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## Language Attitudes and Gender: Descriptors and Nationalistic Ideologies

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## **LANGUAGE ATTITUDES AND GENDER: DESCRIPTORS AND NATIONALISTIC IDEOLOGIES**

*John W. Schwieter\**

### **ABSTRACT**

The present study explores language attitudes among 23 English language learners of Spanish enrolled in elementary Spanish. The data elicited from these participants were analyzed to see whether females used more positive adjectives to describe the Spanish language than their male counterparts (as shown in previous studies). The data were also analyzed to see whether the participants' adjectives and comments supported evidence of nationalistic language ideology. The results mirrored those of past studies: females were more likely to describe Spanish with positive adjectives. Additionally, there was a great amount of nationalistic language ideology and ethnocentrism among the participants who felt negatively toward Spanish. The researcher argues that this may have contributed towards negative language ideologies reported by the participants.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The attitudes that people have about languages are highly correlated with their perceptions toward speakers of those particular languages (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Williams (as cited in Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994) argues that the definition of language is related to the definition of humans. Indeed, most anthropologists would agree that languages represent their speakers and speakers represent their languages. This phenomenon has become the foundation for many studies that have tried to discover to what extent, or perhaps more accurately stated, to what extreme, language ideologies influence people's attitudes and perceptions of their speakers and vice versa. One common type of language ideology is what Haslett (2000) refers to as "nationalistic language ideology." She suggests that nationalistic language ideology is "the indexical link between one nation and one language that still persists decades after anthropologists and other scholars have debunked the old equation of 'a race = a culture = a language' (p. 2)." To explore this, many studies in language ideology have analyzed the adjectives that people use to describe languages and whether nationalistic ideologies have an impact on

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their overall language attitudes. The present study is an extension of this experimental approach among language learners in a first-semester Spanish course.

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

#### **Foreign language requirement**

Studies on language ideology toward Spanish are important not only because of the raise in Hispanic population in the United States but also because of its strong presence in the university system. Indeed, many universities now have a foreign language requirement for graduation and an overwhelming amount of students choose Spanish for obvious, practical reasons. These obligatory language classes broaden students' understanding of other peoples and cultures and many studies have demonstrated student support in making foreign languages a requirement in the university setting (Morello, 1988; Roberts, 1992).

Roberts (1992) conducted a study which demonstrated the perceptions of entering university freshmen regarding foreign language education as a requirement. She found that her participants overall supported foreign language study because it promoted cultural understanding. Roberts' findings mirrored those of Morello (1988) in that over 65% of his participants felt that foreign language should be required to graduate from college.

#### **ETHNOCENTRISM AND "ENGLISH ONLY"**

Although many students feel that foreign language education is beneficial, not all are open to multilingualism. This has especially been prevalent among those with negative attitudes toward immigrants in the United States. Chandler and Tsai (2001) argue that language ideology can be indirectly (negative or positively) shaped by immigration attitudes. While perceptions toward immigration are not of primary interest in the present study, it is worth mentioning as it can promote ethnocentrism (Chandler & Tsai, 2001). Chandler and Tsai suggest that because some Americans feel that part of their self-identification is the English language, a defensive attitude is taken toward anything (and anyone) seen as threatening to the culture and society (e.g., the presence of a foreign language in the U.S.). This idea of "you must know English to be in the United States" and its effects on language ideology will be explored in more detail in the present study.

Not speaking English in public was found to be a major factor preventing acceptance of Hispanics among non-Hispanic community members in Schwieter's (2002) study. His study was a linguistic and cultural report of

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migrant, Hispanics in mainstream, English-only classes in a rural town in Illinois. One of his participants who spoke very little English suggested that his ability to speak Spanish was hindering his acceptance among other students and members of the community and prevented him from participating in extra-curricular activities. Sociolinguistically speaking, another participant claimed that there were many problems on the streets between Hispanics and Anglos because the Hispanics weren't speaking English in public (and in fact, couldn't speak English, therefore they couldn't help it). He also claimed that he had even seen rocks thrown at Hispanics because they were speaking "foreign talk" in the streets. Even within the school system, one participant commented:

...there is no punishment for speaking Spanish [in school] but there are verbal scoldings from the teachers, 'here, in front of me, you will speak English!' (Schwieter, 2002, Interview P1).

