



Journal des anthropologues

Association française des anthropologues

72-73 | 1998

Nationaux, étrangers ? Logiques d'état et enjeux quotidiens

The language of work in an immigrant metropolis

La langue du travail dans une métropole d'immigrés

Roger Waldinger



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jda/2708>

DOI: 10.4000/jda.2708

ISSN: 2114-2203

Publisher

Association française des anthropologues

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 January 1998

Number of pages: 137-159

ISSN: 1156-0428

Electronic reference

Roger Waldinger, « The language of work in an immigrant metropolis », *Journal des anthropologues* [Online], 72-73 | 1998, Online since 01 January 1999, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jda/2708> ; DOI : 10.4000/jda.2708

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

Journal des anthropologues

The language of work in an immigrant metropolis¹

La langue du travail dans une métropole d'immigrés

Roger Waldinger

- 1 Not every American city has become an immigrant city. But in those urban center serving as gateways for the new immigration, the newcomers' advent has produced a Tower of Babel. As of 1990, the foreign language presence was most marked in Miami – where 42% of the population was reported speaking a language other than English at home, exactly three times the national average. The much larger Los Angeles region followed shortly behind, with 38%. Elsewhere, foreign-language levels attained lower levels – as in New York, where less than a third of the population reported use of a foreign tongue at home – but even in these cases the 1990 data point to impressive foreign-language penetration and significant growth, compared to the previous decades.
- 2 High levels of immigration are likely to increase the number of newly arrived, foreign-language speakers and slow the rate at which the foreign-born switch to English. And one suspects that the pace at which the immigrants and their descendants discard the mother tongue will be slowed for other reasons having to do with the characteristics of post-1965 immigration: its concentration in a limited number of urban places; the very large presence of a single national, (for the most part) single language group – the Mexicans, 28% of all immigrants as of 1996; and for the Spanish-speakers, proximity and ease of travel to the home countries.
- 3 Nonetheless, the existing research suggests that today's immigrants will repeat the experience of their predecessors (Lopez, 1996), following in a trajectory pinpointed by Joshua Fishman (1966, 1972) more than three decades ago. The first generation retains the mother tongue for most purposes, adopting the dominant language to get by or get ahead. The immigrants' children may be exposed to the mother tongue at home; but as the dominant tongue rules in all other domains – the neighborhood, schools, and work – mother tongue usage lapses, increasingly reserved for the parental home, and then with diminishing frequency. With the advent of the grandchildren, the parents are at the best

passive bilinguals, retaining a scattering of mother tongue expressions for use on special occasions, but otherwise conversing exclusively in English. At the end of the chain, the third generation grows up as dominant language monolinguals.

- 4 In this account, shift is the result of long-term, collective language choice, as Fasold (1984) has noted. Succeeding generations switch from original to dominant language with increasing frequency and across a growing number of domains; however, the process takes hold right at the start. In contrast to situations of stable bilingualism in non-industrial settings, where a distinctive and lower status speech community occupies a specialized economic role involving little interaction with outsiders, labor migrants in industrial societies furnish a workforce for the means of production controlled by members of the dominant speech community. Since work involves a domain of particular social dependency, « *the language associated with the means of production* » (Fishman, 1972: 104) provides the first occasion for mother tongue displacement.
- 5 Notwithstanding its position, the dynamics of language switching within the work context has been the subject of little research. That newcomers to American society are more likely to switch to English at work talking about work is well documented (e.g., Greenfield, 1972). Yet how this occurs, under which work conditions, and with what relationship between work environments and linguistic outcomes remains an open question. This paper, reporting on a survey of employers of less-skilled help in Los Angeles county, seeks to provide a modest beginning to that discussion.

The linguistic Division of Labor²

- 6 America enjoys an unparalleled track record for obliterating the languages that immigrants bring with them. But immigrant self-sufficiency can retard the process. Self-sufficiency means more than numbers and concentration; it also involves some degree of detachment from the mainstream economy. Today's burgeoning immigrant economies should lessen the motivation to learn English, precisely because they reduce the level of interdependency on dominant-language customers, workers, and bosses. Portes and Rumbaut, for example, suggest that disparities in economic exposure to outsiders may yield divergent effects among groups of immigrants entrepreneurs: whereas the owners of middleman-type businesses may have to « *learn some English to carry out transaction with their domestic customers* »³, business operators in ethnic enclaves enjoy « *the possibility of conducting business in the mother tongue* » (1990: 217). This is perhaps speculation, but one for which studies of the sociolinguistic environment in cities on the U.S./Mexico border provide intriguing support. Teschner's study of El Paso, for example, shows that growing Latino density has altered linguistic practices in the business sector, with more bilingualism in banks or doctor's offices than before, and increasing numbers of retail establishments owned and operated by Mexican nationals « *who typically conduct all business in Spanish* » (1995: 97). Jaramillo (1995: 82) tells a similar story for Tucson, where Spanish is increasingly used in public contexts, making Spanish « *an effective marketing strategy in reaching Spanish-speaking patrons or clientele* ».
- 7 As Grillo (1989) concedes, « *enclavement* » is the exception in immigrant situations, not the rule; more common is some form of economic dependency on dominant language speakers, which means that switching and shifting are likely to prevail. While speakers may converge or diverge with the language of their interlocutors, the theory of linguistic accommodation, associated with Giles and his collaborators (Giles, & al., 1977), suggest that

