

Linguistic “Misunderstandings,” Social Spaces, and the Restriction of Latin American Immigrants in Atlanta

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In the U.S. in general, and Atlanta, Georgia, in particular, changing demographic patterns have led to increased regulation of Latin American immigrant groups. In part through these changes, the Spanish language has become a focal point for enforcing spatial boundaries. In Atlanta, the neighborhood of Buford Highway is commonly acknowledged as a social space where Latinos can fulfill daily activities without the use of English. This paper argues that current legislative restrictions confine Latin American immigrants to this marginal social space, and language is an important component of such control. More specifically, Whites and African Americans perform misunderstanding towards the communicative practices of Latin American immigrants. Such reactions occur when Latin American immigrants cross into social spaces associated with African American and White residents of Atlanta. These results indicate that the semiotics of communication is an integral component of the broader regulation of social space in Atlanta.

Introduction

The regulation of social spaces is one way that groups maintain power in society. As Odem (2009) notes, other groups have effectively restricted the rights of Latin American immigrants in the U.S. by limiting access to social spaces. In the case of Atlanta, residential segregation and spatial delineation have led to a status quo of separation. In other words, Whites and African Americans are less accustomed to seeing Latin American immigrants in English-speaking social spaces like residential neighborhoods, restaurants, and stores. Recent legal measures regulating labor practices and driver’s licenses, as well as increasing surveillance, affect the spaces through which Latin American immigrants can travel. These policies, then, uphold traditional norms about social space in the city.

There is an important linguistic component of this control. Often, the ways those in power act, including their linguistic practices, become linked with particular social spaces (Bourdieu, 1984). This paper examines the linguistic component of spatial regulation in Atlanta. I argue that norms about public spaces of Atlanta as English speaking contribute to the delineation of social space. The implication of such ideologies is that those who are perceived to speak Spanish do not belong in these spaces. This paper examines the censoring of Spanish speakers when crossing social spaces.

Hill (1998, 2008) and Urciuoli (1996) have noted that Latinos are met with resistance in White public spaces. The authors note that Whites often criticize the speech of perceived Spanish speakers. In Atlanta, however, Latin American immigrants encounter resistance to their linguistic practices regardless of actual English-language abilities. When crossing into English-speaking White and African American public spaces, Latin American immigrants report negative reactions of misunderstanding to their attempts at communication. Even Latin American immigrants that are proficient in English experience reactions of misunderstanding to their speech. As one can imagine, such responses often result in frustration, fear, and, eventually, the desire to avoid these spaces. Performing inability to understand, then, is an especially effective form of criticism.

These reactions occur in an environment where Spanish is increasingly a focus of ideologies about race. As Urciuoli (1996) has noted, racism has become “mapped” onto language for Spanish-speakers. Other groups often project negative stereotypes about Latinos onto language, and, conversely, negative ideas about language onto its speakers. This imagination certainly influences how African American and White residents of Atlanta respond to the speech of Latin American immigrants. Stockers in grocery stores, cashiers in restaurants, and even church attendees are some of the individuals that Latin American immigrants cite as negatively reacting to their speech. Latin American immigrants specifically note that both White and African American citizens of Atlanta perform misunderstanding towards their speech. Living in Atlanta, a city with a majority African American population, involves navigating through the many social spaces associated with both African Americans and Whites.

As Inoue (2006) notes, perception itself is a social practice. While the hearing and understanding of voices may seem natural, these actions occur within, and are influenced by, a socio-history of power relations. This paper argues that auditory practices are not neutral. Rather, through assessing signs that co-occur with speech, as well as drawing from metapragmatic awareness, listeners make decisions about how to respond to the communication of others. The result, in this case, is the performance of misunderstanding by Whites and African Americans towards the speech of Latin American immigrants. Though such reactions are ostensibly about speech, they are shaped by socio-political influences of immigration, race, and the construction of a homogeneous “Latino” group.

This paper draws from ten months of fieldwork at an English as a Second Language Center in Atlanta, including interviews with students that occurred within a larger project of participant-observation. I assess how views about language, in conjunction with observations of co-occurring signs, are used by others to maintain the status quo of social spaces. I begin with a review of how, generally, a seemingly homogenous linguistic variety is often associated with a seemingly homogeneous group. Then, with the case of “Latinos,” I consider how, historically, ideologies about language have been important for discrimination towards this imagined group. Next, I focus on Atlanta and the history of Latin American immigration to the city. I then consider how the rights of Spanish-speaking immigrants have been restricted as related to space. Finally, I analyze ethnographic work for how linguistic “misunderstandings” contribute to the reproduction of social spaces. I hope to show how legislation combines with linguistic ideologies about the inherent nature of individuals in order to marginalize Latin American immigrants in Atlanta.

