Review of Mercedes Niño-Murcia & Jason Rothman, eds. ‘Bilingualism and Identity: Spanish at the crossroads with other languages’

Holly R. Cashman
University of New Hampshire, Durham, holly.cashman@unh.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.unh.edu/lang_facpub

Recommended Citation
In Bilingualism and Identity, Niño-Murcia and Rothman bring together twelve chapters on language and identity in language contact situations around the Spanish-speaking world. The collection is divided into five parts: Part 1 consists of both a preface and an editors’ introduction, Parts 2-4 contain the twelve main chapters, and Part 5 is an afterword. The three main sections are divided according to geography: Part 2 contains three chapters on bilingualism and identity in language contact situations in Spain, Part 3 includes four chapters on bilingualism and identity in language contact situations in Latin American, and Part 4 consists of five chapters on bilingualism and identity in language contact situations in the U.S.

In her preface to the volume, Ana Celia Zentella poses two provocative questions for all researchers of bilingualism, language contact and identity to consider: “Why do we want—or need—to know anything about bilingualism and identity, and what are our hopes for future research in this field?” (p. 8). Zentella urges researchers to consider the social and political implications of their methodologies, and she warns that researchers run the risk of being complicit in the situations of language inequality that they are researching. She closes the preface by advocating for an anthropo-political linguistics “to unmask linguistic ideologies that perpetuate inequality, undermining a bilingual’s willingness to maintain and develop his/her bilingualism” (p. 7) and reminding readers/researchers that “there are no apolitical positions where languages and cultures are threatened” (p. 8).

Niño-Murcia and Rothman, in their theoretical introduction to the volume, present a brief review of the literature with respect to several areas: the changing concept of identity, from a structuralist to a constructivist to a postmodern approach; the role of language in identity construction, including the concepts of indexicality and agency; and the concepts of national and ethnic identities in the era of globalization. The introduction also contextualizes the chapters’ contributions within the field of research on bilingualism, language contact and identity. The editors focus on the heterogeneity of the chapters’ language contact situations as a strength of the volume. While this is certainly true, another, perhaps more interesting strength, is the variety of approaches and foci of the chapters, from macro-social language ecology (Azurmendi, Larraña & Apalategi) to small-scale ethnography (Zavala & Bariola; Shenk) to case study (Niño-Murcia & Rothman), from second language writing and identity expression (Sánchez) to identity consequences of language standardization (Loureiro-Rodríquez; French; Urciuoli) to issues around language and gender (Zavala & Bariola; Potowski).

Part 2, “Spanish in Contact with autonomous languages of Spain,” contains three chapters that present a comparison of language revitalization efforts in three different administrative areas of the binational Euskal Herria (Basque Country) (Azurmendi, Larraña & Apalategi), a description of adolescents’ attitudes to and use of Gallego (Loureiro-Rodríguez), and an examination of the role of bilingualism and identity in two conflicting views of Catalan citizenship (Boix-Fuster & Sanz). In Azurmendi, Larraña...
& Apalategi’s essay we learn that attempts to revive Euskera (Basque) in three different regions seem to be yielding vastly different outcomes, with very successful language revitalization in the Basque Autonomous Community and with language loss in Iparralde, or the Basque territories in France; language revitalization efforts in Navarre represent a middle ground of moderate success. While Azurmendi, Larrañaga & Apalategi present macro-sociolinguistic data, Loureiro-Rodríguez investigates adolescents’ attitudes about the use of Gallego and Castilian in a small-scale study based on interviews with 30 adolescents. She uncovers a complex situation in which Galician adolescents express explicit positive attitudes about Galician, recognize the covert prestige of ‘Real Gallego’ in the aldeas or rural areas, as well as the overt prestige of ‘Normative Gallego’ learned at school, while still associating features of Gallego with ruralness, illiteracy and a gñañán (redneck) identity. Spanish-dominant bilinguals or new speakers of Gallego are also stigmatized and stereotyped. Boix-Fuster & Sanz use three cases—a politician, a choir leader and elicited narratives from an experimental study—to elucidate two opposed conceptions of Catalan identity. One perspective, embodied by the politician José Montilla who was born in southern Spain and in 2006 elected President of the Catalan Government, is that people who live in Catalonia and embrace Catalan identity are Catalan, regardless of their native language or place of origin. The other perspective sees Catalan identity as tied to Catalanian origin and native-speaker status of Catalan. This ‘authentic’ Catalan identity does not prohibit someone from using Castilian strategically in interaction, as exemplified by the Catalan choir director whose code-switching, and even crossing into a ‘faulty’ Castilian-influenced variety of Catalan associated with second language learners, does not threaten his authentic Catalan identity. Finally, in their experimental investigation, Boix-Fuster & Sanz discovered a bilingual variety of Catalan, which they claim to be influenced by Castilian at all levels.

