

RISLUS Reports

Outgroup Use of an Ingroup Language: Spanish and English in U.S. Service Encounters

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RISLUS Reports is a forum for RISLUS fellows, associates, and visiting researchers to present their work. This series of occasional talks is intended to foster intellectual exchange between RISLUS researchers and the New York City community. We hope you will be able to attend this talk and future talks in the series. RISLUS is the Research Institute for the Study of Language in Urban Society.

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This presentation offers an examination of Spanish in the United States as a language of selected uses and selected users, along with the factors that can influence U.S. Latinos' acceptance of its use by other Latinos and by non-Latinos. The presentation also has relevance to intercultural pragmatics in the area of interactions between native and non-native speakers, and by extension, to second language instruction in pragmatics.

It focuses on a single dependent variable: whether or not a native speaker of Spanish who is addressed in Spanish will answer in the same language. A response in a language other than the one in which an interlocutor has spoken does not have the same significance in every situation, and in some circumstances it is of little note. But in exchanges between strangers a failure to reciprocate language choice can have negative consequences, which can manifest themselves in the unfavorable impressions one group forms of another.

Important factors come into play in the case of Spanish in the United States. The status of a minority language as a resource for group and personal identity is compromised if ingroup members accept its use by outgroup members. At first glance, acceptance of the use of Spanish by outgroup members is what appears to be happening in the corpus. A team of fieldworkers composed of both Latinos and non-Latinos acted as customers in face-to-face service encounters, and received a high rate of reciprocal response overall. That is, they initiated conversations in Spanish with service workers in a variety of businesses and more often than not were answered in Spanish.

But the situation studied here—the service encounter—has its own special characteristics. Chief among these is the power differential between server and customer. In the United States, the customer has by convention the dominant position. Hence, workers accommodate to the customer's wishes, and one of the ways in which this can be done is by matching the customer's apparent language choice in a given encounter. Nevertheless, the non-Latino fieldworkers garnered non-reciprocal responses at a rate twice that of their Latino colleagues. In other words, in several instances service workers spoke to them exclusively in English. In other cases however, workers did seem to accommodate to these fieldworkers, alternating between Spanish and English to acknowledge the customer's overt language choice as well as his or her perceived linguistic affiliation.

Racial ethnic appearance seems to be a powerful factor in workers' language decisions. Several individuals who were interviewed mentioned appearance

as the deciding factor when choosing a language in which to initiate a conversation with a stranger. Compelling evidence for the importance of physical appearance was also seen in the telephone portion of the study. In telephone service encounters, in which the customer was a non-native speaker of Spanish—and hence apt to be categorized as non-Latino based on what is known about auditory cues to ethnicity—workers answered entirely in Spanish more of the time. From this we can conclude that visual cues outweigh audio cues in determining ingroup or outgroup status, and from there, linguistic affiliation.