Linguistic Varieties and Association with Ethnic Groups

Long established is the idea that, in regards to inter-group interaction, ethnic groups maintain boundaries between one another (Barth, 1969). Differences are reinforced from outside and within the group, and the group's shared patterns of behavior emerge, in part, through in-group associations. Though linguistic differentiation varies within ethnic groups, popular notions often regard language varieties as primordial, genetically constant physical features of groups. Thus, many view language as a vital, static part of an "ethnic being" (Fishman, 1980, p. 634). Ideologies about linguistic boundaries, then, contribute to ideologies about the boundaries of groups (Tabouret-Keller, 1997). Much research has focused on the relationship between varieties of language and associated ethnic groups.¹ Baugh's (2003) study of "linguistic profiling," for example, shows that people act upon connections they perceive between language and race. Clearly, the linguistic patterns of an individual become a focal point of groups, race, and racism. Thus, people not only understand linguistic practices as being group-related, but they also act upon these perceived differences between groups.

Linguistic boundaries, then, often correlate with differences between "imagined" groups. As Anderson (2006) famously notes, individuals who have never met are believed to comprise the same socially constructed communities. Linguistic varieties are certainly affected by semiotic processes related to this construction. Such processes include that of *erasure* where people overlook discrepancies between the speech patterns of individuals of a group in the all-consuming perception of the group members' similarities (Gal & Irvine, 1995).

Additionally, speakers and hearers assess and justify homogeneous linguistic differences between groups in part through the indexicality of group-related social personae. The semiotic processes of *iconization* and *indexing* obscure individual differences within an imagined group. In other words, linguistic features of an individual (or group) may index, or point to, a certain social persona. In turn, through iconization, the population is believed to inherently exhibit this quality (Inoue, 2004; Irvine & Gal, 2000; Silverstein, 2003). In part through ideologies about the inherent nature of individuals, and differences from non-group members, a linguistic "border" between groups is constructed (Urciuoli, 1995).

Thus, while hearers understand qualities in phonetic variation to correspond with certain groups, they also link these perceived sounds to broader stereotypes about the members of that group. Popular beliefs about language, which become naturalized, are often referred to as linguistic ideologies (Silverstein, 1979; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Through these ideologies, individuals can rationalize the "correct" uses of language. In turn, listeners perceive of speech as being good or bad in relation to a standard. One can see that linguistic ideologies are not neutral, but rather are formed within inequitable power relations (Gal, 1989). Such power asymmetries are reflected in linguistic ideologies towards Latin American immigrants in the U.S. In one example, respondents noted that Spanish-accented English "literally stinks of unwashed humanity" (Lippi-Green, 1998, p. 234). Thus, socio-historical influences shape the political or moral indexical persona of a speaker's perceived linguistic features. Many people harbor negative linguistic ideologies towards "Latinos" in U.S. society, and these views contribute to perceptions about the speech of the Spanish speakers in this study.

Communication, Semiotics, and Latinos

Based on the example above, one can see how an “accent” is not merely a sound pattern. It is, in fact, a system of varying personae that hearers (and speakers) link to sound patterns (Agha, 2007). As much research has shown, beginning with Lambert’s (1967) seminal article, perceived accents are important for their indexicality and related social personae. Unquestionably, attitudes towards the speech of Latinos show language ideologies about accents, and these attitudes are important for maintaining control of social space.

The stigma attached to varieties of Spanish-accented English is well-documented. According to Santa Ana and Bayley (2004), negative opinions of Chicano English have continued for more than forty years. The result is that many other Americans consider it inadequate for social interactions. In one study on language attitudes towards Mexican Americans, 63 Mexican American, African American, and Anglo high school students in Chicago were asked to rate the personalities of speakers of Standard English versus speakers of Mexican American accented-English. The students rated speakers of Standard English more positively in every instance (Ryan & Carranza, 1976).

Additionally, studies have shown that the greater the degree of perceived strength of the Spanish-influenced accent in English, the more negatively the English-speaking listeners perceive it. In one study with voice recordings of Spanish-speakers speaking English, as the level of accent increased from speaker to speaker, the native English-speaking judges rated the status of the speakers significantly lower (Brennan & Brennan, 1981). These scores corresponded to the degrees of accented variation that the researchers had assigned in advance. This study showed that people could reliably rate the strength or weakness of the Spanish-influenced English accent, and that they considered a stronger accent to be inferior. The results of my paper contrast with this notion, as I will later explain.

One cause of the stigma attached to Spanish-influenced English is an ideology about a “foreign” ethnicity that naturally has a “foreign” accent. The concept of “whiteness” has changed overtime, with self-designated White Americans often discriminating against immigrant groups (see, for example, Brodtkin, 1996; Hill, 2008; Jacobson, 1998). The English Only movement reflects the fear of “foreign” Spanish-speaking immigrants, individuals who are located on the periphery of contemporary constructions of whiteness. The English Only movement ostensibly promotes the institutionalization of English as a necessity for citizenship and daily communication. In actuality, English Only perpetuates the common perception that Latin American immigrants do not assimilate into the mainstream “American” community. English Only, through embracing a “one-nation, one-language” ideology, supports a homogeneous view of U.S. populations that is incongruent with history. In reality, of course, many languages have always been spoken within the U.S. Such metadiscourses in the English Only movement often stem from anxieties about the increasing numbers of Spanish-speaking immigrants. The circulation of these ideologies promotes fear in the U.S. that Latinos only speak Spanish and are a threat to English. It is within this erroneous ideological background that many perceive of Latin American immigrants as “foreign” (Crawford, 1992).

