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Scooter Pégram  
*Indiana University Northwest*

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*Navigating behind the Shadows of Steel: The Convergence and Divergence of Identity and Language among Latino Youth in Northwest Indiana\**

SCOOTER PÉGRAM  
*Indiana University Northwest*

**ABSTRACT**

The region of Northwest Indiana is home to many thousands of Latinos, and this dynamic group has a long history in the area. As a group, issues relating to Latinos are well researched; however, primary investigations involving youth from the community are few. Influenced by the surrounding host and heritage cultures, young Latinos find themselves in a unique yet conflicting position as they navigate the parameters of both of these paradigms. This paper examines identity and language use amongst young Latinos in Northwest Indiana, and data are presented from a sociolinguistic intervention undertaken with 310 young Latinos from this region. Upon analysis of data collected from this field study, it was found that these youth possess multiple identities that cannot be deconstructed and reconfigured into a single set category. Moreover, linguistic shift toward English is occurring, with noteworthy gender distinctions on that topic and concerning how young Latinos identify themselves.

**KEY WORDS** Latino Youth in Northwest Indiana; Language Use; Identity; Linguistic Shift; Integration

Latinos have a long and deep history in Northwest Indiana. The upper left regional corner of the Hoosier State was once particularly attractive to immigrants because it represented a heavily industrialized part of the American Midwest that offered numerous employment options to unskilled workers arriving from all over the world. The first migrants from Latin America to settle in this rapidly developing part of Indiana came from Mexico in the 1890s, with a more significant presence beginning to take hold during the 1920s. The abundant (and cheap) labor provided by continuously arriving immigrants from Eastern Europe and Latin America, in addition to African Americans and others from the southern region of the United States, helped to vitalize and build the area economically. Most of the arriving Mexicans chose to settle in and around the cities of

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\* Scooter Pégram, Associate Professor, Modern Languages and Minority Studies, Indiana University Northwest, 3400 Broadway, Hawthorn 463, Gary, IN 46408; spegram@iun.edu; (219) 980-6532

East Chicago and Gary, as these two municipalities were home to numerous steel mills and other factories of heavy industry (Samora and Lamana 1967). During the 1920s, Mexicans were recruited to the area to help “break” strikes at the major steel mills, and it was during this period when small but vibrant communities known as colonias were created in Gary and the Indiana Harbour neighborhood of East Chicago (Taylor 1987). Despite the varied job opportunities available to them, however, things would not be easy for these new migrants. During the non-union era of the 1920s, Mexicans and other low-skilled laborers worked long days under arduous conditions for very poor wages (Lane 1987). Moreover, residential conditions for these Spanish-speaking newcomers who joined the potpourri of diverse cultures arriving to work in Northwest Indiana were appalling at best. For example, Lane (1987:25) describes the homes and boarding houses where Mexican migrants and their families lived as being “noxious basements devoid of plumbing, beds, chairs or tables.” Life was also strenuous for these migrants outside of the work environment, as they faced discrimination in many sectors of society, and any existing heritage institutions that might have catered to their needs were few in number (Lane 1987; Rosales and Simon 1987). Later, when the Great Depression forced many mills and factories to downsize their employment rosters because of economic duress, large numbers of Mexicans were repatriated home, either voluntarily or by force. It was not until the years of the Second World War that the community would start to rebuild itself anew, as Northwest Indiana (and the entire United States) experienced a postwar economic boom and the labor of immigrants from Mexico was welcomed once again.

From the 1940s forward, the Mexican population of Northwest Indiana grew substantially in number, and by mid-century, the region was home to tens of thousands of Latinos. In the postwar period, tens of thousands of people were employed in the steel mills and other factories across the area. Opportunities for low- or semi-skilled workers were plentiful, as employers needed and relied on a steady stream of cheap labor for the now-unionized jobs. In the latter half of the century, large numbers of migrants from Puerto Rico migrated to the region and joined the previously established (and still arriving) Mexicans, thus adding a new ingredient to the multicultural and diverse mix of people living in Northwest Indiana. Interestingly, the two Spanish-speaking communities often lived together in the same neighborhoods and their relationship was harmonious in nature as a Latino community/identity slowly began to develop and form in the region (Escobar 1987).