switching will be influenced by the demographic characteristics, relative status, and institutional support of contrastive language groups.

- 8 Much of the available research on language at work focuses, for understandable reasons, on Canada, and in particular, on Quebec. *The Language of Work*, one of the three reports issued by the « Gendron Commission » on the « situation of the French language in Quebec », described French as a marginal language at the workplace, used almost exclusively by Francophones for « low-level tasks and small incomes (petits revenus) », and of little need to Anglophones (Quebec, 1972: 111). Breton and Grant (1980), in a 1980 review of research on the same topic, found that conditions were increasingly favoring the use of French, with the bilingual interface within organizations shifting in such a way as to give greater place for French. Bourhis' (1994) more recent study of language use among civil servants in New Brunswick – a province with a large, but minority Francophone population – underscored the continuing dominance of English among both anglo and francophone civil servants, while also noting the greater relative use of French among both language groups in settings where Francophone density was high.
- 9 The Canadian research would seem to be of limited direct relevance: the findings apply to a situation of diglossia and relatively stable bilingualism, quite some distance from the linguistic situation encountered by contemporary labor migrants in the urban economies of the contemporary United States.
- 10 In its emphasis on the organization and its environment, the Canadian research underlines the importance of *market*. By contrast, the economic sociology of immigration highlights the centrality of the *non-market* processes involved in network migration, and thus *intra-organizational* factors. On the one hand, migration is lubricated by connections tying settlers to members of their home communities; as immigrant networks consolidate and expand almost everyone in the home society enjoys access to a contact abroad, making migration a self-feeding phenomenon (Massey, et. al, 1993). On the other hand, since getting a job remains very much a matter of whom one knows (Granovetter, 1974), those same contacts bring newcomers into the economy. Networks among immigrant incumbents and job seekers allow for rapid transmission of information from workplaces to the communities; they also provide better information within workplaces, reducing the risks associated with initial hiring. Consequently, ethnic hiring networks are self-reproducing: each new employee recruits others from his or her own group. Networks derive both economic functions and social power from their potential for social closure, precisely that factor most closely related to language maintenance (Fishman, 1980).
- 11 By implication, then, the language of industry is not constant, but variable; and so too, therefore, will be the mechanism of linguistic adjustment. In the conventional view, the shift to English serves both as a sign of acculturation and as a tool for getting ahead, as immigrants who improve their mastery of English also better their prospects for employment and upward movement on the job. But one can imagine an alternative: the deep immigrant penetration into the economies of American cities brings a multitude of foreign languages into the workplace, in part due to customer demands and preferences for interaction in their mother tongue, in part because workers can't speak English adequately, with the result that bosses and supervisors accommodate to the linguistic needs and preferences of the newcomers – *and not the other way around*. Because work is a fundamentally social activity, the linguistic preferences of immigrant co-workers and customers may have the further effect of extruding native English-speakers, who can't get the work done because the *lingua franca* is a foreign tongue, or because entry barriers

get raised as employers opt to hire workers who can speak more than one language. Thus, growing foreign-language densities can further diminish pressures for English-language use at work.

Methodology

- 12 This paper is an accidental by-product of a study designed to focus on the mechanisms of competition between immigrant and African-American workers at the low-skilled end of the Los Angeles labor market. Language was, unaccountably, of barely incidental interest. But the employers talked about language extensively, and long before we invited them to do so. Initially, their comments on language seemed relevant to an understanding of the proficiencies that employers demanded, and of the qualities they sought in their workers. As I worked with the data, it became clear that the discussion of language was sufficiently rich – and to my years, novel – to provide material for a story in its own right.
- 13 In methodology and approach, our survey was inspired by Kirschenman and Neckerman's (1991) research on employer hiring practices in Chicago. This paper is based on in-depth interviews, conducted in 1993 and 1994, with managers and owners in 230 establishments in Los Angeles County, including 44 restaurants, 46 printers, 41 hotels, and 39 furniture manufacturers, 24 department stores, and 36 hospitals⁴. With the exception of the restaurant sample which was designed to include chains from 3 to 55 units and single-owned operations, the sample was drawn randomly from directories⁵. The organizations were located in a variety of areas within Los Angeles County, both within the central city, and in more suburbanized areas. With few exceptions, our organizations were drawn from the « mainstream economy », including few immigrant-owned firms.
- 14 The interviews were arranged with the highest ranking person involved in the hiring process and they were structured by an instrument involving a mix of closed-and open-ended questions. In the beginning of the interview, we identified the largest category of « low-skilled » jobs and then focused the remainder of our discussion on those jobs and the workers who filled them. The interviews lasted from an hour and a half to three hours; in some cases, interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed; in other instances, detailed notes were made of interviewees' responses. We asked only one explicit question about language, coming at the end of the interview, but our queries about required skills and desired traits elicited much comment.

