

The Anguish of Normative Gender

Sociolinguistic Studies among U.S. Latinas

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An enduring puzzle for the study of language and gender among minority populations is the extent to which the gendered behavior observed in majority populations (on which theory is usually based) is generalizable to minority groups. In particular, my concern in this essay is the following: How do Latina women negotiate contradictory ideologies coming from Latina/o communities, on the one hand, and from dominant-culture ideologies for women in general and Latina women in particular, on the other hand?

In her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa comments on the links between Latinas' gendered linguistic transgression and Standard English usage:

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for talking back to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. If you want to be American, speak American. If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong. "I want you to speak English. Pa' hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar inglés bien. *Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un acento?*," my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. At Pan American University, I, and all the Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents. . . . En boca cerrada no entran moscas. "Flies don't enter a closed mouth" is a saying I kept hearing when I was a child. Ser habladora was to be a gossip and a liar, to talk too much. *Muchachitas bien criadas*, well-bred girls don't answer back. *Es una falta de respeto* to talk back to one's mother or father. *Hocicona*, *repe-*

lona, *chismosa*, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being *maleriada*. In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women—I've never heard them applied to men. (53–54)

Anzaldúa's work echoes Robin Lakoff's observations on ladylike speech in *Language and Woman's Place (LWP)* (1975) but with a twist: when more than one language is involved, the very act of switching between them carries gendered implications.

The work on language and gender among U.S. Latinas has thus far been characterized by attention to actual or perceived adherence to normative gendered expectations, what I call the "Anguish of Normative Gender" (cf. Baugh 1984). The anguish resides in the very act of linguistic implementation; speakers must address two, and more often three or four, sets of norms for gendered linguistic behaviors at the collective and individual levels. Consider Ana Celia Zentella's (1987: 169–171) rhetorical questions of identity conflict that young Puerto Ricans pose for themselves, questions that recognize different possible avenues for identity production and alignment: "WHAT AM I? PUERTO RICAN OR AMERICAN? . . . WHAT COLOR AM I? WHITE OR BLACK? . . . WHICH LANGUAGE SHOULD I SPEAK? SPANISH OR ENGLISH? WHICH SPANISH SHOULD I SPEAK, PUERTO RICO'S OR SPAIN'S? WHICH ENGLISH SHOULD I SPEAK, BLACK OR WHITE?" Adding in gender and sexual orientation, while dealing with what W. E. B. Du Bois (1903: 2) termed *double consciousness*, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," creates a veritable hall of mirrors for Latinas in the United States.

In this essay I sketch some paradoxes of research in the field, keeping in mind, as Deborah Cameron (1992) admonishes, that we must look not only at gender differences but also at the difference that gender makes. I begin by outlining some of Lakoff's arguments on gendered ideologies of language and politeness, of conservatism and innovation, and proceed to show how those ideologies set up contradictions for Latinas (my essay, though dealing mostly with women, also advocates the theorizing of Latino masculinity and language behavior; cf. Cintron 1997). I conclude by presenting a case study from my own research, which investigates issues at the intersection of class and gender among Latina youth.

Lakoff's Legacy and Its Relation to Current Debates

LWP has proved not only groundbreaking but also downright uncanny: a number of Lakoff's theoretical analyses of gendered language behavior would later find statistical support in certain quarters of quantitative sociolinguistic study (Labov 1990). Lakoff's list of the features that com-

prise women's language includes the use of hypercorrect and superpolite forms:

6. Hypercorrect grammar: women are not supposed to talk rough. It has been found that, from a very young age, little boys [engage in nonstandard language behavior] more than do little girls . . . [and] are less apt . . . to be scolded [for doing so]. Generally women are viewed as being the preservers of literacy and culture, at least in Middle America, where literacy and culture are viewed as being somewhat suspect [i.e., effeminate, cf. *LWP* 44] in a male. . . . In cultures where book larnin' is the schoolmarm's domain, this job [of preservation] will be relegated to women. [Lakoff goes on to suggest that women are less prone to neologisms and are less likely to be the source of linguistic innovation than men.]

7. Superpolite forms. . . . This is related to [women's] hypercorrectness in grammar, of course, since it's considered more mannerly in middle-class society to speak "properly." But it goes deeper: women don't use off-color or indelicate expressions. (*LWP* 80)

Lakoff's work launched a thousand ships in the field of variationist studies of language and gender: Can women in general be shown to be more conservative and status-seeking in their linguistic behavior than men? (For highlights of the debate, see Eckert 1989, this volume; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003; Labov 1990; Trudgill 1972.) And yet the question remains paradoxical when applied to Latinas: How should we evaluate a claim of female conservatism and prestige-mindedness where the language that might be thought to be the conservative language, Spanish, is marginalized in practice and its maintenance discouraged? How do we reconcile the larger social stigmatization of Spanish-based linguistic resources (Hill 2001; Ramírez 1981) with positive language attitudes on the part of U.S. Latinos (García et al. 1988)?