Times have not always been favorable for this growing community of Latin Americans, however. At the end of the 1970s, thousands of industrial jobs in Northwest Indiana were outsourced overseas, automated, or simply phased out and eliminated as the steel mills and other factories downsized their employment rosters. Despite this downturn regarding employment, however, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans (and small groups of other Latin Americans) were firmly entrenched as a permanent part of the Northwest Indiana polyglot. Although the region suffered economically throughout the 1980s and 1990s as it changed from a primarily industrial economy to one based on service-type jobs, the Latino community continued to grow in numbers.

Due to the proximity of Northwest Indiana to Chicago (with the region having long been considered as the “South Shore” suburbs of the city) and the abundance of low-priced housing, migrants from Latin America continue to settle in the area. Although Latinos live throughout Northwest Indiana, most reside in urban locales located within the region’s three largest cities, located in the northern section of Lake County, adjacent to nearby Chicago, and along the southern shore of Lake Michigan. In addition to the well-established community found in the city of East Chicago and to a lesser extent on the west side of Gary, Latinos are also heavily concentrated in western and northern sections of Hammond and in its smaller sister city of Whiting. The population remains in flux in some areas as outward migration to suburban municipalities is affecting the Latino communities in East Chicago and Gary. For example, recent U.S. Census (2010) statistics show that the percentage of Latinos living in East Chicago remains stable at 50 percent of the city’s total population (but not increasing), and Gary’s population of Latin Americans is dropping. In contrast, when one looks at census findings regarding Hammond and its northern neighbor Whiting, the Latino community grows larger each year, now representing 34 percent of the residents in the former municipality and 40 percent in the latter (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Moreover, smaller concentrations of Latinos are also spread throughout the more traditional suburban and rural areas of Lake and Porter Counties. Latinos represent a small percentage of the overall population away from cities in the northern part of Lake County, but census statistics indicate that their numbers are increasing in every city and township across Northwest Indiana.

Although topics relating to integration, acculturation, and assimilation concerning Latin American youths have been partially researched from a national perspective, how might these issues be similar or different in regard to young Latinos in this unique region of the Midwest? Previously, the Latino community of Northwest Indiana has been researched from different angles by Attinasi (1985) and Mendieta (1995), among others, but investigations concerning solely the youths from within it have been overlooked. Although studies on the entire assemblage are indeed valuable, one cannot assume that younger members of Latin American cultures will view the world through the same prism as their parents or caregivers. We believe that it is also important to examine and research issues as they relate to this younger segment of the Latino population, as to gain a greater understanding of how inner and outer influences motivate their self-identity as well as their linguistic competency. Our aim here is therefore to introduce, deconstruct, and briefly analyze recently gathered data relating to identification and language use among young Latinos in Northwest Indiana.

## **TRENDS REGARDING IDENTITY AND LANGUAGE**

The Latin American community of the United States is increasing at an astounding rate, and population data illustrate the demographic changes that are occurring nationwide. The 2010 U.S. Census estimated the Latino population of the country to be over 51 million people, which represents a 43 percent increase since the statistics were last taken in 2000. When one considers this population in terms of birthplace and

generational status, recent census figures also show that approximately 40 percent of all Latinos living in the United States were born outside of the country, versus 60 percent who are second-generation or beyond. Concerning linguistic ability in the majority language, more than half of all Latinos in the United States indicate that they speak English “very well” (Bills, Hudson, and Hernández-Chávez 2000; Potowski 2004; U.S. Census Data 2010). In fact, by the third generation, many Latinos have moved toward monolingual use of English, although the constant flux of new arrivals keeps Spanish visible and constant in areas of the country where Latin Americans are present in significant numbers. At the same time that Latinos are becoming more visible in American society, however, divisiveness over topics such as integration, Spanish language use, assimilation, and cultural resistance continues to be more prevalent than ever.