Isolation and Employer Accomodation

- 15 Though part of the « mainstream economy », the hotels, restaurants, and furniture factories of Los Angeles seemed to be following the path of linguistic accomodation. Cleaning and cooking jobs « don't require any English skill whatsoever », noted a hotelier. The same holds for production work where « you could do it without knowing English. 50% of my workers have been here 20 years and they still have not learned English ». As employers see it, the nature of the work explains their « encapsulation » in a Spanish-speaking world:

In the case of a steward or dishwasher who hardly has guest interaction, when you can't find someone who speaks English, we would waive the

requirement, because let's face it, there aren't that many English language people who would be dishwashers.

16 Factory managers had the same problem, as with one informant who had been searching for a driver, but « couldn't find anyone who spoke English. All the applicants were Hispanic ».

17 Monolingual factory bosses, like the furniture factory manager who told us that « the number one challenge for a white Anglo Saxon American is the language barrier », were unhappy with the situation. Some furniture manufactures contend that problems arise with promotion:

Here we are 99% Spanish and the supervisors are bilingual. Someone who can't speak English, it's not that big of a hangup. But in a couple of years you could get in to position where thy're communicating with engineers and design people who don't speak Spanish.

18 Another manufacturer discovered that « as the recession came in, we found it necessary to do more customizing », which, in turn fed a demand for English.

19 The greatest noises of discontent came from the hotel managers. « I don't want to sound like a nationalist, but this is America ! » exclaimed one respondent while grouching about the inability of the housekeepers « to interact with guests because they don't know the basics ».

20 While adequate as long as trade was booming basic problems, in English no longer proved satisfactory when business got bad. « Customers increasingly expect people to speak English. When someone asks for a towel, they can't go "huh" ? ». But this is not a universal occurrence, much to management's regret, and encountering non-English-speaking housekeepers makes for an unhappy clientele. « Our service suffers » if housekeepers don't speak English. « Guest interpret (avoidance) as rudeness » (301). One manager reported « customer complaints – a lot of them – because they can't speak with the maid ».

21 Thus employers could not be described as enchanted with the advent of a largely, monolingual Spanish-speaking workforce; note further that the comments describe employers' *attitudes* about language usage, though they provide ample testimony to the prevalence of Spanish, pressures to use English notwithstanding. But for all their unhappiness with the linguistic situation, the employers in these industries appear to have taken the path of least resistance: « we would prefer that they speak English but they speak Spanish », exclaimed one manufacturer; « we try to encourage the workers to speak English », noted another with resignation, « but it is very difficult ».

22 But not only have employers hired foremen and other intermediaries who come from the immigrant communities; they have decided that if you can't beat 'em, join'em, which in this case means that managers learn Spanish themselves, or else make the necessary adaptation. A furniture manufacturer told us that « both floor managers speak "Mexican" (sic), so it is not that important that the workers speak English... ». One hotel chain requires managers « to have basic understanding of Spanish », an accomplishment matched, if not bettered by a furniture factory in L.A.'s industrial belt, where « everybody is bilingual », including the production manager who « is Caucasian and speaks perfect Spanish ». In an interview that focused on warehouse workers, a department store manager first told us that « English is not required, because we all had to take Spanish to

communicate with them » and later commented that « if there were no immigrants, I wouldn't have had to take Spanish ! ». « I speak Spanish, so that is not a problem », said a company president. « Otherwise, everything would go through the production manager, and that is very awkward ». Speaking about the « tight Hispanic group » that works in the kitchen of one of L.A.'s best-known steak houses, our respondents reported that « English is the second language. Most of the communication in back is in Spanish ». One furniture manufacturer with the unusual practice of deploying several black foremen was asked whether these supervisors also spoke Spanish, the answer, « Yes, you have to in this workforce ». A third generation Mexican-American supervisor told us that:

The language barrier is very important, that is why a lot of people in my position wouldn't make it. You need to speak the language. How could I make them do and understand what I wanted them to do ? I didn't know a word of Spanish before I went to work. My parents, didn't.

