had; they were bilingual and couldn't understand how Latinos/as could not speak Spanish fluently. This is an important point since Latinos/as are a heterogeneous population and some of the differences among Latinos/as are reflected in different geographical references. The experience of Latinos/as in New Mexico is different in many ways because of the different history of living in the United States since the fifteenth century. For many years Latinos/as in New Mexico were isolated from Mexico and unique cultural patterns developed (Roberts & Roberts, 1986). This included the experience with the Spanish language that I described earlier in the paper. The Latinos/as whom I encountered in graduate school were from the border communities on the Mexican border. In this geographical reference, the closeness to Mexico is such that there is a constant replenishing of the Spanish language. These two different references collided and Latinos/as from Colorado were labeled as not being fully Latino/a because we were not fluent. The "not knowing" was again applied. How could one be Latino/a if one does not speak Spanish?

After graduate school I began a twenty-year career working in community mental health centers. I was expected, as many Latinos/as are when they work in agencies, to be an "essence expert." What I mean by the use of this concept is that when an institution or agency hires a Latino/a there is an assumption that that person is an expert on Latino/a life and therefore is fluent in Spanish. This assumption is based on the concept of essentialization, which is the belief that there is a monolithic experience, in this case, that of Latino/a. It is as if one voice speaks for all (Harris, 1995). This assumption was reinforced in the social science literature that cultural groups are homogeneous (Buriel, 1984). I was made an essence expert the day I

walked into my first job after graduate school. Although this was an unfair assumption and responsibility, I accepted the role since I was socialized in undergraduate and graduate school that Latinos/as had one essence. I think that many times when I gave workshops, I reinforced stereotypes about Latinos/as.

One position that I held for four years was as clinical director of a Latino/a service agency whose clients were about 98% Latinos/as. In this agency the Latino/a "opera moments" were many. The Spanish language was spoken everywhere – in the waiting room Latino/a families were speaking Spanish and the receptionist was speaking Spanish on the phone. The culture was vibrant. Every morning we would anxiously await the "burrito lady." When she came into the building, a phone tree started; meetings would stop as we went down to the waiting room to buy a burrito.

The dilemma was that a professional Spanish speaking staff was difficult to find. Many of the applicants were Whites that had the experience of traveling to Latin American counties and were able to immerse in the Spanish language. Many of the Latino/a applicants did not have the Spanish language. A friend of mine, a Latina who also lived through linguicide and understands some of the Spanish language but is unable to speak it fluently, had a job interview with another Latino/a agency that provided mental health services. The four people interviewing her were white and all were fluent in Spanish, and she, a Latina, did not know the language. She did not get the job. She laughed as she told this story, but it is a sad story. The problem with this scenario is that by not hiring a Latina, the agency is missing a presence of Latinos/as. In my experience, many Latino/a clients want to work with another Latinos/as. The other dilemma is that in helping agencies, knowing the Spanish language is a prize. To speak Spanish could give someone a boost in finding employment. But because of the linguicide,

many Latinos/as are not getting that prize of knowing the Spanish language.

I am now 51 years old, an assistant professor at a major university in a school of social work. I also consider myself to be a Latino scholar. I am well read in Latino/a theory, and have conducted a Latino/a dissertation. The Spanish language is more important to me now than ever before. Since I am the only Latino professor, many of the Latino/a students seek me out. I see the same pattern continuing: young Latinos/as who are very much into the culture but don't know the language. I see the same lack of confidence. The stories are different, but it is clear that we have let another generation of non-Spanish speakers emerge. I also have white students approach me, asking how they can learn to speak Spanish without going to a four-year program, and I also get many calls from community agencies seeking Spanish speakers.

It strikes me that we, at least in this school and perhaps many other schools, don't have a structure to deal with this issue. How realistic is it that the students have the time, energy, and money to complete a four-year college program? Few have the resources to travel to Latin America. Even though it is generally agreed that immersion is the best way to learn another language, I submit that linguicide is a major oppressive tool that needs to be addressed. I also submit that from an ethical standpoint, and out of human dignity, we should be able to speak to Latinos/as in their native language. One of the reasons that I have spent a career in social work is my attempt to help eliminate oppression. I suggest that we could provide "small immersion experiences" for the students.

Some of the ways that I keep the Spanish language alive is to immerse myself in Univision (Spanish speaking television network). I asked a Latina who has been in this country for one year how she became fluent in English so quickly. She said television. This was only one of many experiences that helped

her become fluent, but it is a powerful experience. I also read Spanish texts; currently, I am reading *cuentos* (stories) from the southwest in Spanish. I also speak it as much as possible. I find that if I don't do this, I lose it. Using this as a background, I am currently working with a student who has a passive knowledge that she acquired from college classes and some travel into Latin America. I structured some experiences so that she could become more fluent. As part of her assignment, she is to complete a Spanish course that has tapes and a book. She is also to listen to Univision for two hours a week and take notes. And she is also to understand the phrases in the book *Spanish for Social Workers*. This little book is out of print, but it is a gem (Portuondo & Singer, 1981).

This is one example of how we could structure some experiences, but I am sure that there are many other ways that this can be accomplished. I also suggest that we seek out Latinos/as who have a passive understanding, and then we create a program to help the students learn the language. When I brought up this idea in our curriculum committee, the faculty was excited and verbalized a realization of the importance of helping the students learn the Spanish language. In the fall, I will present a proposal on some ways that this may be accomplished. If we address this issue, we could increase the presence of Latinos/as and others in helping agencies that serve Spanish-speaking clients. My point is that we could provide a program that consists of structures and experiences to help our students understand the Spanish language and be more prepared to serve the increasing number of Spanish speakers coming from Latin America.

I will pause here, but the story is not ended. I will write a follow up article one year from now and continue the story.

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