Despite these issues, and similar to the many waves of immigrants who came before them, Latinos in the United States are integrating into American culture, albeit in their own unique manner. For instance, although Latinos are becoming more “American” in certain facets, they are also preserving aspects of their own cultural construct in others. Hurtado and Gurin (2004) posit that over time, Latinos are able to identify as “Americans” and speak English, though many of this same group also safeguard links to the heritage culture and maintain use of the Spanish language. Other researchers argue that because new migrants from Latin America constantly make their way into the United States, a slower rate of full cultural assimilation into the American majority will occur among Latinos than has previously been seen with other immigrant groups (Castro-Gonzales, Boyer, and Balcazar 2000; Hurtado and Gurin 2004; Potowski 2004).

The topic of identity is a complex issue facing many young immigrants of color to the United States. Researchers such as Phinney (1989), Marcia (1980), Tse (1997), and Castro-Gonzales et al. (2000) argue that the development of identity among ethnocultural youth in the United States progresses via a set of unique coping stages. Although the number and designated label of these unique developmental mechanisms varies from researcher to researcher, all maintain that immigrant youth employ a number of adjustment coping strategies as they navigate through adolescence. Phinney (1989), Tse (1997), Koss-Chioino and Vargas (1999) and Hurtado and Gurin (2004) suggest that the first type of these coping stages consists of rejecting or ignoring one’s ethnic heritage in favor of that of the majority culture. In the second set, immigrant youth begin to recognize the uniqueness of their ethnocultural differences without having a clear understanding of these distinctions. In the next stage, these youths begin to explore their heritage identity in tandem with that of the majority group, usually neither embracing nor rejecting either cultural paradigm. Finally, Phinney (1989) and Tse (1997) argue that in the last adjustment strategy, immigrant youth develop a clear comprehension of their ethnocultural differences and begin to accept and embrace their own identity, either partially or in full. Thus, it is in this final adjustment stage when ethnocultural youth will clarify their feelings toward their heritage culture as positive, negative, or neutral.

When large numbers of young immigrants are grouped together into a single geographical area, their progression through each of these adjustment stages transpires at

a much quicker pace than among those youths living in more ethnically diverse constructs (Castro-Gonzales et al. 2000; Mendieta 1995). It should be noted, however, that the power and strength of American culture permeate even the most homogeneous of ethnic neighborhoods, and bicultural self-examination via the aforementioned developmental mechanisms occurs everywhere to one degree or another. Concerning the youths in our study, the majority are peer-clustered and reside in areas heavily inhabited by other Latinos (e.g., East Chicago and northwestern sections of Hammond).

In addition to being motivated by the demographic and social parameters of their surrounding environment, self-identity among Latino youth is also influenced by the developmental strategy in which they find themselves at the time (Castro et al. 2000). Phinney (1989) and Koss-Chioino and Vargas (1999) argue that Latino youth who have not achieved this last coping stage (i.e., understanding and resolving their ethnocultural uniqueness and differences) are those who are most vulnerable to conflicting feelings with respect to their own cultural construct. Castro et al. (2000:161) maintain that young Latinos and adolescents of color are sensitive to prejudice and cultural discrimination and therefore will suffer if they also happen to be labeled as “different” from members of the “mainstream” set of reference. Negative feelings such as these may cause some Latino youth to disassociate themselves with the majority culture, to the detriment of the heritage group.

Latino youth are often caught between two often conflicting sociocultural paradigms: the large and omnipresent American host/majority group, and the smaller heritage assemblage. The two diverging paradigms (heritage versus host) surrounding young Latinos in the United States often causes a sort of cultural conflict as these youths struggle to create their own place within a society where they find themselves increasingly caught in the middle, not being fully comfortable with their choices (Castro-Gonzales et al. 2000; Koss-Chioino and Vargas 1999; Oetting and Beauvais 1987; Phinney 1989). When confronted with these challenges in regard to ethnic labeling, Koss-Chioino and Vargas (1999), Mendoza-Denton (1999), and Potowski (2004) argue, young Latinos will assume and develop a bicultural identity, and this choice can often be burdensome. For example, with which group (majority or minority) should Latinos identify? Which language (English or Spanish) will be spoken more frequently at home, or outside the family or social unit? Is it possible for someone to consider himself or herself as Latino or Latina without being able to speak or read Spanish? To deal with this schizophrenic reality, some researchers posit, Latino youth learn to navigate the parameters of both the heritage and host cultural groups at an early age by developing various skills that help them to adjust and accept each environment in a constructive manner (Castro-Gonzales et al. 2000; Koss-Chioino and Vargas 1999).