Swearing and the *Abuelitas* (Grandmothers)

In his essay "Me Macho, You Jane" (1996), Dagoberto Gilb recounts watching an Anglo basketball coach repeatedly and unfairly scolding his ten-year-old son. Gilb blurts out: "Motherfucker, you leave him alone!" The author continues:

The coach glared at me, appalled. Worse yet, I caught something else too. An I-told-you-so smirk. Now he had confirmed that I was from the crass, violent, low-class, vulgar, gang-ridden, unfit-to-lead culture he so clearly was not from. I'd

justified him in his self-righteous fundamentalism. But I was shamed equally about being an American, the ugliest kind. *Abuelitas*, sitting gracious and gently near me, dressed with Sunday shawls over their shoulders, watching their sweet *nietecitos* [grandkids] playing, being nothing but young and sweet, leaned forward, stunned, disgusted, like I'd hocked one onto the foot of the Virgen de Guadalupe. Two little girls on the other side of them got off their seats to step out onto the court to look at the face of the goon. Their innocent mouths were open. . . . If I could've left I would have. It was that I was in the corner and the door was at the other end, and I couldn't. (14–15)

This excerpt illustrates linguistic double consciousness, with its paradoxical overlapping frames of reference across gender, class, and ethnicity: swearing marks the narrator as boorishly American to the Latina *abuelitas* and little girls, while simultaneously confirming stereotypes of slum-dwelling Latino male riffraff to the Anglo coach. The same speech event is interpreted, unfortunately for Gilb, in diversely unflattering yet consistently gendered ways by both Anglos and Latinos.

Marcia Farr (1994) defines *relajo* as the suspension of seriousness that for the women in her study distinguishes the decorum and social norms of the public sphere from the freedom from those norms in the private sphere. Her transgenerational study of a Michoacán (Mexican) transnational community in Chicago places *relajo* within a cline of social activities that connect the individual to the social and that range in scale from the festival through the smaller carnival, *fiesta*, *relajo*, *desmadres*, and the double entendre of the single-word *albur* (innuendo). According to Farr, these events constitute transformative experiences and entail the expression of verbal-art genres valued within the community. Joking during *relajo*, for instance, involves criticism of the common gendered moral code. Many of the teasing routines that Farr documents deal with gender-role and ideological differences between Michoacán and Chicago. *Echar desmadres* ('to joke around'; literally, 'to throw unmothers!'), an even more carnivalesque and heightened form of *relajo*, deals almost exclusively with sexually oriented double entendre, and is documented by Farr among the *abuelitas* of the community. If *relajo* among the women in Farr's study occurs only in the private sphere, *desmadre* involves the most intimate of circles within that sphere, and the sexually explicit nature of this speech routine relies precisely on such intimate, gendered settings. Imagining Gilb's shawl-wrapped *abuelitas* getting together at home to become Farr's ribald jokers reminds us to consider contextual dependency not only in the interpretation of speech acts such as swearing but also in our theorizing of gender roles.

In ethnographic studies of Latinas' gender transgression, we see that

the stigma in the use of taboo words and expletives serves to keep women in Lakoff's figurative linguistic place. Leticia Galindo's work (see, e.g., Galindo 1999) investigates the public speech of East Austin, Texas, *pachucas* (Mexican American female street-gang associates, following the *pachuco* style in vogue in the 1940s through 1970s), focusing on their use of *caló* (a form of slang that involves nonstandard language and codeswitching), taboo words, and expletives. Galindo regards the *pachucas* with whom she conducted her research as innovative, uninhibited, assertive speakers breaking with traditional patriarchal structures through words that are off-limits to "ladies" (cf. Bean & Johnstone, this volume). Galindo contends that the use of *caló* and taboo language as a lingua franca among the *pachucas* facilitates the performance of particular speech acts traditionally associated with males (boasting, challenging, and insulting), arguing that these acts serve the social functions of conveying intimacy and camaraderie.

A parallel to this work, also conducted in Texas but among men, is the research of José Limón (1994), which deals with *carnalismo*—the combination of bawdiness and talk about food—in the casual conversation of Mexican men in south Texas. The exaggerated masculinity, homoerotic innuendo, and grotesque-realistic degradation (Bakhtin 1984: 21) inherent in *carnalismo* (a three-way ambiguity we may gloss as 'sharing [sexual] meat' and 'fictive-kin brotherhood') is understood by Limón as an instance of class-contestative ideology, opposing it to the ruling bourgeois official culture of both Anglos and upper-class Mexican Americans. Thus the *pelado's* (Mexican lower-class man's) hypermacho discourse of sexuality, the body, and low-prestige food ("Mexican leavings," as an Anglo rancher told Limón) "acts as a counterpoint to the repression and affectation of the ruling sectors throughout the region" (Limón 1994: 136).