In the recent movements toward restricting Spanish in the U.S., then, one can note the imagination of a homogeneous group, the erasure of cultural and lin-

guistic differences within the group, and the negative indexical personae attached to the speech of the group's members. As Zentella (1994) writes, "Hispanophobic" folk beliefs often conceive of a monolithic Latino community that refuses to learn English, or a homogenous group that is "undemocratic, unscrupulous, and sexually out of control" (p. 74). Though Latinos are experiencing language loss comparable to or exceeding that of other groups in U.S. history, language remains important for how others perceive these individuals.

While the numbers and prominence of Latin American groups in the U.S. rise, negative portrayals surface that unfairly depict homogeneous characterizations of these groups. Stereotypical depictions of Mexican Americans in the media include images like that of a *paisano*, a poor rural resident; a *mojado*, a "wetback" or illegal alien; and a *bandido*, a robber wearing a large sombrero with tobacco-stained fingers and teeth and a "grating" accent (Lippi-Green, 1997, p. 236). All of these characterological persons are depicted as speaking English with exaggeratedly thick Spanish-influenced accents, and they are applied to all "Latinos," a group made up of many distinct nationalities. This monolithic and prejudiced idea of Latino culture allows anti-Spanish attitudes to prosper. The mediation of these ideals, then, can contribute to negative popular ideologies about the speech of Latin American immigrants.

Thus, negative ideologies about Latin American immigrants are frequently directed at language use. Pejorative terms like "Spanglish" or "Tex-Mex," referring to the resulting language syncretism of Spanish and English, recall images of "linguistic mish-mash" (Zentella, 1994, p. 8). Attitudes toward the children of Latin American immigrants provide some of the more notorious examples of negative ideologies about language. Puerto Rico's first education commissioner provided an illustrative example:

"These poor kids come to school speaking a hodgepodge," he said. "They are all mixed up and don't know any language well. As a result, they can't even think clearly. That's why they don't learn. It's our job to teach them language—to make up for their deficiency. And since their parents don't really know any language either, why should we waste time on Spanish? It is 'good' English which has to be the focus." (Zentella, 1994, p. 9)

This perception of Latin American speakers of English is common in the U.S. Codeswitching or codemixing between English and Spanish, which often identifies the most effective bilinguals, paradoxically indexes to Whites that speakers are inherently "lazy, sloppy, and cognitively confused" (Zentella, 1994, p. 9). Thus, numerous ideologies about a homogeneous Latino group, as well as the inherent nature of group members' language use, contribute to linguistic insecurity among Latin American immigrants. These populations are, in fact, quite nervous about their speech. Contrary to popular beliefs that Latinos do not learn English, insecurity in turn drives Spanish speakers to learn English "as fast as possible" (Zentella, 1997, p. 75).

Given the negative indexical effects of language, even bilingual Latin Americans can struggle in the outer sphere of talk (Urciuoli, 1996). Such locations especially include English-speaking public spaces. These spaces, which are often White public spaces, are established in part through language. By vigilantly monitoring the speech of non-White, non-English speaking populations, some Whites look for

“linguistic disorder” in those who are different (Hill, 1998). In other words, Whites often carefully monitor the speech of others for indications that the others could be outsiders who do not speak English. This careful attention to speech shows that speech patterns of White populations are standard in many public spaces, whereas others are racialized and subjected to immense linguistic criticism (Page & Thomas, 1994).

Thus, the ways of acting of those in power, including their linguistic practices, can become linked to social spaces (Bourdieu, 1984). As shown above, this connection is made possible through imagining homogeneous social groups. The establishment of such a group often erases the perception of individual differences within a group, including differences in linguistic features. Furthermore, the speech of individuals within a group can index negative group-related social personae about them. Linguistic ideologies about language use often hold that the speaker is naturally a certain way. The semiotics of language use, then, certainly affect daily communication. Popular beliefs also contribute to spatial circumscription. In Atlanta, one can see how the legislative restriction of social space combines with linguistic censoring to maintain traditional White and African American English-speaking social spaces. A history of monitoring the speech of Spanish-speakers is important on a national level, as shown above. This focus is particularly relevant to the specific case of Atlanta. The short history below of how Latin American immigrants have arrived in Atlant shows how a similar socio-political atmosphere develops on a local scale.

Shifting Demographics in Atlanta

As a part of the “New South,”² Atlanta has seen a significant increase in immigrants from Latin America in recent years. Until the 1980s, the population of Atlanta consisted of mainly White and African American residents. Today, Atlanta has one of the highest total population percentages of African Americans of all urban regions in the United States (“New Ethnic Enclaves”). In part for this reason, the changing dynamics of Latino immigration to the city have altered the traditional racial dichotomy. Until recently, research on citizens of Atlanta focused mainly on disputes between African Americans and Whites. This change necessitates the study of newer members to the community and their effects on traditional group dynamics.

