

Latin@ in Chicago: Constructing ethnic identities in research interviews

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Sociolinguists are increasingly interested in the complex relationship between regional dialects and ethnic identities. For example, a growing body of research focuses on the varieties of English spoken in Latin@ communities in US regions such as the Southwest (Fought 2003; Mendoza-Denton 2008), New York City (Zentella 1997; Newman 2010), and the South (Wolfram, Carter, & Moriello, 2004). However, these varieties of English spoken in the Midwest have received less attention, with the exceptions of Frazer (1996) and Roeder (2010). Moreover, only a few previous studies (Farr 2006; Konopka & Pierrehumbert 2008) have focused on language use in Latin@ communities in Chicago specifically. Our research addresses this empirical gap by collecting much-needed data on language use across the diverse Latin@ landscape of Chicago.

In addition to analyses of the systematic features of Latin@ varieties of English and other ethnolects, previous research has also examined the dialogic construction of ethnic identities in social interaction (see Schilling-Estes 2004, among many others). Much of this work shows how speakers draw on a range of linguistic resources, what Benor (2010) calls “ethnolinguistic repertoires,” to dynamically construct their ethnic identities in unfolding interactions. In this approach, researchers use methods of discourse analysis and ethnography to study the social meanings of the locally-relevant linguistic features that are recruited in these individual and group identity performances.

In our research, we employ both approaches to studying language, discourse, and the construction of Latin@ identities in Chicago. We are conducting an ongoing collaborative student-faculty research project that employs multiple methods of data collection, including interviews, surveys, and ethnographic participant observation. This poster will present findings from a set of 10 qualitative research interviews we have conducted with speakers (ages 19-30) who identify as members of either Mexican-heritage or Puerto Rican-heritage communities in Chicago. The interviews were conducted by a team of undergraduate student researchers who were trained in sociolinguistic field methods. Using quantitative and qualitative discourse analysis methods, we examine the constellation of features that speakers (interviewers and interviewees) used to index, negotiate, and jointly construct ethnic identities during the unfolding interactions. We examine the use of phonological variables, such as final /z/ devoicing, along with in-depth analyses of interactional moments in the interviews where self/other ethnic identities become salient. Importantly, our analysis pays attention to the ways in which the interviewers participate in shaping these emergent meanings.

This research sheds additional light on the discursive practices of constructing ethnic identities in the research interview context, and examines some of the distinctive linguistic features of emergent Latin@ varieties of English in Chicago. Moreover, this poster presentation also highlights one successful method of collaborative research between faculty and students in Linguistics, and shows

the benefits of engaging undergraduate students in hands-on empirical research to answer questions about language that matter to them and to wider, ongoing conversations in the field.

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