Gender, Ethnicity, Class, and Language Choice among California Latina Youth

In my own work, which is indebted to all these scholars, I seek to address issues at the intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity, with emphasis on personae as the carriers of linguistic style (cf. Eckert 2000). In an ethnographic and sociolinguistic study of social networks and linguistic behavior among Latina high school girls in the Bay Area of northern California, conducted over the course of two-and-a-half years in the mid-1990s (Mendoza-Denton 1997, 1999, forthcoming), I have examined the linguistic patterning and social differentiation of several distinct self-identifying groups of Latina girls. Latina and Latino students accounted for approximately twenty percent of the 1,200 students at Sor Juana High School (a pseudonym) and were subdivided into Chicanas, Mexicanas, and recent immigrants from other Latin American countries. Within these groups,

cross-cutting allegiances divided students along the lines of nation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES), and immigration history. For the purposes of this essay I shall discuss only one of the groups, the Spanish-speaking *Piporras*, mestiza (mixed Native Mexican–European–African) girls from the countryside (for a fuller account, see Mendoza-Denton 1997, 1999).

As with all ethnography, the participant-observer's perspective merits mention as inherently embedded in the social and power relationships emerging in the larger society and in the enterprise of anthropology. Like the girls that I interviewed and who allowed me to participate in their social networks, I was a Spanish-speaking *mestiza* who left Mexico in early adolescence. Like the *Piporras*, I was a native Mexican Spanish speaker, and had extensive family networks in Mexican rural areas. Unlike them, I was from a large Mexican city, middle-class, had wide access to the dominant European American culture, and spoke a more standard variety of English (albeit as a second language). This range of similarities and differences made me an insider-outsider, and allowed me to participate as teacher/older sister/fictive kin depending on the circumstance.

One of the largest groups among the Latinas at Sor Juana High School, *Piporras* were recent-immigrant adolescents from Mexico's countryside, sometimes monolingual Spanish speakers and sometimes bilingual in Mexican indigenous languages. Coming from rural Mexican families, many of them worked as itinerant farm workers and were often absent from school to pick produce on California farms alongside their parents. As the most recent immigrants from Mexico, *Piporras* were the girls that other Latinas in the school sometimes complimented, sometimes taunted, as being "traditional Mexican girls." Immigrant *Piporras* were expected to hold down the proverbial fort of traditional values, while U.S.-born Chicanas were indulged by teachers and parents with more freedom and less reproach for social experimentation. At school, *Piporras* became vested with the role of keepers of feminine virtue and traditions of the motherland; they were often asked and sometimes just expected to participate in activities that reproduced versions of Mexican gendered identities. The feminine arts fell squarely on their shoulders. Thus it was often *Piporras* (and their mothers) who would volunteer or be asked to cook Mexican food for school events, and *Piporras* also who were recruited as primary participants in Ballet Folklórico, the Mexican folk-dance group at the school (and their mothers who had to sew the sequined dresses). Tracked into beauty school ostensibly because of their limited English skills, at home *Piporras* were held to rigorous feminine standards that involved housework and child care, and that encouraged their relative seclusion even from school-sponsored activities like physical-education classes. Even at lunch, these girls stood in line in the cafeteria, retrieved their rations, and ate isolated in a separate room, inhabiting a private, quasi-domestic sphere within the public school system.

Immigrant and culturally distinct communities offer cases where the

expectations of the school, of parents, and of society may not only fail to converge but also in effect may create contradictory demands. Thus the *Piporras*' refusal to swim during their menstrual periods, while accurately aligned with parental authority and expectations, went deeply against the grain of what is commonly required of an American high schooler, creating no end of conflict between parents and the school. The girls' negotiation and balancing of parental, cultural, and school expectations was especially complex, since contradictions sprang up in almost every arena—not only with respect to sports but also with respect to how much and how late a girl may stay at school or fraternize with boys, and certainly with respect to how much girls should be taught about sex.

Linguistic expectations from teachers and classmates that dogged *Piporras* included the presumption of lesser English and greater Spanish proficiency. Because the *Piporra* designation subsumes ethnicity and class as well as gender, it functions as an excellent test case for issues of women's conservatism and of linguistic change. In contrast to the *Piporras*, the more "Westernized" groups of recent immigrant girls, those coming from European families and higher SES in the big metropolises of Mexico, were regularly assumed by teachers to speak less Spanish than the *Piporras* (despite the fact that they were often more "standard" speakers). With more social freedoms and fewer responsibilities for the defense of traditional Mexican womanhood, the higher-SES girls were quickly promoted out of "English as a Second Language" classes. Subsequently, through exposure to mainstream curricula and the accompanying negative attitudes toward Spanish preservation they also experienced greater language shift, thus fulfilling the assumption of greater English-speaking ability that others had of them from the beginning. *Piporras*, however, tended to maintain Spanish while they acquired English. Phenotypic Indianness and lower SES functioned as the ratification of their authenticity as Mexican, and placed them under chronic stereotype threat, with interlocutors expecting their phenotype to correlate to linguistic choices.

As this brief discussion suggests, my own work in the field of language and gender owes a great debt to Robin Lakoff. Linguists' understanding of the social phenomenon of gendered conservatism that she described continues to be enhanced by extending her insights to new populations and taking into account the intersecting axes of class and ethnicity.

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