## **METHODS USED IN THE CURRENT STUDY**

To examine identity and language use in regard to our sample of young Latinos, sociolinguistic questionnaires were developed and distributed following similar previous investigations (such as Lambert and Taylor 1996; Mendieta 1995; Potowski 2004; and

Zurer-Pearson and McGee 2000). Although this survey posed a variety of inquiries regarding language, identity, social position, and connections to the heritage and host cultural paradigms, the results shown in the present paper will concentrate solely on those questions dealing with language use and self-identification.<sup>1</sup>

Data collection for our sample took place throughout the region of Northwest Indiana, and the bulk was conducted within the areas where Latinos are most concentrated (namely East Chicago, Hammond, Gary, Whiting, and Merrillville). Questionnaires were enumerated and gathered at all hours of the day and night in a diverse array of locales, such as on the streets, at festivals, outside of schools and churches, at places of employment, and so forth. Concerning the personal characteristics and demographics of our sample, youths from all social classes and Latino national origins were sought, as we wanted our respondents to be varied in their characteristics so as to mirror the communities of which they are members. Thus, we interviewed a diverse section of young Latinos, from those who recently arrived to the United States, to others hailing from the second generation and beyond, with the vast majority of our respondents (83 percent) representing the latter. In all, we collected 310 questionnaires, of which females numbered 198 and males, 112. The majority of our surveys were completed by youths of Mexican and Puerto Rican origins, with Mexicans being the most numerous group (80 percent), followed by Puerto Ricans (17 percent), with the remaining 3 percent being of “other” Latino origins.

Concerning possible limitations regarding this type of data collection in sociolinguistic and cultural research, the use of questionnaires to measure language use and ability might not be the most accurate, given the tendency of some respondents to overestimate their capabilities in the heritage language; however, because the researchers were present during the entirety of the data collection (personally speaking with all respondents before they filled out the survey, as well as during), we believe that our presence and attention concerning this issue minimized any potential inadequacies. Furthermore, to prevent data from being otherwise skewed by the choice of multiple responses by interviewees, we explained to each respondent that only a single answer to each inquiry was to be chosen, so as to avoid the need to discard any questionnaires during the data analysis and codification.<sup>2</sup>

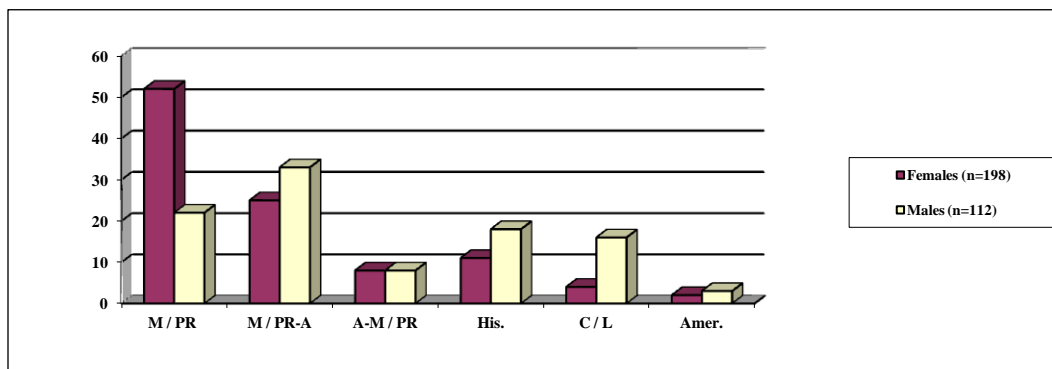
In the following sections, results are shown by using table graphs, and findings are presented in the following order: First, data is introduced showing how young Latinos identify themselves; second, the findings are illustrated regarding heritage language ability; and third, the subsequent sections discuss data relating to language use inside and outside of the home. Following the presentation of our results is an analytic breakdown of the collected data as given by our sample.