Interdependency and the switch to English

- 23 Thus, in hotels, restaurants, and furniture manufacturing, the networks have seized hold of the hiring process, detaching the organizations from the general labor market, with the result that interdependency pushes employers to accommodate to workers' linguistic practices. Market is a facilitating factor: furniture factories sell to wholesalers and retailers, making the linguistic capacity of the plant workforce a matter of little importance. While restaurants and hotels, by contrast, cater to a diverse, largely Anglo-customer base, that clientele is either entirely – as in the case of kitchen workers – or partly – as in the case of hotel housekeepers – removed from needs for interaction with the Spanish-speaking staff. The nature of the jobs comes into the equation as well: the entry-level positions in restaurants, hotels, and even furniture manufacturing plants involved simple competencies that almost anyone could be expected to know and demanded little in the way of cognitive proficiencies for which English would be required.
- 24 Elsewhere, difference in organizational complexity, workforce force diversity, and market exposure yielded greater pressure for switching to English. Spanish is also the most prevalent foreign language printing and dominates in certain low-skilled areas, such as bindery work. Outside of this one specialization, however, Spanish often competes with other foreign languages as well as English. One firm, for example, reported use of English, Spanish, Thai, Tagalog, and Sign language among its employees; another mentioned a Chinese supervisor from Malaysia who speaks Malaysian, English, Cantonese, and Spanish with the workers (238); a third noted that « one challenge is the many different language spoken here – English, Chinese, Spanish »; in a fourth case, English was used for business purposes, but Vietnamese and Spanish were employed on the shop floor, which also contained one person who spoke Armenian on the phone.
- 25 Employers made do as they could, but the effort did not create much joy « I hate it when I have to have a translator ». Many resorted to translation, a stratagem that produced its share of hiccups:

If she can't talk with them because of language differences, she gets her « best translator ». One translator makes her seem more forceful, another makes what she says seem less forceful. She tries to communicate through a neutral translator.

- 26 « Most employers and workers resent being forced to deal with multiple languages on the job », insisted one printer; as his shop ran all training programs on a bilingual basis, dollars and cents considerations undoubtedly fed his ill-temper.
- 27 The imperative for cooperation across ethnic and linguistic boundaries, however, generated a strong push toward English. Many departments had a mix of people and consequently, numerous printing firms insisted that English be spoken on the job – a policy absent from furniture or hotels or restaurants. « *They can't interview unless it's in English. English is for your work. If you want to speak a foreign language, you can do it on your own time* ».
- 28 One interviewee claimed that his was the first firm in the U.S. to post a letter on the bulletin board saying that English could only be spoken around the press, a move prompted by anxiety over the potentially dangerous equipment (though concern about « Hispanic workers talking in Spanish and one couldn't tell if the topic was ink or their girlfriend » also entered the equation). Foreign-language monolingualism also carried a cost in flexibility: a Spanish-speaking feeder, for example, could be successfully deployed alongside a bilingual pressman, but trouble was in store if the next pressman could only speak English. Even a Spanish-speaking bindery worker « could not be left alone by himself without some sort of supervision. I couldn't supervise him », explained a manager, « because I don't speak Spanish. That would be a problem ». The fact that jobs were not routinized and were subject to unpredictable changes made precise communication all the more important. « There are times that I need something to, to say to them, the client calls me, they need something to get done and if I cannot tell them exactly what I want to say, it isn't gonna work right ».
- 29 The preference for promotion from within had a similar effect: language problems that might be tractable at the lowest levels were more difficult to manage when the linguistic context became more complex. The owner of a west-side printing shop praised immigrants as « good employees », but then complained that « some don't see that they need good English ».
- 30 The structure of interaction again shaped linguistic needs, since « customers come in for a press check and if the salesmen's not here, the pressmen have to talk with the customer. I haven't run into pressmen who can't speak English: most are bilingual ».
- 31 Pressures to use English are still stronger in department stores. To be sure, the retail sector is swept by the same currents of linguistic change at work elsewhere in the region. Managers made clear that there was no shortage of foreign language speakers among their employees, and not just the usual mix – « associates who speak Spanish, Farsi » or « lots of Armenian » – but the complete Tower of Babel itself: « English, Spanish, Tagalog, I have a whole mix of all the baltics, Russians, we have some Yugoslavs, Czechs, a little bit of Dutch... ».
- 32 The retailers respond to the region's shifting ethnic mix in such a way as to attract the newest Angelenos, seeking to « pick up more and more Hispanic customers », by advertising in Spanish and « using the Spanish-speaking stations ». The changing clientele leads them to conclude that « the employee base has to reflect the customer base ». « We do have associates who speak to customers in Spanish, Farsi, etc. if the customer feels more comfortable that way », noted a manager with a mainline department store. Numerous interviewees agreed with the assessment of one chain store

manager who thought that « if the associate speaks a language other than English, that helps ».

