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LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION IN CHILDREN’S RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The discursive and affective construction of identity

1. INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades the study of language socialization has become an important theoretical and methodological approach for understanding language acquisition and use, and for analyzing the ways in which communicative practices serve as tools whereby newcomers (e.g. a child, an immigrant, an apprentice) become competent members of society (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Ochs, 1988). Language socialization takes as its starting point the notion that language mediates the development of competencies, whether linguistic or cultural, over time. This chapter examines an aspect of this process of language socialization by paying close attention to the affiliative dimension constructed and employed in moment-to-moment classroom communicative practices while locating such practices in their ecological complexity; that is, as practices necessarily reflecting and constructing a larger context of interaction. Drawing from a three-year ethnographic and discourse analytic study of Saturday religious instruction at a St. Paul’s Catholic Church in Los Angeles, I describe the socialization of Mexican children into particular social identities in a class conducted in Spanish called doctrina and in an English-based catechism class. The chapter also discusses the ways in which the larger political context of the State of California influences local parish language policies, and in turn has consequences for the socialization of Mexican children at the parish, that is, for their acquisition of language and of particular cultural worldviews.

2. LANGUAGE, IMMIGRATION, AND EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA: THE LARGER SOCIALIZATION CONTEXT

At the turn of the 21st century, California is one of the most linguistically diverse regions of the U.S. with more than 200 languages spoken within its geographical boundaries. The city of Los Angeles in southern California alone is the backdrop of over 120 different languages including Amharic, Armenian, Cantonese, English, Farsi, Hmong, Khmer, Korean, Japanese, Lao, Mandarin, Quechua, Spanish,
Russian, Tagalog, Thai, Urdu, Vietnamese, and Zapotec to name but a few (Ferrell & Holtz, 2000). This diverse linguistic and cultural landscape provides opportunities for continuity as well as for transformation and change. Indeed, the consequences of the polyglot constitution of the state are reflected most directly in the institutional responses to this diversity. While on the one hand the state responds favourably to the linguistic cartography of the state (for example, through the printing of voter registration documents in at least seven languages), it also, quite contradictorily, restrains the use of these languages. A telling example of this contradiction can be found in the State's implementation of bilingual education in the 1970s to serve the needs of its linguistically and culturally diverse student population, and twenty years later, its decision to eliminate precisely these educational efforts.

Similarly, in the midst of the growing diversity of the state, English continues to be the standard and norm of the mainstream society. In fact, the official language of the state is English. And while second- and third-generation immigrants merge into the English-speaking mainstream and are able to more easily access the upward mobility it brings, California continues to be a major port-of-entry to recent, less financially secure immigrants that continue to feed linguistic and cultural pipelines. Upon arrival, these new immigrants often become part of discrete, and at times isolated, urban pockets sometimes with little or no contact with each other, yet contributing rich cultural resources to relatives and other members of their new communities. Of this group of immigrants, Latinos constitute the majority ethnic group in Los Angeles County. In fact, the 2000 Census Data reports the ethnic and racial composition of the county as 44.6% Latino, 31.1% White, 11.82% Asian and Pacific Islander, 9.5% Black, and 0.3% Native American (California State Census Data Center, 2000). This varied ethnic landscape, however, has fueled exclusionist ideologies that most pointedly blame Latino immigrants, particularly the undocumented work force, for an unstable local and national economy. Indeed, the economic boundaries between Mexico and the United States are very permeable, not only because the two countries are adjacent, but also because historically the Southwest was part of Mexico prior to its incorporation in the United States during the Mexican-American War of 1848.

In recent history, no state of the Union has engaged so intensively in discourses of immigration and education than the State of California. While educational attainment of immigrant Latino children in public schools—a majority student population—has been a well-documented concern for educators, where policy-making is concerned, the emphasis has been on the students' immigrant status rather than on their school achievement (Trueba, 1989; Chapa, 1991; Valencia, 1991; Valencia, Menchaca & Valenzuela, 1993/1994; Darder, Torres & Gutierrez, 1997).

Since most of the undocumented immigrants, now approximately two million in the State of California, are Mexican nationals (McDonnell, 1997), immigration controls seem to be mostly directed at them. It is therefore not surprising to find that in California political discourses and campaigns that “otherize”, racialize, and restrict the growing Mexican immigrant population find their way to the voting booths. In the past eight years, three anti-immigrant—and more generally anti-diversity—measures have changed California law in the form of Propositions 187, 209, and 227. To better understand the political landscape and the effect of these