## **SELF-IDENTIFICATION**

As previously mentioned, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and other Latin Americans have a long history of living in and contributing to the growth of Northwest Indiana, and

the population continues to grow as new migrants arrive and further enrich the community. Given these unique demographics, how do the two intersecting sociocultural paradigms (host versus heritage, American versus Latin American) affect young Latinos in the region? More specifically, how will these youths identify and classify themselves when queried? In a wide critique of available literature concerning acculturation among Latino youth, Castro-Gonzales et al. (2000), Hurtado and Gurin (2004), and Potowski (2004) contend that numerous surrounding influences such as daily language use, family cohesion, self-esteem, ethnic loyalty, peer pressure, community demographics, contact with the host culture, and the mainstream media all play a part in the formation and development of ethnocultural self-identity. Regarding this subject, respondents were asked, “How would you identify yourself?” and were given six preselected categories from which to choose: (1) Mexican/Puerto Rican only, (2) Mexican American or Puerto Rican first, American second, (3) American first, Mexican/Puerto Rican second, (4) Hispanic, (5) Chicano or Latino, (6) American only. The results from this query are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Self-Identification, by Percentage**



*Notes:* A-M/PR=American first, Mexican or Puerto Rican (*or other*) second; Amer.=American only; C/L=Chicano or Latino; His.=Hispanic; M/PR=Mexican or Puerto Rican (*or other*) only; M/PR-A=Mexican or Puerto Rican (*or other*) first, American second.

Although the collected responses varied among all of the available categories, in terms of self-identity, our data show that as a group, Latinos in Northwest Indiana generally tend to choose some sort of a split designator rather than place themselves into one single set category, which suggests a segmented type of acculturation among these youths. Interestingly, the results also indicate that more females (52 percent) than males (22 percent) chose to identify themselves as being part of the heritage group alone, without some sort of split designator (e.g., Mexican/Puerto Rican only). On this note, if we examine the findings based on a mixed type of identification, more males than females identify themselves as “Mexican/Puerto Rican first, American second” (33 percent) or as “Hispanic” (18 percent). Few respondents of either gender chose the designator of “Chicano or Latino” (males 16 percent, females 4 percent) or “American only” (males 3 percent, females 2 percent). It should be noted, however, that in both



cases, more males chose these responses than females. Concerning the ensemble of the possible responses regarding gender, the distribution of the data is statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 34.2253$ ;  $df = 5$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

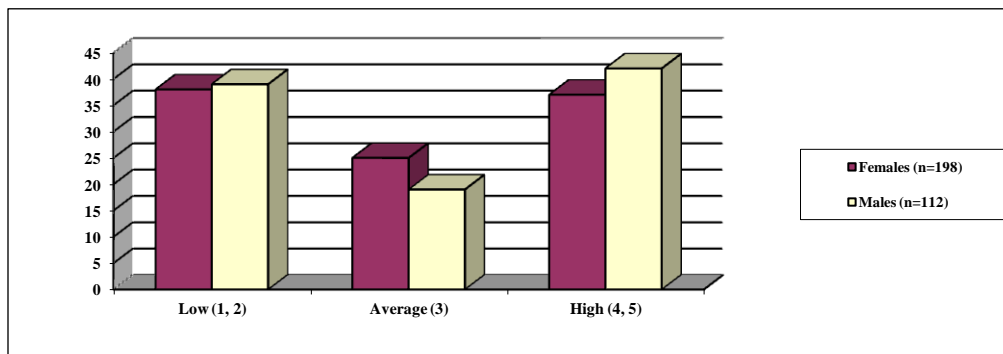
## LANGUAGE

Linguistic researchers have long argued that language is one of the most important factors to consider when analyzing the subject of identity, and it is often the sole unifier concerning ethnocultural distinctiveness, as it binds individuals together into a group. In this respect, we sought to ascertain the symbolic and realistic value of the Spanish language among young Latinos in Northwest Indiana. In a previous study that examined the use and preservation of Spanish by Latinos in this region, Mendieta (1995) measured language maintenance by applying the concept of linguistic loyalty (an index that examines the total number of people in a single defined area identifying as “Latino” versus the actual percentage of that same demographic who maintain Spanish language use). When studying the community by using this indicator, Mendieta (1995) found that a large percentage of respondents who identified themselves as “Latino” or “Hispanic” indicated that they continue to speak and use Spanish (e.g., 75 percent of the residents of East Chicago and 65 percent of the residents of Hammond), although without specifying to what degree of fluency it is spoken. Because these two geographical areas of Northwest Indiana maintain a long and deep history of Latino settlement and continue to be augmented by new arrivals, this finding is not surprising. Moreover, in describing these areas as “urban villas,” Mendieta (1995:100) posits that Spanish language maintenance in Northwest Indiana decreases when Latinos leave cities (where high densities of Spanish speakers reside) for the suburbs (where the population is more ethnically diverse in favor of the majority culture).