- 33 So speaking non-English languages was frequently allowable; speaking English with an accent was also acceptable « if I can understand them and they can understand me ». Still, the stores wanted English to remain the *lingua franca*.
- 34 « We have bilingual management for the most part », a discounter told us, « pretty much all Latino, although not as much as our customer base ».
- 35 Most managers however, contended that « we wouldn't have people working here with no English ability ». « They need to know the English language », exclaimed one manager; « on the selling floor, they must speak English », noted another. As with the printers and the hospitals, English facility had a bearing on successful task completion: thus while a store might conclude that « it helps if the person is bilingual, that's better than just speaking English », the same retailer would still insist that « the most important thing is an understanding of the English, it underlies other skills, such as interaction and reading ».
- 36 Customer diversity provided an even stronger reason for the insistence on English: « We need them to speak English. We have a very diverse ethnic population in our company and in the stores ». Clearly, the mix of languages among workers and customers is a source of tension, and one that many managers want to alleviate. « We have customers complaining (using a whining voice) that "they can't speak English and they live in California" ». Part of this customer dissatisfaction is undoubtedly related to ethnocentric feelings among Anglos. But Anglos are not the only customers prone to sentiments of an ethnocentric sort: « The Baldwin Hills store is definitely an African-American population », noted a regional personnel manager. « From a language standpoint, there have been situations when I've had to tell workers to speak English on the floor ». Moreover, the adverse reaction goes beyond an allergy to Spanish. One manager fretted about customer complaints « In the downtown stores, (where) the Filipino workers would speak to each other in Tagalog »; another griped about « the Middle Eastern, who is intent upon using their native language instead of English ». And when immigrant sales people speak Spanish, Farsi, or Tagalog, adverse reactions arise for reasons that have nothing to do with foreigners or foreignness as such. Sometimes, « other parts of the work force doesn't know what they are talking about »; in other instances, there is always « the American customer who gets offended when he or she hears associates speaking in another language, and gets offended, thinking they're talking or laughing about them ». Consequently, managerial tolerance of linguistic diversity often had its limits:

I give them a bad time about (talking other languages), but I realize that you're always going to go back to your natural source. And Tagalog is spoken heavy here, but I always go up to them and pinch them or tease them and say « This is an English speaking country »... I give them a bad time about it, but not on a negative level. I will get angry, though, if they're conversing amongst themselves in the cashier environment.

- 37 The linguistic environment in hospitals at once resembled and differed from the evolving situation in the department stores. In contrast to employers of seemingly similar low-skilled help, hospitals require more – and more complex – information to be communicated. Likewise, communication is more likely to require two-way exchange. In contrast to comparably low-level workers employed on a factory floor or in a kitchen,

where contact is limited to co-workers, the least skilled members of the hospital workers labor in a very different interactional structure. Hospital work involves a great deal of incidental contact with people, whether customers or co-workers, a generalization that holds true for those workers whose jobs do not formally have anything to do with customer service.

- 38 Moreover, hospitals emphasize skills involving formal communications, mainly because workers need to understand written instructions of a complex sort. Reading English is of major importance, because if the housekeepers « can't read what the doctors or the nurses said about this patient's room, that could put them in danger as well ». Consequently, hospitals want their bottom-level workers to have at least some proficiency in reading English. Dietary workers, for example, who « fill orders, fill trays », have to do so with « attention to detail » frequently doing so « without direct supervision ». Those low-level workers who lacked the ability to read English spelled trouble, as noted by the food service manager who told us that « I've got some illiterate people and it's very difficult ». And with hospitals downsizing and requiring a more multivalent workforce, there appears to be less tolerance for monolingual workers. « There used to be a time when we could hire someone who could not speak English, but that changed four to five years ago. The system is too fast, there's no time for hand-holding ».
- 39 While emphasizing the importance of English, many hospitals made allowance for the language shifting that might occur when workers move from public to more private settings:

If they talk Tagalog or Chinese, say, on the job, we will not tolerate it long. This is an English-speaking facility. On break, in the cafeteria, I don't care what language they speak, but in patient areas, they should be speaking English.

