

Preface: Language Planning in Intimate Household Settings

Every story of language maintenance is, in some way, the story of human resilience. This is not an exception. This book is about language and much more than language. Language is the vehicle for memory – collective and individual. It is the site of practices, ideas and stories that make us a *we*. It is also the site of practices, ideas and stories that make us an *I*. Through language we give form and meaning to the experiences that create the (speech) community. In community we create and give meaning to language. This is a book about language in the small spaces: the language of cursing and laughing, of crying and scolding and asking for the trash to be taken out at night. In other words, it is a book about the language through which the joint experience of a family comes together. This is an analysis of everyday household language dynamics and planning efforts in a group of first-generation Spanish-speaking families in the US Midwest. It is also a comparison of the self-perceptions and attitudes of the mother and one child in each of these households about their family language and its viability in public and private spaces. Most importantly, this is an in-depth examination of the gendered nature of linguistic transmission in immigrant households (Lanza, 2007; Okita, 2002).

Because this is a discussion about language from the perspective of working-class immigrant families, it is a discussion about language planning with no armies, no institutional agendas, no official proclamations, memorandums of understanding or certificates of achievement. On a larger scale, it is also a discussion about the everyday choices that take place in communities and families in every country on the receiving end of global population movements. This book is written at a specific point in the history of Spanish–English contact in the heart of the United States. It is a snapshot, a slice in time, of the experience of US Latinos in a mid-21st century, post-industrial, hyper-globalized Midwest. As such, one of the secondary arguments made here is that states like Nebraska constitute a suitable laboratory in which to study the sociolinguistic aspects of language contact dynamics which have been accelerated in recent decades by global labor movement, international agribusiness markets and post-industrial population shifts.

Language experience takes place along at least five dimensions: the materiality of language and its use; the perception of speakers about these conditions; their beliefs about self and others in the speech community; their emotional responses about language; and their emotional responses about language users. Despite this fact, even though bilingualism at the individual level and language contact at the level of the speech community are, by definition, dynamic, in attempting to describe them most research efforts (this one included) run the risk of framing them as linear processes with an either/or result. And yet, in thinking about language maintenance and language loss, linguists might do well to borrow an insight shared by neuroscientists and students of Buddhism alike: there is no intrinsic identity in anything; when conditions change, reality – and our perception of it, changes (Olendzki, 2012: 81).

In studying language dynamics in these households, how are we to know if we are witnessing the maintenance of Spanish or just a stage in the path toward its loss? Most likely, we may not answer that question without the recourse of time. What then, is the value of studying language use in these households, in this period, under these conditions, if we cannot arrive at a definitive answer? I will argue that this value lies precisely in these small spaces: in that window of time between being and losing, between inhabiting and dissipating; therein lies linguistic – which is to say human – experience.