Concerning our sample of Latino youth, most respondents indicated that they could speak and understand Spanish to some degree, with native speakers and recent arrivals having the highest amount of comprehension. It should be noted, however, that findings from our data show that not everyone chooses to use the heritage language in daily exchanges for various reasons, such as a lack of fluency, or a deficiency of confidence, and so forth. In a similar investigation, Mendieta (1995), Castro-Gonzales et al. (2000), and Potwoski (2004) argue that the home use of Spanish affects linguistic ability, because family life is important with regard to the overall vitality of the heritage language. Thus, fluency between persons varies greatly, depending on the density and percentage of Spanish speakers in the immediate community and on the use of the language in the home or immediate social environment.

To measure linguistic competence in the heritage language, our sample of young Latinos were asked to measure their overall abilities regarding literacy and speaking knowledge in Spanish. Respondents self-ranked their abilities on a Likert scale numbered from 1 to 5, with 1 having the lowest amount of proficiency and 5 the highest.<sup>3</sup> The results of this inquiry are shown in Figure 2.

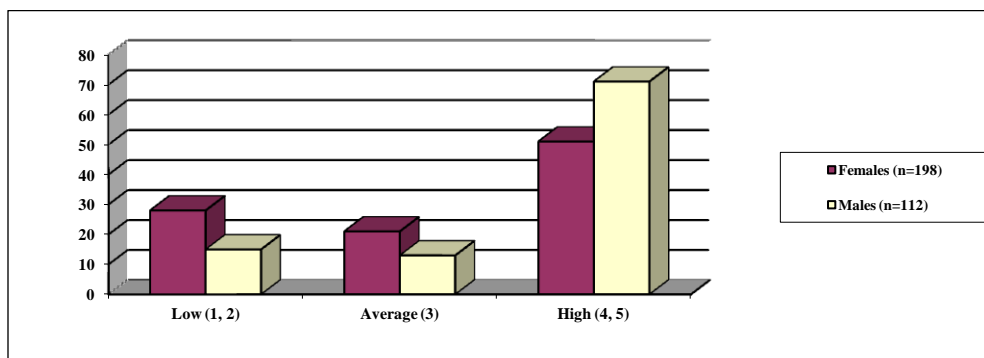
**Figure 2. Literacy in Spanish, by Percentage**



The data from Figure 2 indicate that a higher percentage of males (42 percent) than females (37 percent) are literate in Spanish at a “high” level. When one considers the “average” and “low” categories, a greater percentage of females (25 percent) state that they are less literate at the “average” level than are males (19 percent), but both genders are equally distributed at a “low” level (females 38 percent, and males 39 percent). Although the distribution of the data between the genders is not significant concerning this inquiry ( $\chi^2 = 1.634$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 1$ ), these differences are indeed noteworthy to consider.

Regarding speaking ability in Spanish, the same set of measures was applied. The results of this inquiry are highlighted in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Oral Ability in Spanish, by Percentage**