- 40 The typical policy allowed for a distinction between domains, granting legitimacy to foreign language use in worker's truly private interactions, but casting English as the only language spoken by employees in work areas, « so that patients don't feel that they're being talked about », and because English is the « language spoken in the Medical Center, and by customers and supervisors ». Even the best efforts, however, do not always produce satisfactory results: « we have so many different thick, thick accents that sometimes somebody, say that it's Filipino talking to somebody of a different nationality, (they) have difficulty understanding each other's feelings. Both of their accents are thick. They may be speaking English but it's thick ».
- 41 As in the other industries, English-speakers, hither on the staff or on the patient-side, evince « a lot of dissatisfaction with people who speak another language ». To some extent, management's complaints can be read as a barometer of more general reactions to shifts in the regional, not just occupational, linguistic environment. Consider, for example, the manager who told us that « When I see people walking in the hallways speaking Spanish to their kids, it's just one thing that drives me nuts » or the following comment made by an otherwise liberal personnel officer, who worried that « pretty soon people like myself are going to be required to be bilingual »:

And I'm thinking here I am in my own country and I'm having to accommodate you know learning something else and accommodate these people because I

have really strong feelings because I've seen it walking in the hospital and somebody can't talk to somebody and it gets real you know frustrating.

- 42 A workforce having at least a minimal English-proficiency is desired; but it is not a universal imperative. Experienced workers evolve their own alternative methods for getting by, as in the case of these housekeepers in a « for-profit » hospital, who « have done their own little skills like if they see this color, they communicate it once in Spanish with somebody and if they saw a sign with this color that it meant that they had to be really careful if they go in without masks or gloves or whatever ». Likewise, limited fluency is often enough in English: they should at least be able to understand a written note that a nurse might leave for them, like « this patient is in isolation ». Still, there is a little question that hospitals expect far more in terms of English-speaking ability than do the other institutions and individuals who also employ people who clean floors and make beds.
- 43 But in sharp contrast to the situation in the retail sector, hospital's needs to service a growing non-English speaking population – « we have a lot of Spanish speaking members that come in, and we call for translation a lot » – yields a countervailing pressure. « We desperately need bilingual people », reported a manager in a facility with a very large black workforce. Many hospitals viewed bilingualism as a plus.
- 44 A manager in a county facility told us that « to a large extent, people who have bilingual abilities are wanted, because our patient mix is heavily non-English speakers at some of our locations ». The same point emerged several times in our conversation with managers at one of the largest public hospitals: « We have a high Hispanic population; we need to have people to communicate in it. Being bilingual is a big consideration ».
- 45 Interest was still greater at an hospital which was avidly trying to develop a niche servicing the area's new, multiethnic population. « Bilingualism is the big thing », we heard, though our respondent also conceded that it's « hard to find » « Many of the positions that I have are bilingual, so I would look if they speak Spanish », recounted a manager as she explained the criteria she would use when assessing an application. One hospital offered a premium to bilingual employees:

If you translate for 50% of your job, we give you like \$0.60 extra an hour. You get a lot of money for that. And the badges say, « Yo hablo Espanol », so if they can't find something they know you speak Spanish, so... It's a plus if you're bilingual.

- 46 Unlike the situation with English, however, bilingualism was a preference, never a rule, « Being bilingual is not required », reported a manager in an Eastside hospital, « but it is an asset ». Similarly, a manager who noted that « it is important to be bilingual » when filling a clerical job, also reported that « I have not had a requisition come down that requested a specific person who was bilingual ». Further, because hospitals view bilingualism as an add-on skill, it is unlikely to work to the benefit of the least-skilled Latino immigrants, most of whom are in any case not fully bilingual.

Conclusion: Network, Market, and Language Change

- 47 The material on which this paper is based provides reports both on language change at the workplace and on employers' views of that process. Only the former issue connects

directly with the analytic question at stake—namely, how organizational characteristics – both internal and external – affect language choices at work. The information on employers’ attitudes to be treated with care, as the forces affecting those attitudes derive from factors exogenous, not endogenous to the workplace itself. But employers’ attitudes are nonetheless illuminating, as they highlight the deep embedding of Spanish (and other foreign languages) within the workplace, notwithstanding employers’ wishes to the contrary.

- 48 For the most part, the linguistic shifts we have described are both a product of and a contributor to those closure processes that extrude less-skilled, native-born workers from the labor market. The tendency to rely on referrals to recruit workers – « our guys... send a stream of people that don’t speak English », exclaimed an unhappy manufacturer – separates furniture factories, restaurant kitchens, and hotel back-of-the house areas from the general labor market. With little in the way of demands to service English-language customers, the networks powerfully reinforce linguistic isolation. « Since the supervisor is Hispanic you have to speak Spanish to get hired », explained a hotel manager. « You cannot get hired if you only speak English ». Employers in immigrant-dominated industries like hotels, restaurants, or furniture manufacturing have to make deliberate efforts to widen the linguistic spectrum of the applicant pool, as in one factory which switched over from a reliance on referrals to newspapers, in a deliberate effort to avoid undocumented applicants, and specifically advertised for workers who could « read, speak, and write English ». However, others have all but given up any effort to obtain English-speakers, even when they recruit from the open market:

We tend to go to the Spanish papers like the Opinion because a lot of these people are Spanish that work in these furniture factories⁶.

