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By Mariana Alessandri

# The colour of my language

“Racial identity is easy to tell,” a former student informed me. I was teaching at a university whose racial composition was mostly white. “You just look at the colour of a person’s skin.”

When I heard this, I got an idea for a classroom exercise that I never used. It begins with me showing students a photo of my cousin, and then asking them to identify her race. As a blue-eyed blonde, they would likely guess “white”. Then I’d play a video of her speaking in Spanish, her native tongue. “What race is she now?” The students would stumble, their minds grinding to resolve the cognitive dissonance they’re experiencing. They’d want to change their answer to “Mexican”, “Spanish”, or “Hispanic”, and the desire alone would make them doubt the naïve premise that we wear our race exclusively on our skin.

Some of us wear our racial identity in our names, like my father who is Raul but who for the majority of his life in the US has received mail delivered to “Paul”. When US society pronounced his name too hard to spell or say, he lost an identity marker that he’d enjoyed for thirty years in Chile. He only regained it three years ago upon moving to the US-Mexico border, where Raul is a common, even an American, name.

We also wear our race on our tongues, making us vulnerable to linguistic racism. Speech recognition technology in the US routinely misinterprets words spoken in African-American Vernacular English at almost twice the rate of standard English. An Indian woman has to bend her voice to get Siri to play her music. A Black man may use his ‘white voice’ to get ahead in his career, and in so doing he risks ostracism from his community. Daily, those of us who can, do hide our differences. We neutralise our identities for the comfort of others

and the ease of social navigation. We straighten our accents in the direction of an amorphous, presumably colourless standard called “American”.

Despite being fifth generation US-American with flawless English, the Chicana philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa was forcibly enrolled in a year of speech-correction courses at the border university where I now teach. The idea was that to be successful in the US, she’d have to tame her accent. She couldn’t be American if she sounded Mexican.

Each region of the world has its own story of identity policing, of legitimising and delegitimising people based on skin tone, name, and the colour of their language. How many of us have had our identities rejected or reassigned by a bewildered social order? How many identities have been broken because our world cannot handle linguistic incongruity?

Once when I was visiting the Midwest (where English is dominant), I got caught speaking to my children in Spanish at the park. I was stared at until



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Luchamos por la libertad de todos (poster), 1940-50, Edward McKnight, Library of Congress



I addressed my impromptu audience in New York-accented English, at which point they seemed to settle down. “So *she is American after all*,” their look seemed to say. “*She’s like us*.” Relaxed as that revelation made them, they might even have approved of me giving my children a second language. But had I been a monolingual Chilean speaking that strange language to my children, it would have been seen as a shame or an affront, certainly as un-American. Fair enough, since I would technically be a foreigner. But what do you do if you are a US citizen with no identity marker to prove it? What if you are a Raul born on the US side of the border who speaks Spanish and Spanish-accented English? Do you get to be American? Do you get out of the racist question: “But where are you really from?”

Despite the fact that the US has no official language, and that Spanish is more American than English in terms of history and geography (America includes Central and South America), Spanish is still rejected as an American language in the US. The schools try to quickly 'transition' Spanish-speaking kids from bilingual classrooms to all-English ones, and they convince parents that this moment is worth celebrating. By the time these kids get to my classroom, their English is academically dominant while their Spanish is conversational. But because they are kin to Spanish-speakers, they tend to feel ashamed of having lost their native tongue. They haven't put it together that the school system stole it from them, thus making it impossible for them to adopt a robust Mexican identity. But this violent act of cutting out their tongues (which Anzaldúa called "linguistic terrorism" even though it was done in the name of education) did not guarantee them access to an American identity either. The great

mid-century college experiment of speech-correction classes failed to convince anyone outside of South Texas that Anzaldúa was American. Likewise, turning Spanish-speaking kids into English-speaking adults doesn't fool anyone either, but they do end up one language down.

Trying to convince people that you are US-born *and* a native Spanish-speaker is one thing – like domestic Raul – but legitimising a patois language like Tex-Mex is another. Tex-Mex is an amalgam of English and Spanish that my students have been told repeatedly is *fea*: 'ugly'. The Spanish slang term referring to children who speak Tex-Mex isn't *bilingües* (bilinguals) but *nilenguas*, 'no-tongues', people who speak no language at all. Since they were little, my students' identities have been marked by linguistic deficiency. Siri doesn't speak Tex-Mex.

Anzaldúa took linguistic discrimination personally. "If you really want to hurt me," she wrote, "talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin-skin to linguistic identity – I am my

language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself." My students can relate to feeling identity-poor, in part due to linguistic racism. They tend to deeply appreciate Anzaldúa's legitimisation of their tongue when she complains:

"Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate."

Because we live in a geographical region where almost everyone's skin is brown, my students' complexion doesn't bar them from assuming an American identity. But linguistic racism constantly threatens it. Self-knowledge, the lifelong task of philosophers, is incalculably harder to practise after a school system cuts out your mother tongue and informs you that the language you dream in is unintellectual and un-American. ▣

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