Intergenerational changes in language use and identity in superdiversity: Migration, bilingualism, and heritage languages

This paper addresses the impact of language, migration, and identity on people’s lives via close examination of the changing relationship between language, ideology, and identity across immigrant generations in contact with other social groups in an immigrant gateway city characterized by superdiversity, transnationalism, and historic racial segregation (Blommaert, 2010; Vertovec, 2007). Research questions address changing attitudes and ideologies about language as indexing different “kinds of people” and social behaviors (Gee, 1992; Silverstein, 2003), with particular attention to 1) bilingualism and 2) language as an index of cultural affiliation and belonging related to diasporic and transnational space. Data are sociolinguistic interviews with first, 1.5, and second generation Latino immigrants in Washington, D.C., a superdiverse global city characterized by both historical segregation and an African American majority, which emerged as an immigrant gateway with a heterogenous and rapidly-growing Latino population after World War II. The paper uses qualitative sociolinguistic and discourse analysis methodology, ethnography, and metalinguistic commentary to provide new insights into the relationship between linguistic practice and proficiency, social environment and ideology, and group and individual identity manifested through discursive self- and other-positioning. This comprehensive integrated approach is necessary in complex multilingual environments, where a single methodology cannot adequately address linguistic behavior and its social motivations. While participants encompass a wide range of experiences and language behavior in keeping with the diversity of the D.C. Latino community, a good deal of consistency is shown in language attitudes and ideologies and patterning by immigrant generation and social group. Results indicate that bilingualism is an important stance object (Du Bois, 2004), valued by all generations while also serving as a site for identity gatekeeping. Home-language maintenance is seen as agentive and lower heritage language proficiency associated with “Americanization” and home-culture rejection, factors which contribute to linguistic insecurity and avoidance in later generations. Diverse social networks contribute to hybridity and relax the language-culture-identity paradigm as later generations orient to local discourses of identity; further, emergent host-country language practices, such as Latino English in contact with African American English, serve as indices of local identity that contrast with whiteness for self- and other-positioning within the racialized social landscape (Tseng, 2015). Implications for research on migration, language, culture, and identity include the influence of social attitudes and environment on emergent multilingual repertoires, heritage languages, and new language forms; language as an index of individual, group, and place identity in diasporic and transnational circumstances; and the dynamic relationship between individuals and group practices affected by changing generational and residential/social practices. Findings also highlight the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to migration and multilingualism, and the need for integrated sociolinguistic research incorporating ethnography and discourse analysis to contribute to the “social turn in SLA” and broader questions of culture, society, and education (Block, 2003; Cutler, 2014; Garcia & Wei, 2014; Hay & Drager, 2007; Johnstone, 2006).
References