Schwieter's (2002) findings support Chandler and Tsai's (2001) comments regarding ethnocentrism. Because of the town's local factory, the community was seeing a major growth in migrant workers who couldn't speak English. The Anglo community members in the research community reported feeling threatened by the migrants' inability to understand English and they feared that Spanish would "take over" their town. In addition to supporting Chandler and Tsai, Schwieter confirms what Haslett (2000) refers to as nationalistic language ideology.

Haslett (2000) observed similar ethnocentric comments from community members in a small town in Iowa. By analyzing two years of the town's newspaper call-in column, Haslett separated comments into two distinct categories: those that represented nationalistic language ideology and those that exhibited ideology of linguistic tolerance. An example of a radical nationalistic language ideology from her study was:

In regards to all Americans: go English-speaking people! If people come from a different country over to ours they should speak English. If we go over there, we'd have to learn their language (2000, p. 9).

Another community member proposed creating a separate school for Hispanic students until they learned English as to minimize the amount of mixing of the two languages (Haslett, 2000). Haslett argued that community members felt threatened that the power he has in English could be lost by having it "diluted" with Spanish.

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### HISPANICS' REASONS FOR SPEAKING/MAINTAINING SPANISH

Is it possible that many of the English native speakers in Haslett's (2000) and Schwieter's (2002) study don't realize *why* Hispanics speak Spanish in public? People may immediately assume that Hispanics don't know English simply because they are speaking Spanish in public. Mejías and Anderson (1988) report that it isn't that Hispanics aren't familiar with English, *per se*. The Hispanic participants in their study claimed that they used Spanish to get along and establish bonds with their parents, relatives and friends. Furthermore, they suggested that many times it was necessary for communication as some of their family members and friends didn't speak English. Mejías and Anderson found that the use of Spanish does not equate to lack of English knowledge. On the contrary, it is simply a way for Hispanics to express themselves between each other, share a common connection, and attain social goals.

Hornberger's (1988) Quechua participants exhibited much loyalty to their first language, a finding similar to that of Schwieter (2002) and Mejías and Anderson (1988). Hornberger suggested that the Quechua held on to their first language especially for communicative reasons, even though a "higher" and more "prestigious" language existed within the same country (i.e., Spanish in Peru). Her participants, also recognized the importance of their first language as a tradition and essential part of their culture. This is yet another example of the importance of language maintenance.

### THE SOUNDS AND PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGES

In addition to interviews, the experimental design of the majority of the previously discussed studies, other studies have found that exploring the adjectives used to describe a language is an effective way to investigate language ideology. Ludwig (1983) conducted a study that analyzed students' attitudes of languages. Her participants consisted of French, German and Spanish students enrolled in university courses. All the participants completed a questionnaire which elicited adjectives describing how they felt about their respective foreign language. Ludwig revealed that the students enrolled in Spanish felt that it was the easiest language to learn which contributed to its higher enrollment. Ludwig's study also explored why the participants chose their foreign language (and not another). Interestingly, in particular, females reported taking Spanish because it sounds "neat" more than twice as much as males. It is quite interesting to compare these results to those reported by French language learners: nearly the same amount of males and females reported taking French because it sounds "neat." Table 1 shows these two results. It is striking that students actually chose one language to study for the

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next two years over another based on whether it was “neat” sounding. This is a clear example of how the sounds of a language influence peoples’ perceptions and although many students may base their decisions to take certain foreign languages on other things such as cultural and literary interests, Ludwig’s (1983) results suggest that even the most simplistic elements such as how “romantic” or “neat” the language sounds influence students’ choices in university courses.

Table 1  
*Ludwig’s (1983) question on who enrolled because it sounded ‘neat’ by gender in percent*

	French	Spanish
Male	19.7	6.3
Female	21.0	14.5

In Ludwig’s (1983) questionnaire, she also provided a list of adjectives that her participants were to select if they accurately described the language in question. Table 2 includes nine of the adjectives that were included Ludwig’s study. It must be noted that in Ludwig’s study, more adjectives were used; however, Table 2 only shows the nine adjectives that were adopted into the present study.