As one of the fastest growing regions in the U.S., the Southeast has increasingly attracted recent Latin American immigrants. These populations especially began to migrate to the Southeast from Mexico in the 1980s. Prior to this time, the Bracero program, which lasted from 1942 to 1964, recruited young males from rural Mexico to come to the United States to fulfill agricultural labor needs. Most Mexicans went to California through this program, and before the 1980s, the few Southeastern Latin American immigrants in Atlanta were temporary agricultural farm workers (Odem & Lacy, 2009). The enactment of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act heavily influenced migration patterns. Latinos received full labor rights in accordance with the U.S.’s labor needs. In order to increase the availability of inexpensive labor, the law provided amnesty to undocumented workers, resulting in less restricted movement across the U.S. (Mohl, 2003). This

change, combined with falling wages in California and the Southwest, led Latinos to traverse the U.S. in search of jobs.

Additionally, NAFTA failed to produce expected wage increases in Mexico. Thus, economic hardship spurred another increase in immigration (Mohl, 2003). As the economies of U.S. Southern states underwent major restructuring in the 1980s and 1990s, a plethora of low wage jobs resulted, especially in the manufacturing, poultry processing, and service sectors. Many Latin American immigrants began to seek these jobs in small towns and metropolitan regions. An economic boom in the 1980s offered even more jobs, especially in the field of construction. In 1996, the Olympic Games in Atlanta continued to bring construction workers to the region, and many workers remained after the end of the Games (Odem & Lacy, 2009). With the continuing problems of the Mexican economy throughout the 1990s, the Mexican population in Atlanta increased by 83.4 percent and 206.9 percent in the two respective counties with the largest Latin American populations (Walcot & Murphy, 2006). The result was that the Hispanic population of the Southeast almost doubled, increasing by about five million people to total more than 11 million (Odem & Lacy, 2009). With the increasing population came economic and social marginalization in Southern communities, in part through exploitative bosses and spatial segregation (Winders, 2005).

Much of this immigration, as well as more recent settlements of Spanish speakers in Atlanta, occurred around the Buford Highway area and its nearby communities. Unlike common immigration patterns throughout the U.S., these communities are not in the inner city, but rather suburban areas located on the fringes of Atlanta (Odem, 2009). "La Buford," as Spanish speakers commonly know this area, is a bustling and filled with strip malls and plazas.

Spanish speakers first settled in this area with the arrival of Mexicans to the city in the 1970s. As Mexico's economy declined in 1975, many comparatively better-educated Mexicans came to the city, though in relatively small numbers (Walcot, 2002). A popular neighborhood of settlement was in the Doraville and Chamblee areas around Buford Highway, former railroad stops in the northern outskirts of Atlanta. At the time, these towns consisted mainly of White working class people. Workers were typically employed by one of the many factories in the area. When the economy slowed down in the 1970s, many of the previous residents who worked at these plants were laid off and subsequently left the area. Drawn by an overabundance of inexpensive apartment buildings, many Asian and Latin American immigrants continued to populate this section of the city. The addition of public transportation stops also attracted these populations (Walcot, 2002).

Mexicans make up 60 to 70 percent of the Latin American population in Atlanta today, but Central Americans are measured as the next largest group ("The New Latinos," 2001). The recent increases in immigration from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador makes ascertaining exact numbers difficult. The likelihood, however, is that the combined number of immigrants from these nations is 20 to 30 percent of Atlanta's Latin American population.

Though these populations are understudied, researchers do know that many live below the poverty line (26 percent below for Mexicans and 30 percent for Central American groups). Also, it is estimated that more than 40 percent of the foreign-born Latin American population is undocumented (Passel, Capps, & Fix, 2004). People arriving from this region commonly settle along lines of national

and even regional origin. Furthermore, there is even division based on where people are from within Mexico (Walcot, 2002). Thus, not country of origin, but rather region of origin best describes settlement patterns.

These divisions do not occur solely between groups of Latin American immigrants. White residents of Atlanta often maintain distance towards Latin American immigrants through residential segregation. As more immigrants from Latin America settled around Buford Highway, previous White residents left. Over time, the Mexican population in the area quadrupled, the Asian population significantly increased, and almost 16,000 Whites moved out of the area (Walcot, 2002, p. 5). Thus, "White flight" contributed to the perception of Buford Highway as a social space for minority populations.

The Legislative Restriction of Social Spaces for New Immigrants

Spatial delineation restricts the rights of Latin American immigrants and distances them from other communities. The ability to reproduce social spaces is an important mechanism of control (Hayden, 1995). As Odem (2009) notes, perhaps the most central ways of restricting the rights of Latin American immigrants in the U.S. is through limiting their access to social spaces. Controlling access to a city's central social spaces can keep marginalized groups on the periphery. Consequently, spaces are not neutral. As places for the maintenance of social memories, dominant groups often restrict others' access to these spaces. The result is that marginalized groups must struggle to gain prominent social spaces. This spatial control, as I will show, is certainly seen in Atlanta.

Odem (2009) provides an illustrative example of how legislative actions contribute to this restriction of space. She notes that on any weekday morning, one will notice recent Latin American immigrants, many undocumented, waiting on street corners to be hired for daily labor. After complaints from suspicious Atlanta residents and employers, city councils have passed ordinances that forbid the gathering of people on private property for the solicitation of jobs without the owners' consent. One cited reason for the law is that business owners claim that the gatherings of Latin American men adversely affect business. Thus, the regulation of labor also limits access to parts of Atlanta.