- 49 Demands for higher level skills would increase resistance to use Spanish on the job. In some cases, those firms engaged in upgrading skill levels have also sought to diversify the workforce – at least by acquiring a staff which is bilingual in Spanish and English. That option, however, hinges on a determination to either alter established recruitment practices and/or pay the freight in the form of higher wages, a possibility before which many employers blanch.
- 50 But Anglophone exclusion is not simply a by-product of the referral process; for those non-Spanish speaking workers who find their way onto the shop or kitchen floor, membership in a linguistic minority is a source of even greater and continuing trouble. Advertising can attract a more diverse applicant pool, but outsiders then have trouble fitting in:

Even when we advertise, or we put through the department of employment, we rarely get either a black or an Asian. I’d bet you in the last twelve months I’ve had one or two Asian applicants, but that’s it. And then it usually becomes a language problem, because I don’t have bilingual foremen for them.

- 51 Interdependency in a situation where most workers spoke Spanish left English monolingual workers out in the cold: « because of the language barrier, there are two jobs here (for blacks), if they are unskilled: shipping and sweeping the floor ». « Unless the blacks speak Spanish », noted one furniture manufacturer, « we have a major problem »; another reported that language was an issue, not so much for management, but for

« blacks dealing with hispanics »; a third, who emphasized the need for cooperation and communication, went on to tell us that « the fact that our workforce is homogenous » – they were all Mexican – « helps towards this communication ». Explaining why it was « difficult to hire blacks when you have a predominantly Hispanic workforce », a hotel manager pointed to « discomfort with Latino influence. They don't understand the language ».

- 52 Linguistic encapsulation is not on the horizon in industries or work situations involving contact with an English-speaking clientele or labor force. Here, interdependency links entry-level work to a linguistically diverse population, in which English-speakers retain dominance, if only for the moment. Thus, demands for English may actually work to the benefit of less skilled, native-born workers, as explained by one of the an hospital managers with whom we talked:

The only real difference is that with black men... I typically don't need to worry about English as a second language. Whereas with somebody from a different country, I need to be concerned with their ability to speak English. So I might put, um, I might choose a black man for an area that is more accessible to the public, so that...because our environmental service techs are asked directions all the time in our hospital. So I much put somebody with better English in a position where they're going to deal more with the general public.

- 53 Moreover, most jobs demanded a modicum of English-language speaking and, often, reading ability, with even the lowly « environmental service technicians » – hospitalspeak for janitorial work – expected to communicate with doctors, nurses, and patients and absorb written information relating to hazard and threat of disease. Printing departs from both the hospital and department cases, involving much lower levels of client interaction. But like the hospitals, the printing plants had an elaborated division of labor, arranging jobs in such a way that workers at varying levels of the hierarchy labored in tandem. Entry-level Spanish-speakers thus fell under pressure to conform to the linguistic practices of the more skilled, generally Anglophone, workers.
- 54 If hospitals, department stores, and printing shops maintain a continuing demand for English-speakers, they operate in an increasingly multilingual environment, which inevitably adds another item to the list of skills which black, and other low-skilled, native-born applicants generally lack. The impact on monolingual African Americans as they slowly become an English-speaking minority in the lower level occupations is likely to be frustration and alienation:

I see it in hospitals, like in one hospital we have, you see, the blacks on one side of the room, the Hispanics are on the other side of the room, at one of these general meetings. And you can hear in it some of the questions that come up, and some of the answers that come up, the representation from the unions. There's a certain amount of animosity because the union representative is speaking in Spanish. So it comes up, there's an attitudinal thing. I think the blacks feel probably threatened because there's so many Hispanics here.

- 55 In hospitals, the children of immigrants with the baseline skills needed to work as dietary aids or housekeepers are entering the labor market in growing numbers, and to the extent that they have some facility in two languages, they will increasingly have an advantage over native-born blacks:

We have a large ethnic patient population, and to an extent our patients' access to medical care has improved with having people that they can communicate with. So one of our objectives is having a diverse workforce which mirrors our diverse patient population.