Table 2  
*Ludwig’s (1983) adjective distribution in percent used to describe Spanish by gender*

Adjective	Male	Female
Attractive (+)	10.7	11.8
Clear (+)	8.6	8.7
Logical (+)	9.8	11.4
Precise (+)	6.3	6.4
Romantic (+)	7.9	9.7
Scary (-)	*	*
Cold (-)	*	*
Complex (-)	8.6	7.4
Strange (-)	4.2	2.7

\*Note: infrequently chosen; not reported in Ludwig (1983)

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Next to each adjective in Table 2 the symbols (+) and (-) indicate whether the adjective is positive or negative, respectively. It should be noted that in all cases, positive adjectives were used more by females and negative adjectives were used more by males. This prompts the questions, why are females more positive in how they describe the Spanish language when compared to males? and what are some factors that contribute to the negative descriptors? Although much research has been conducted on analysis of language ideology via adjectives among language learners, only a few studies have simultaneously examined it and nationalistic language ideologies that may also be prevalent. By combining the two questions above, the purpose of the present study is to analyze whether or not a particular gender uses more positive adjectives to describe Spanish and to examine any evidence of nationalistic language ideologies among Spanish language learners in university courses.

### **PRESENT STUDY**

#### **Participants**

Twenty-three English language learners of Spanish currently enrolled in a first-year Spanish course at a major U.S. university participated in the present study. These included 13 males and 10 females with an average age of 20. The participants reported their permanent homes being in Florida (19), Texas (2), Tennessee (1), and Rhode Island (1).

### **METHODOLOGY**

A questionnaire (see Appendix A) consisting of both short answer and essay questions was distributed to all the participants. Three questions (8, 10, and 15) were of primary importance to the results of the present study. As seen in Table 2, nine of the 10 adjectives used in Ludwig (1983) were adopted in the present study in Question 8. However, to ensure that there was an equal number of positive and negative descriptors (five positive and five negative), one additional negative adjective was created, namely “fast/careless.” For the sake of clarification, the following descriptors were coded as positive: attractive, romantic, clear, precise, and logical. The following were coded as negative: complex, cold, strange, scary, and fast/careless. To explore additional descriptors that were not restricted to a list, Question 10 was provided to allow the participants to produce an open-ended list of adjectives they felt described Spanish. This differed from Question 8 because the participants were not confined to a list. Finally, Question 15 sought to elicit attitudes that the participants had about language diversity, Hispanic cultures,

and Spanish spoken in the United States. Furthermore, the intention of this question was to also bring forth any nationalistic language ideologies the participants may have had.

## RESULTS

### Adjectives describing Spanish

I first would like to comment on the adjectives the participants selected from the list of ten in Question 8. As far as these adjectives are concerned, my data suggest similar, but not exact results as those of Ludwig (1983). Table 3 shows the positive adjectives used to describe Spanish as given by the participants. The adjectives “logical” and “clear” were equally produced by males and females in this study. However, in accordance with Ludwig (1983), the descriptors “attractive” and “romantic” were used more by females. Finally, contrary, but not radically opposed to Ludwig’s results is the instance of “precise.” In this study, only 2.6% of the adjectives used by male participants was “precise.” When considering the small sample size of this study, this does not constitute a significant difference from the females’ 0%. As Table 2 showed, there was only a .1% difference between males and females producing “precise,” which only accounts for a few individuals in Ludwig’s (1983) sample. This suggests that, although “precise” has a higher percent of usage by male participants in the present study, there is not enough difference between Ludwig’s and these results to constitute a significant contradiction.

Table 4 demonstrates the negative adjectives used to describe Spanish as given by the participants. Except in the case of “complex,” males produced more negative adjectives than females overall. This is an interesting finding for which I have only one explanation. The final grade distribution for the course from which the participants were recruited revealed that there was a 5.4% difference in the average grades of males (82.8%) and females (88.2%). This may suggest that more male participants chose “complex” because they had more difficulty with learning the language than females.

Question 10 in the present study is unique to the field of language ideology because, contrary to having to choose among a pre-determined list, it allowed my participants to create their own list of adjectives they felt more accurately describe Spanish. There were a total of 106 distinct adjectives produced in the participants’ responses to Question 10. Only a maximum of five positive adjectives and five negative adjectives were recorded for each participant, as a means to avoid skewing the data. This only applied to the data of one male participant in which 14 positive adjectives and 7 negative adjectives were produced. Thus, in this case, the study’s results report him as



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Table 3  
*Positive adjective distribution in percent used to describe Spanish: Question 8*

Adjective	Male	Female
Attractive	18.4	21.7
Clear	2.6	2.6
Logical	5.3	5.3
Precise	2.6	0
Romantic	15.8	22.7
Total	44.7	52.3

Table 4  
*Negative adjective distribution in percent used to describe Spanish:  
Question 8*

Adjective	Male	Female
Cold	0	0
Complex	21	30.4
Fast/Careless	24.7	8.7
Scary	2.6	0
Strange	7.9	4.3
Total	56.2	43.4

having produced 5 positive and 5 negative adjectives.