Increases in such regulations permit the control and surveillance of undocumented workers. Programs such as that of 287(g) operate in certain counties in Atlanta. As part of federal immigration law, this program provides state and local law enforcement officers with authority to investigate, detain, and arrest immigrants on civil and criminal grounds (Cook, 2009, p. 1B). Such measures result in increased surveillance of Latin American immigrants. These measures combine with local ordinances that restrict access to housing, higher education, and employment (Odem, 2009). These measures allow majority populations to maintain spatial control.

Understandably, Latin American immigrants fear such forceful restrictions. Out of trepidation of jail and deportation, people are forced to move to putatively safer sectors of Atlanta (Pickel, 2008a, p. 7D). These laws and their repressive functions have even come to the attention of elected legislators. Congressman Jon Lewis, for example, noted that the immigration laws passed in Georgia, and the

raids that they allow, were “repugnant” and “violating due process and basic human rights” (Pickel, 2008b, p. 3D). As the examples above show, increasing surveillance, terror, and discrimination helps control Latin American communities. Spatial restriction is one manner through which fear is instilled. These tactics are reminiscent of Taussig’s (1992) description of how members of the state control others through normalizing terror. His idea of the “nervous system” describes a society where those in power make terror the norm instead of the exception. In other words, majority groups control marginalized populations through forcing them to live in a state of constant emergency. Thus, a nervous system is when this continuous fear becomes naturalized. In Atlanta, laws enabling arrests and deportation can cause undocumented Latin American immigrants to live in similar states of anxiety.

A multitude of local laws limit access to social space for Latin American populations. Laws restricting driver’s licenses for the undocumented certainly function in this manner. With Atlanta’s suburban sprawl and inefficient public transportation, the use of a car for even habitual needs like work, school, and healthcare becomes essential. Restrictions of the ability to drive greatly limit the spaces that one can visit, thereby limiting the individual from traveling away from the two lines of Atlanta’s public transportation. Violating driver’s license restrictions can result in fines and even jail time (Odem, 2009).

Furthermore, farcical working regulations aimed at Latin American immigrants further separate these populations from White and African American social spaces in Atlanta. A prime example is an incident from the nearby community of Smyrna, where six Mexican bricklayers were arrested for working beyond a 6:00 p.m. construction ban. While laying bricks, an activity that makes little noise, the workers were told by police that they were required to leave. When the workers were still present at the site fifteen minutes later, they were arrested and jailed (Schrade, 2000a, p. 1H). Based on city law, the city’s policy is to first administer a warning followed by a citation, and the police chief could not recall a similar incident that resulted in jail time. Through legislatively controlling the access that Latin American workers have to certain spaces, and following up these restrictions with the promotion of fear in the community, Latin American workers are kept away from the spaces of African Americans and Whites.

Further complicating this case is the uncertainty surrounding whether the workers spoke English; it is almost certain that they all did not. Remarking on this situation and questions surrounding whether the workers were able to understand the police officers, Smyrna mayor Max Bacon commented, “If I go to a foreign country, I better know the language” (Schrade, 2000b, 3H). Such remarks convey the one language, one nation linguistic ideology common to the English Only movement³. With this example, one can note how the convergence of labor policy, authoritarian consequences, and linguistic ideologies contribute to the marginalization of Latin American Immigrants in Atlanta. The linguistic practices of Latin American residents of Atlanta, then, have also become instruments for spatial control.

Linguistic ideologies about the speech of a “Latino” ethnicity involve beliefs about the social spaces where such linguistic practices can occur. As reported by *USA Today* and other news outlets, Georgia-born politician Newt Gingrich, in a speech to the National Federation of Republican Women, announced that, “We

should replace bilingual education with immersion in English so people learn the common language of the country and they learn the language of prosperity, not the language of living in the ghetto" ("Gingrich Critical of Bilingual Education," 2007). In this example, notions of "Spanish" as a static homogeneous language place its speakers into an undesirable, delineated space. It is a Spanish language that is the focus of negative beliefs about the individuals who speak it. The linguistic variety is associated with a certain place--a limiting, undesirable space--to which its speakers are confined. Language, reflecting a group of people, is metaphorically delineated to a certain space in Gingrich's quote.

A similar belief frequently contributes to the marginalization of Spanish speakers in Atlanta. Through objections to language as a reflection of Latin American immigrants, Whites and African Americans can maintain spatial separation. A linguistic variety is but one identifiable feature of a group. Its iconic relationship to the individual, however, provides an opportunity for others to mark boundaries in a way that is more publicly acceptable than directing ethnic or racial criticism directly at the individual. Prior examples show iconicity, such as when the "sloppy" Spanish-English codeswitching resembled the "sloppy" individuals doing it. Urciuoli (2001) writes that race is mapped onto language, where people claim that group traits are seen naturally in linguistic varieties. Similar beliefs are important for spatially bounding the Spanish language to "the ghetto." This association of language with a group allows for the criticism of the speech of "Latinos" as they cross social spaces.