- 56 The need for bilingual speakers is particularly acute in precisely that sector where blacks are more over-represented – namely, the public hospitals – since these are the facilities most heavily used by Latino immigrants. Though dominated by poorly educated Mexican and Central Americans, the region's foreign-born population is very diverse; higher skilled newcomers from Asia or the Middle East are more likely to have adequate competency in English and also possess other skills that hospitals want. Moreover, the demand for English is more of a soft than a hard constraint in its impact on the influx of the foreign-born.
- 57 In the end, this paper essentially confirms the conventional wisdom: exposure to influences outside the immigrant community propels the process of language shift. But the paper does suggest one revision: work need not be the domain of initial change. The massive entry of immigrants into the workforce, combined with the stranglehold of immigrant networks over the hiring process, yields a type of social closure that yields linguistic accommodation with a twist, as bosses and supervisors accommodate to the linguistic needs and preferences of the newcomers – *and not the other way around*.
-

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bourhis, Richard Y. 1994. « Bilingualism and the language of work: the Linguistic Work Environment Survey ». Pp. 217-266 in *The International Journal of Sociological Language*, nos. 105/106, pp. 217-66.
- Breton, Raymond and Gail Grant. 1981. *La langue de travail*. The Institute for Research on Public Policy.
- Fasold, Ralph. 1984. *The sociolinguistics of Society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Fishman, Joshua. 1966. *Language Loyalty in the United States*. Hague: Mouton.
1972. *The Sociology of Language*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
1980. « Language Maintenance »... Pp. 629-638 in S. Thernstrom et al., eds. *The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- et al. 1985. *The Rise and Fall of the Ethnic Revival*. The Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Giles, H; Bourhis, R. Y.; Taylor, D.M. 1977. « Towards a Theory of Language in Ethnic Group Relations ». In H. Giles, ed. *Language, Ethnicity, and Intergroup Relations*, New York: Academic Press.
- Gouvernement du Québec. 1972. *La langue de travail: La situation du français dans les activités de travail et de consommation des Québécois*. Commission d'enquête sur la situation de la langue française et sur les droits linguistiques au Québec: Québec.

- Greenfield, Lawrence. 1972. « Situational Measures of Normative Language in Views in Relation to Person, Place and Topic among Puerto Rican Bilinguals » Pp. 17-35 in Joshua Fishman, ed. *Advances in the Sociology of Language*, V. II, The Hague: Mouton.
- Grillo, R.D. 1989. *Dominant Languages*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jaramillo, June A. 1995. « The passive legitimization of Spanish. A macrosociolinguistic study of a quasi-border: Tucson, Arizona ». Pp. 67-91 in *The International Journal of Sociological Language*, no. 114, 67-91.
- Kirschenman, Joleen and Neckerman, Kathryn. 1991. « We'd Love to Hire Them, But...!: The Meaning of Race for Employer ». Pp. 203-234 in Christopher Jencks and Paul Peterson, eds. *The Urban Underclass*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.
- Lopez, David. 1996. « Language: Diversity and Assimilation ». Chapter 5 in Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, eds. *Ethnic Los Angeles*. New York: Russel Sage Foundation.
- Massey, Douglas et al. 1993. « Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal ». *Population and Development Review*, V. 19. 3, 431-66.
- Teschner, Richard V. 1995. « Beacheheads, islands, and conduits: Spanish monolingualism and bilingualism in El Paso, Texas ». Pp. 93-105 in *The International Journal of Sociological Language*, no. 114, 93-105.
- Waldinger, Roger. 1996. *Still the Promised City? African-Americans and New Immigrants in Post-Industrial New York*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

NOTES

1. Thanks to the John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation for the generous funding which supported collection of the data on which this study is based, and to a grant from the UC-Mexus program, which facilitated preparation of this paper.
2. With apologies to Evert C. Hugues (1972).
3. Note de l'éditeur : on appelle « domestic » l'économie interne aux USA.
4. All employers are single-counted, even if they were owners or managers of multi-unit operations. Three of the hospital interviews involved persons not directly employed by hospitals ; these were with the vice-president of a company supplying contract housekeeping services to hospitals ; an official in a large public sector hospital workers' union ; and two personnel officials in a local government department responsible for general health care services.
5. Our list of acute care medical hospitals in Los Angeles County was taken primarily from a local street guide, supplemented by a regional business directory.
6. This respondent is referring to *La Opinion*, Los Angeles' largest, and oldest, Spanish-language daily.

ABSTRACTS

Le modèle du « melting pot » américain passe par l'oubli des langues maternelles en l'espace de trois générations dans les milieux de travail où hiérarchies et clients utilisent la langue dominante. La nouvelle immigration des années quatre-vingt-dix a transformé certaines villes américaines en tour de Babel. L'étude de la nouvelle immigration permet de préciser les conditions de réalisations du modèle dominant et de la nouvelle situation. Le développement d'entreprises d'immigrants montre l'importance du phénomène relationnel dans le travail : ce qui compte est l'inter-compréhension patrons/clients/ouvriers, même si elle est en rupture avec la langue dominante. C'est cette nouvelle définition de l'« autosuffisance » du monde migrant d'économies parallèles, ses contraintes et ses apports concrets que l'auteur développe dans le secteur du tourisme et de la santé du comté de Los Angeles.

AUTHOR

ROGER WALDINGER

Department of sociology and lewis center for regional policy studies UCLA