

Ideologies of Mexican Immigrant Language in the New Latino Diaspora

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Abstract

Attracted by regional labor opportunities, almost ten thousand Mexican immigrants have come to the Mid Atlantic suburban town of Marshall over the past fifteen years. The immigrants, plus the continued movement of wealthier people to surrounding suburbs, have significantly changed the look and feel of this town of 30,000, once inhabited mostly by English-speaking whites and blacks. Long-time residents must make sense of their new neighbors in this changing landscape. At the same time, immigrants must adjust to hosts' ideas about them and form their own opinions about an unfamiliar social context. How immigrants are viewed impacts their experiences and futures in a community. In particular, the ways in which teachers, administrators and other host community members understand immigrants can influence the experiences of immigrant students in schools. Long-time residents draw upon many resources as they form perceptions of their new neighbors. Many attend to external characteristics of the newcomers: the way they look, where they work, how they speak. While generalizations overtly based on race or ethnicity have become taboo in many places, oversimplifications about the language that immigrants speak or how they speak it do not carry the same stigma. Yet value judgments about newcomers are often hidden in local discourse about language use, in talk about immigrants' English proficiency, for example, or about the language they speak in public and how they speak it. Beliefs and attitudes ostensibly about language can act as a proxy for beliefs about individuals or groups of people who speak a language and can influence how these individuals or groups are treated. In this paper we conceptualize these beliefs and attitudes as language ideologies, culturally-situated theories about the relationship between language and the social world. We examine how language ideologies circulated by residents and educators in New Marshall, as well as by immigrant students themselves, help both hosts and immigrants understand students' place in the social order of the community and their concomitant rights and responsibilities. In particular, we examine how the concept of an "educated person" is constructed in part through language ideologies in this community and how this concept influences Mexican immigrant students. Our analysis draws on ethnographic data collected in New Marshall over the past four years, including recorded interviews with townspeople, school staff, and students, as well as videotaped classroom interaction. The data show how people often interpret low English proficiency—and uses of language characterized as such—as deficit, disability, lack of ambition, or even outright resistance, while Spanish proficiency is regularly erased. At the same time, we find that Mexican students develop both analogous and antithetical accounts about the meanings and connotations of English use and proficiency. We argue that these language ideologies play an important role in the constitution of social relations between immigrant students at New Marshall High School, the educators who teach them and the community that surrounds them. As taken-for-granted ideas that often work under the surface of social interactions, these ideologies about language shape the experiences of young Mexican immigrants in New Marshall, the organization and quality of the services that are provided for them, and their post-secondary options.