Part 3, “Spanish in Contact with Creole and Amerindian languages in Latin America,” contains four contributions, including a study of identity in second language writing among Quechua-Spanish bilingual primary school children in Peru (Sánchez), an examination of the essentialist and essentializing ideologies used to both eradicate and conserve Mayan languages in Guatemala (French), an ethnography of the construction of gender and ethnicity among a community of Shipbo people who have migrated from Peru’s Amazonian region to the capital, Lima (Zavala & Bariola), and an exploration of the perceived Haitian influence in the Spanish spoken in the fronterizo region of Cibao in the Dominican Republic (Bullock & Toribio). The two chapters that highlight the function of language ideologies in cases of language contact and identity are particularly interesting. French argues that both the brutally repressive Guatemalan government of the 1970s and 1980s that attempted to eradicate the Mayan population in Guatemala, as well as the Pan-Mayan Movement whose activism strives to preserve or revitalize Mayan languages and cultures and achieve self-determination, promote an essentializing argument about the link between Mayan languages and indigenous identity. She points out that there are modern, urban Kaqchikel Maya who are disrupting this essentialist view of Mayan identity and creating new language ideologies that privilege their unique position; they see speaking Spanish as inextricably linked with being modern (whether ladino or indio) and speaking Mayan as being backward and uneducated, but they also see being a modern indio as requiring the recognition of the value of Kaqchikel. Bullock and Toribio also investigate language ideologies in their experimental study of perception
of Haitian-influenced Spanish of speakers from the border region of the Dominican Republic. They found that the judges, who were 60 urban university students, could not accurately judge speakers’ skin color, but they assumed that speakers whose accents they disparaged were darker skinned, poorer, less educated and more rural. Judges did accurately distinguish between rural and non-rural speech, assigning rural or campesino speech less prestige. Based on their examination of the speech samples that were disparaged, Bullock and Toribio posit that the gliding or deletion of coda /r, l/ and the use of marked ‘sing-song’ prosodic pattern contributed to the judges’ evaluations, but they recognize that there is no indication that these features are due to Creole/Kreyol influence. Instead, the naïve ascription of ‘Haitianness’ to disparaged varieties reflects educated, urban Dominicans’ ideologies about race, culture and language purity.

Part 4, “Spanish in Contact with English in the United States,” comprises five diverse studies: an examination of the influence of the mother’s language variety in intra-family dialect contact among MexiRicans in Chicago (Potowski), a study of language ideologies in a dual immersion school and families (Shenk), an analysis of the tension between the symbolic capital of minority students and diversity for prestigious liberal arts colleges and the ideologies of language correctness in the Spanish language classroom (Urciuoli), a study of the articulation of identity construction in students’ narratives about identity (Bustamonte-López), and a case study of a family in which three boys are being raised trilingually (Niño-Murcia & Rothman). Both Potowski and Urciuoli warrant special mention for their chapters’ seemingly opposing views of bilingual speakers’ agency that actually complement and complete each other. Potowski indicates that the majority (74%) of children in families with one Mexican parent and one Puerto Rican parent were judged to speak more like their primary caregiver, their mother. Those who were not judged to be speakers of the same language variety as their mothers were often found to speak the Spanish language variety they were exposed to, i.e. their fathers or other relatives were the ones who spoke Spanish in the household rather than the mothers. This would, on the surface, seem to indicate a rather deterministic view of language socialization in a situation of intra-family dialect contact. Urciuoli, in contrast, presents a picture of bilingual Latina/o college students from New York City as agentive social actors who, when confronted with a new situation—the rural, elite liberal arts college—interpret the conflict and tension between the standard language ideology of the Spanish classroom promoting language correctness and the speakers’ acceptance of their ‘home’ or ‘authentic’ Spanish as an integral part of their cultural or ethnic identity, and act affirmatively to adopt a value-added approach in which academic Spanish is seen as a marketable skill and as a resource for re-imagining a globalized identity that incorporates both their native variety of Spanish and academic Spanish. In dialogue, however, these two chapters make for a more complete picture, in which, through Potowski, we see the formation of speakers’ ‘authentic vernacular bilingualism’ (Urciuoli) in the home and the community, and, through Urciuoli, we see how speakers interact, adapt and negotiate identity in and through language in new contexts that may challenge and disrupt their original language-identity link.

The diverse contributions to Bilingualism and Identity will enrich readers’ understanding of the multiples ways in which identities and language varieties are linked, the ways these links are studied and evaluated, and the ways they are used, manipulated and activated for sociopolitical purposes. Exciting and provoking questions emerge from
the volume’s contributions. The first question that the interaction among several chapters seems to beg is: for whom and by whom are languages being preserved, standardized and legislated? Loureiro-Rodríguez and Urciuoli particularly engage in an interrogation of the role of the ‘correct’ or ‘standard’ version of speakers’ community language, but the theme crops up throughout the volume. Another question that arises is: is bilingualism always the most interesting or salient feature of bilingual speakers’ language practices? And does focusing on, or even fetishizing, bilingualism divide research areas and distinguish between phenomena that could or perhaps should be examined together? While any organizing theme for a collection has the effect of privileging one perspective on the research and analysis included at the expense of other possible perspectives, it is crucial that research on bilingualism avoid cloistering itself by assuming that bilingualism is always necessarily the most interesting or salient question simply because speakers are bilingual. A final question that results from the exciting themes that connect chapters from the different sections of the volume is: is the traditional geographical Spain/Latin America/U.S. distinction the best way to group and order the contributions, or does this organizational approach mute connections across regional boundaries and reinforces colonialist hierarchies? The most compelling themes that emerge from the volume are those that reverberate across all three sections, including most notably the function of in-group and out-group language ideologies in language contact situations, the concepts of citizenship, belonging and regional/national identity, and the question of the consequences of migration, immigration and urbanization. Overall, this is an important and valuable collection. Readers will no doubt discover that the volume’s inclusion of a wide range of methodologies and diverse language contact situations enriches their understanding of the phenomena of language contact, bilingualism and language and identity.

Reviewer’s address

Holly R. Cashman
University of New Hampshire
Dept. of Languages, Literatures & Cultures
Murkland Hall 210G
Durham, NH 03824

holly.cashman@unh.edu