Through practices such as these, Mantero (2008) notes that many Latinos in the Southeast have few communicative opportunities outside the Spanish-speaking community. He cites this linguistic limitation, "the continued linguistic isolation imposed on immigrants through a dearth of efforts on the part of both the Anglo community and the non-English-speaking individual," as a means for "ghettoizing" Latin American immigrants in the South (p. 223). These populations, then, are relegated to a subpar spatial location in part through their linguistic variety. Even Mantero's description of the linguistic variety occurs through spatial metaphor with the word "isolation."

Certainly, then, there is a linguistic dimension in the confinement of Latin American immigrants to marginalized spaces. Simply learning and speaking English, however, is insufficient for any type of "de-ghettoization." Through the semiotic processes associated with a host of features of the individual, one of which is accent, it is likely that others would still use ideologies to circumscribe Latin American immigrants, even if they spoke English. This likelihood is presented in the research below.

The Performance of Misunderstanding as Directed Metapragmatic

Commentary for Spatial Circumscription

In part because of spatial delineation and residential segregation in Atlanta, Whites and African Americans are generally unaccustomed to seeing Latin American immigrants as equals in the same social spaces. Through ten months of ethnographic fieldwork at Peachtree English as a Second Language Center,⁴ a large ESL Center with a majority Spanish-speaking population, it became clear that Latin

American immigrants often greatly fear crossing into social spaces outside of the Buford Highway community. This fieldwork included participant observation, as I worked with students on English, partook in break times and festivals, and observed classes. The focus of the study was Latin American, Spanish-speaking populations. During fieldwork, I had many informal conversations with students about life in Atlanta. Furthermore, I followed up such conversations with semi-structured interviews about daily communication in Atlanta with 20 students. All students spoke Spanish natively, and their ages ranged from 18 to 55 years old. Interviewees included both men and women. Additionally, the participants' English abilities spanned all levels of proficiency, from those who knew little English to those who were fluent. Thus, our talks occurred in both Spanish and English.

From this fieldwork, it was evident that Latin American immigrants often experience negative reactions to their speech when interacting with members of the larger English-speaking community. In other words, similar to the findings of Hill (1998) and Urciuoli (1996), when Latin American immigrants cross into African American and White public spaces, they encounter negative reactions to their speech. Nearly every participant, spanning those with excellent English to those with little knowledge of English, noted that listeners pointedly and antagonistically expressed that they did not understand them. One student, María, expressed how people, both African American and White residents of Atlanta, get frustrated with her when she speaks. She performed how they sighed, rolled their eyes, and very visibly showed that they were displeased with her linguistic variety. The result, she said, is that she no longer ventured to social spaces where English-speakers are common, "*Ahora nunca paso por esos lugares de la ciudad*" [Now I never pass through those places in the city]. María blamed her "accent" and her lack of English knowledge for these actions.

Similarly, nearly all of the adults mentioned that when they speak English, people commonly react with "What?!" or "Excuse me?" in a hostile tone of voice. An unreceptive "I don't understand!" was cited as a frequent response, as well. Nearly all of the Latin American immigrants that I spoke with had received reactions such as these. They noted that such reactions occurred when they passed through spaces like grocery stores and restaurants located away from Buford Highway. These negative responses made them more nervous about practicing English. Whether the student was an advanced English speaker or one that knew only enough for basic communication, all of the Latin American individuals that I encountered had similar experiences in English-speaking spaces. Such instances show how language can serve as a boundary, where the inability to understand, or the unwillingness of the listener to admit that he or she understands, creates an emotional detachment. Such results indicate the importance of hearing as a socially constructed performance. It is this display of misunderstanding that especially frustrates Latin American immigrants.

Ironically, the ire of Whites and African Americans toward the immigrants' supposed inability to assimilate contributes to the marginalization of Latin Americans in the U.S. Latin American immigrants experience hostile reactions of incomprehension even though they are speaking English. Through reacting in this way, African American and White English speakers critique the very knowledge that they say Latin American immigrants lack. Furthermore, most of these native Spanish speakers are unquestionably intelligible in English. Whether the native Eng-

lish speakers actually understand Latin American immigrants is thus irrelevant. Through the performance of misunderstanding, White and African American speakers uphold social spaces because Latin American immigrants are rendered unable to communicate. These reactions occur regardless of the level of English, and Latin American immigrants may then cease attempting to communicate in White or African American English-speaking places. This performance of misunderstanding is crucial to maintaining boundaries across social spaces.

The separation resulting from communicative resistance is bolstered by the emotional reactions of Latin American immigrants to these situations. The frequent result of these reactions, as my ethnographic fieldwork made clear, is anxiety, timidity, and the avoidance of interaction with English speakers. Such characteristics are illustrative of the responses that Bourdieu (2001) notes are seen in symbolic acts of power, where the dominant invoke just such feelings in the dominated, and the dominated show the acceptance of imposed limits through their bodily emotions. With Latin American individuals, negative attitudes in response to their linguistic practices are acts of symbolic violence. These acts are reflected in the anxiety Spanish-speakers face in crossing social spaces. As Jessica, a Mexican female in her 40s, told me, "I no longer go to the grocery store off of Buford Highway. I know that, one day, someone is going to make me cry and all of the customers in the store will watch. I cannot permit that it happens to me, so I do not go." Such reactions thus leave students unwilling to risk crossing social spaces associated with White and African American speakers of English.