The total number of adjectives produced in Question 10 by males and females was 63 and 43, respectively. It should not be surprising that overall males produced more adjectives than females due to the fact that there were three more male participants than females.

The data elicited from Question 10 suggest that when participants were allowed to create their own original list of adjectives to describe Spanish, similar results arose. Table 5 shows how symmetrical the distribution of positive and negative adjectives is between Questions 8 and 10. When both male and female students were allowed to create their own adjectives to describe Spanish, both genders produce more negative adjectives than positive ones overall. Nonetheless, in both questions, females still produced more positive adjectives than males.

Table 5  
*Comparison of the adjective distribution in percent*

	Question 8		Question 10	
	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
Positive	44.7	52.3	42.9	48.9
Adjectives				
Negative	56.2	43.4	57.1	51.1
Adjectives				
Difference	-11.5	8.9	-14.2	-2.2

## LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT

At the present study's university, many academic majors require a three-semester sequence of a foreign language. Students may choose between Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. The questionnaire presented a question (number 17) regarding their feelings about the language requirement at Florida State University. The results showed that 11 participants (47.8%) agreed with the requirement and 11 (47.8%) did not agree. One participant (4.4%) claimed she was neutral. These quite balanced results are different than Roberts' (1992) and Morello's (1988) findings that suggested the majority of students agrees with having to take a foreign language in order to graduate. In the present study, these participants were divided on this issue.

## NATIONALISTIC LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY

Probably some of the most important data collected from this study suggested nationalistic language ideology elicited from Question 15. Only six participants (26.1%) described that they were neutral to the fact that some Hispanics are in the United States and don't speak English. Impartial attitudes such as this were not at all commonly shared by other participants in the sample. The remaining 17 participants (73.9%) voiced very strong opinions suggesting that Hispanics must speak English if they are living in the United States. Select examples of these responses are provided in Appendix B. It is interesting to note that although most participants were very opposed to not speaking English in the United States, other participants didn't seem to care. However, *no one* demonstrated feelings of acceptance of not knowing English while living in the United States. Furthermore, no participant mentioned that it was acceptable to maintain the Spanish language after moving to the United States. The closest comment of acceptance regarding this topic is the first comment shown in Appendix B.

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### DISCUSSION

#### Implications and suggestions to reduce negativity

Rusciolelli (1994) suggests that more universities need to create and adopt Hispanic culture classes so that students can better live in a culturally complex society. Through these classes, students will also begin to appreciate the meaning of language and how important it is to maintain and communicate in one's mother tongue even if that language is not an official language of the region. Rusciolelli (1994) also argues that these types of classes may create problems because they raise issues of race, social justice, and economic opportunity. He claims that because the natural and often unconscious tendency is to establish one's own culture as the norm, anything else is deviant and inferior. Nonetheless, Hispanic cultural classes remind students to avoid these types of nationalistic ideologies (Rusciolelli, 1994).

Robinson-Stuart and Nocon (1996) claim that the modern language requirement in universities has not produced a U.S. population that is capable of interacting in languages other than English. Because of this, they suggest that cultural projects be incorporated into the curriculum. The results from their study indicated that ethnographic interview projects enhanced student attitudes toward the study of Spanish and the culture of local Spanish speakers (1996).

An ethnographic project that entails more interaction with Spanish and its native speakers could be the key to promoting more positive attitudes toward Spanish and Hispanic cultures. Hudson (1995) found that Texas had the highest Hispanic population claiming Spanish as a home language in addition to having the most loyalty and retention of the language. Although the sample in the present study only included two students from Texas, the answers they produced seemed to reflect very high opinions of Spanish, Hispanics, and Hispanic cultures. In accordance with Urciuoli's (1991) findings suggesting that people build their sense of language around relationships, it is not surprising that because these two participants grew up with more interaction with Hispanics and Spanish, their language ideology was more positive. Perhaps Robinson-Stuart and Nocon's (1996) suggestion indeed should be considered; more projects that reflect Hispanic cultures and other real-life elements could be a step toward more neutral or positive attitudes such as those produced by the two participants from Texas.

The present study has found that females were more likely to describe Spanish with more positive adjectives than males. This occurred in both instances where they were restricted to a list of adjectives (Question 8) and when they were allowed to create their own list (Question 10). Although there

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was only a small difference between the amount of positive adjectives produced by females and males overall, it is still apparent that females produced more positive descriptors, as in previous research. Perhaps with a larger sample size, more differences can be observed.