As previously mentioned, the students with accents closer to Standard English still received the same responses of unintelligibility. Throughout the months I worked at the English as a Second Language Center, I interacted with numerous Spanish speakers in English, seeing a range of accents. As a common phenomenon, the students with accents closer to Standard English, and with proficient knowledge of English, still reported negative reactions to their speech.

In one example, a student from Uruguay had an accent that was only slightly different from the standard when speaking English. She was a recent arrival to the community and had studied English extensively in the past. Furthermore, she had formerly lived in Chicago. Desiring to enroll in free English classes, she was hoping to perfect her English to the greatest degree possible. Regardless of her command of English, however, she clearly had experienced negative reactions to her speech.

When I speak English, people always say 'What? Excuse me?' and that they don't understand me. I try to tell them, but they don't understand, just say 'What?! What?!' and I can't get things accomplished. People get annoyed when I can't speak English and say, 'What?,' just watching me. The people in these locations are very cold. Yes, very, very cold. No one wants to help me, and then I am scared to communicate. (From field-notes, 11/15/06)

This case contrasts with research showing that people perceive varying degrees of accents and rate milder accents more positively. Rather, it seems that this student is unable to overcome perceptions of her ethnicity to avoid performances of misunderstanding.

Such results better support the research of Rubin (1998), who found that people often believe that they do not understand accents because the person appears to be “foreign.” In his study, he performed a matched-guise test by altering pictures instead of speech and playing talk from the same speaker twice: once paired with picture of a White speaker, and then again re-matched with someone of a different ethnicity, one that looked less like a “White” U.S. citizen. Respondents claimed they could not understand the very same speech when paired with a different picture. The pre-formed image of the individual, who the respondents may have thought spoke a certain way in the past, shaped how listeners believed that they heard speech in the present. The linguistic patterns, it seems, were the focus of broader reactions to a host of traits related to ethnicity. Such research is bolstered by much data showing negative evaluations of the accents of International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) by U.S. undergraduate students, regardless of actual speech.⁵ Though censure focuses on linguistic practices, co-occurring signs affect how the construction of an “accent” is linked to social personae. The evaluation of physical features and what Mauss (1935/1975) calls techniques of the body, or ways of carrying oneself (such as dress, for example), are important. Combined with semiotic connections to metadiscourses about the speech of certain groups, listeners draw upon a number of features to understand the speech of others. Thus, these examples indicate that people are perceived to talk like a particular group regardless of how they actually speak.

The negative reactions to the presence of Latin American immigrants under the pretense of speech did not stop at statements about incomprehension. The responses often included verbal orders to learn English. Willy, for example, had an experience where someone told him (in English) that he needed to learn English. “*Es mejor que aprendas inglés* [It is better that you learn English], he said that he was told. In fact, he was already speaking in English when he received this response. The reality is that Willy, an intermediate-level English speaker, was fully capable of carrying on a conversation in English. Popular notions about language use often disregard what constitutes an “ethnolect,” or a variety of a major language that is influenced by language contact within a bilingual community.⁶ In this case, the linguistic variety is used as a boundary marker, with negative attitudes towards the English of Latin American immigrants being so severe that people deny that these varieties are English. The irony of chastising speakers’ linguistic abilities as they attempt to improve the very focus of criticism, through practice, is unfortunate.

Not only did the students describe the verbal responses that were made in regards to their ethnicity and speech, but they also noticed reactions expressed in nonverbal codes (Saville-Troike, 1989) when they crossed into White and African American public spaces. Several students commented that when they asked questions at stores, people would stare at them without answering, or even walk away without responding, leaving the person to fend for him- or herself. One student commented that when at church, she would experience people staring at her and ignoring her, which she felt was partly due to her language. She said that some people were friendly and that she could understand their questions and reply, but a number of other people ignored her completely. These examples show that in addition to negative vocal and verbal responses to language, people also respond paralinguistically and extralinguistically. Such responses involve the maintenance of emotional (or, where people turn their

bodies and leave, physical) distance from the individuals, conveying broader notions of how space becomes demarcated.

There are instances where the broader Atlanta community finds it more permissible for Latin American workers to cross social spaces. As one worker tells me, White people are amiable when she performs duties for her job as a cleaning lady in an office. The student said that as she is cleaning, people talk to her, and many times she does not understand but simply smiles and shakes her head. But when she does this, she says that people there are always nice to her. "It doesn't matter, don't worry," she says they say, or "You're busy working." With examples such as these, it is noteworthy that reactions change while performing a lower status job for the benefit of others. In these public spaces, where a single individual is working in an almost invisible way, it seems that Latin American immigrants encounter less antagonism. Such results support notions that labor subordination among Latinos is a form of racialization (De Genova, 2006). As opposed to numerous Latin American workers waiting in line to work, or groups of Latin Americans working, a single individual working during common working hours provokes less criticism than attempting to share the social space as an equal. Perhaps broader Atlanta society does not see such language users as trespassing upon spaces that are allocated to the dominant language users. While the student interpreted these comments as friendly, they could also be interpreted as a pejorative. "You're busy working," could be perceived as cavalier and expressing superiority, a discourse that maintains the power status quo.