Haslett (2000) suggests that nationalistic language ideologies negatively contribute to language attitudes. Nearly three-fourths of the participants in the present study suggested feelings of nationalistic language ideologies in their comments regarding Hispanics' not speaking English while living in the United States. Their ethnocentric remarks illustrated that they felt it should be required to know and speak English if one is to reside in the United States.

More research is merited on language attitudes by analyzing adjectives and nationalistic language ideologies. The present study is a step in the right direction towards uncovering what influences positive and negative language attitudes—particularly the differences among males and females. I recognize that a limitation in this study is the small sample size. Future studies should follow in the footsteps of Ludwig (1983) and include a very large sample of language learners. These studies should also look to explore the role of nationalistic language ideologies on language attitudes. Only with more data can we properly evaluate the nationalistic language ideologies that exist among our foreign language students and begin to suggest alternatives to eliminate negativity toward languages and foreign language education.

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## APPENDIX A

### STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE FORM

PART I: Answer the following questions:

- 1) Where were you born?
- 2) Where do you live now?
- 3) What is your age?
- 4) What is your ethnicity?
- 5) How many years of Spanish have you had in high school?
- 6) Are you:        Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_
- 7) How would you describe your need to learn Spanish? (Check all that apply)

- |                               |                               |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| _____ a. requirement          | _____ e. interest in travel   |
| _____ b. personal enrichment  | _____ f. interest in speakers |
| _____ c. interest in culture  | _____ g. job prospects        |
| _____ d. interest in Mexicans | _____ h. other _____          |

8) Check the following that you feel describe how Spanish sounds (Check all that apply)

- |                        |                   |
|------------------------|-------------------|
| _____ a. attractive    | _____ d. romantic |
| _____ b. complex       | _____ e. clear    |
| _____ c. cold          | _____ f. logical  |
| _____ g. fast/careless | _____ i. scary    |
| _____ h. strange       | _____ j. precise  |

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PART II: Using separate paper, please discuss the following questions/ideas to the best of your knowledge, expressing your feelings as much as possible. There is no limit on the amount you write.

- 9) When you hear Spanish, what and who do you think of?
- 10) Make a list of creative adjectives that come to your mind when hearing/thinking about Spanish. How does Spanish sound to you?
- 11) List and describe things you like and dislike about the Spanish language.
- 12) Do you have any native Spanish-speaking friends? If so, please describe them and whether they are good friends of yours. If not, please explain why.
- 13) Explain the contact, if any, that you have with Hispanics.
- 14) Describe what you have heard about Hispanics (good and/or bad) and whether you agree with these things.
- 15) How do you feel when Hispanics don't know English and are living in the United States?
- 16) Why do you feel that Spanish is generally taken the most by students at universities?
- 17) Describe whether you agree with the fact that foreign languages are mandatory at some universities such as your home university.

## APPENDIX B

### NEUTRAL RESPONSES AND NATIONALISTIC LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY EXAMPLES: EXCERPTS FROM QUESTION 15

#### Neutral responses

1) If a Hispanic cannot speak English in the U.S., the only person who is really disadvantaged is themselves. I certainly don't think English should be a required language, but the Spanish speaker must understand the great disadvantage they must face.

2) When Hispanic people live in the U.S. and don't speak English, as long as they're lack of English is not negatively affecting me, I could care less. If I lived in Mexico, I'd probably want to come to the U.S. too.

3) It doesn't really bother me because the U.S. is so diverse and I don't really have to deal with them.

#### Examples of nationalistic language ideology

4) I feel very strongly about this question. I can't stand when people don't know English in America. I feel that if they come to America they need to learn it or know it. I don't mind when people don't know all of it and have questions about some things but if people don't even have the ability to converse with Americans, this really gets on my nerves. You come to our country, you know our language!

5) It is very annoying because they come to this country where the national language is English and expect us to accommodate for their laziness. If this is where they want to come and live, they should take part in the language just as much as their desires for coming here.

6) This is the one thing about Hispanics that gets to me. If they are out, in the presence of non-Spanish speakers, I feel they should speak English. This is the U.S. and English is the primary language. Speaking in Spanish is fine when they're at home or with all Spanish [speakers]. A lot of the time, when I'm out and people are speaking Spanish, I, like most people, tend to think they're talking about me.

7) I feel that if you are living in the U.S. you should know the language. If you don't you need to be learning it quickly or go back home!