The consensus of the adult Latin American immigrants was that the reactions of others discouraged them from practicing their English and venturing out into the English-speaking community. As such, one can certainly see how semiotic formations like linguistic ideologies assist in the boundary marking function of language. In part through the indexical social personae related to language, people chastise the speech of Latin American immigrants, especially when passing through predominantly White and African American parts of the city. These reactions clearly and understandably made the students apprehensive about continued interaction with English speakers. The easiest way to avoid contact, then, is to not visit the communities where navigation is complicated by the performance of misunderstanding.

The conversations with Latin American workers at the Peachtree English as a Second Language Center show that they are the victims of negative ideologies about language and exhibit some metapragmatic awareness. All of the students with whom I spoke were self-conscious of their speech, having been accustomed to negative responses in the past. These participants spanned numerous backgrounds, coming from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Venezuela, and Uruguay. The diversity of the demographics shows that *Chicanos* are not the only nationality of "Latinos" to experience negative reactions to speech. Urciuoli (1995) notes that linguistic boundedness can emerge with all populations of Spanish speakers, whether Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, or Central Americans (p. 537). Because of the diverse group of nationalities included in the study, results show that Chicano English or Mexican American-accented English are not the only, nor necessarily the most prominent, cases that incite negative language attitudes and discrimination in Atlanta. Rather, it seems that the construction of a homogenous Latino ethnicity contributes to a belief that people of these diverse backgrounds

belong to the same group. Linguistic practices, through association with Spanish speakers in the U.S., indirectly index incompetence and lack of proficiency. People in White public space seize upon these signs to enforce spatial boundaries by performing misunderstanding towards Latin American immigrants.

The results of this research support that Whites and African Americans evaluate a host of features, one of which is communication, in deciphering how to respond to Latin American immigrants. Through essentializing others in this way, Whites and African Americans simplify the linguistic patterns of individuals belonging to this group regardless of what actually occurs. Gal and Irvine (1995) refer to this process as *erasure*, as such essentializations mask inconsistent differences that may occur within a group. In other words, phonetic differences between individual speech patterns are obscured by linguistic ideologies related to expectations about how members of a certain group will speak. The focus, then, is on how hearing is socially constructed. This observation also shows that linguistic practices are but one of many physical features, or techniques of the body, that people rely upon to understand communication. Linguistic practices co-occur with a host of other signs such as styles of dress, ways of carrying the body, and physical traits, and listeners take all of these possibilities into the evaluation of the speech of individuals. As noted by other authors (see Irvine, 1989, for example), there is no wholly arbitrary relationship between linguistic differentiation and social differentiation. The combinations of signs are judged together, and all of these can result in the reactions of misunderstanding experienced by Latin American immigrants.

Conclusion

Through the processes described above, reactions to the communication of Latin American immigrants enforce spatial distance in Atlanta. On the one hand, the municipal governments of the Atlanta area have continued legal restrictions of space in response to increases in Latin American immigration. Through legally regulating areas in which Latin American immigrants can reside, those in power attempt to control these groups. Spatial group boundaries are constructed in part through law, and this delineation is important for the imagination of a homogeneous linguistic group. Through imagining and enforcing group boundaries, and regulating group spaces, the Spanish language has come to index a marginalized, "not-where-I-am-present" space to White and African American communities. Dialogue about the "language of living in the ghetto" and "linguistic isolation" shows how others direct negative ideologies about Spanish speakers towards language (as opposed to the individuals themselves).

In turn, metapragmatic reactions in African American and White communities towards the speech of Latin American immigrants include performances of misunderstanding. These reactions uphold ethnic boundaries and reproduce the status quo of social spaces. Through an understanding of the socio-historical power asymmetries towards Latinos in Atlanta, one can see how the act of listening is socially influenced. Additionally, through passing laws that restrict the spatial opportunities of Latin American immigrants, as well as metacommunicatively enforcing social spaces, majority populations can control the actions of Latin Ameri-

can individuals. These restrictions illustrate what Low and Lawrence-Zuñega (2003) call “spatial tactics,” or the strategic use of social space for the control of others. This theory means that space is not neutral, but rather a key component of the power structure in society.

In the case of Atlanta, a recent history of spatial regulation of Latin American immigrants is enabling reproduction of an unequal power structure. The ethnographic research reported here shows how directing criticism towards a linguistic variety reflects broader racial sentiments against Latin American immigrants. Such actions contribute to and benefit from this spatial control. The performances of misunderstanding of White and African American speakers show the indexicality of Spanish-influenced English, as well as how listeners perceive co-occurring signs to interpret the speech of others. These reactions are part of a local increase in spatial restriction. All of these factors converge for the spatial control of Latin American immigrants in Atlanta.

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Notes

¹There are many examples, but for a particularly thorough one related to language and ethnicity, see Fought (2006).

²See Furusest & Smith (2006) for a history of this term.

³See Hornberger (1998) for a review of this and similar difficulties for language policy in the U.S. and worldwide.

⁴The name of the school, as well as the names of all individuals, are pseudonyms.

⁵See Crusan-Alviani (1998) for a concise review of this literature.

⁶For information about scholarly research and the term *ethnolect*, see Clyne (2000) and Eckert (2008).

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