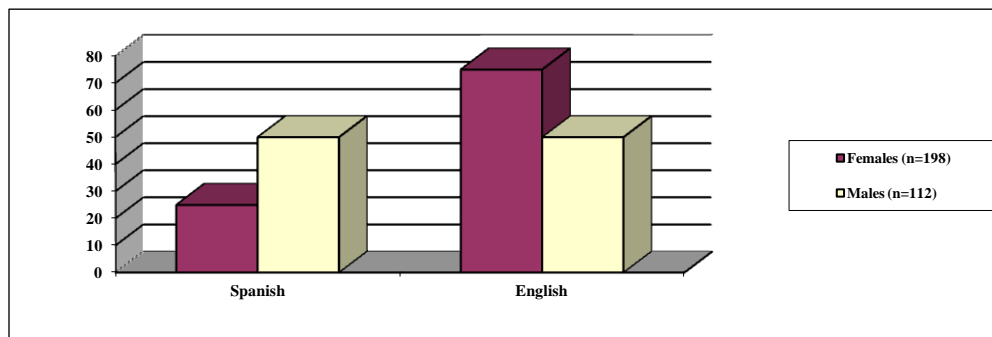


The data from Figure 3 show that a majority of our respondents indicated that they are able to speak Spanish at a “high” level, with more males (71 percent) than females (51 percent) choosing this designator. Moreover, a larger percentage of females than males stated their linguistic capability in Spanish to be at either the “average” (females 21 percent, and males 13 percent) or “low” (females 28 percent, and males 15 percent) level. The distribution from the totality of answers concerning this question is statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 12.443$ ;  $df = 2$ ;  $p < 0.0019$ ).

## LANGUAGE USE

Now that we have examined linguistic ability in Spanish among young Latinos in Northwest Indiana, it is important to investigate which language these youths choose to speak *most* from day to day. Although some researchers could argue that it would be difficult to measure an individual's code-switching behavior regarding this particular question, we explained to all respondents that they should choose the language that they used *most often* with their parents or caregivers. The responses from this inquiry are shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Language Most Used in the Home, by Percentage**

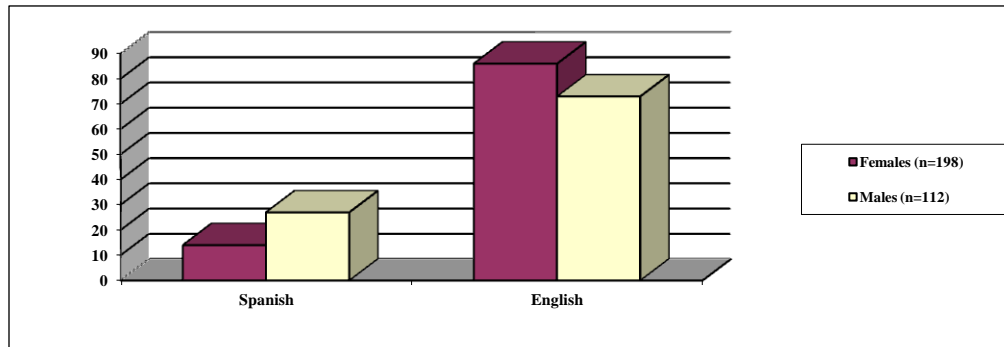


The data from Figure 4 show that more males (50 percent) speak Spanish at home than females (25 percent). In fact, an overwhelming number of females (75 percent) stated that they speak more English at home than Spanish, whereas only half (50 percent) of the surveyed males indicated the same. These findings therefore demonstrate that a move toward English among Latinos in Northwest Indiana is occurring, although it is more pronounced among females. In fact, this linguistic shift is taking place despite the numerous popular stereotypes in the American media and elsewhere that suggest the opposite. The data from this inquiry are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 20.366$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < 0.0000$ ).

Despite our findings, linguistic researchers argue that because of the continuing arrival of migrants to the United States, young Latinos will either maintain Spanish (to differing degrees) in the home for a longer duration of time than youths from other ethnocultural groups or will speak a hybridized mix of Spanish and English (Castro-Gonzales et al. 2000; Koss-Chioino and Vargas 1999; Mendieta 1995; Mendoza-Denton 1999). Because of the continuing flux of Spanish-speaking arrivals to Northwest Indiana that will obviously influence the community already in place, the data from Figures 3 and 4 illustrate that a *complete* shift toward English is not occurring, as a significant number of young Latinos in the region continue to use the heritage language in the home, albeit with fluency varying from person to person. However, the findings also show that many Latino youth favor using English over Spanish as their principal daily oral vernacular, despite any competency in Spanish.

A more poignant example that demonstrates this slow move toward English can be seen if one considers the language that is used among young Latinos beyond the home environment. To this end, we asked respondents to indicate which language they most speak outside their residence. The findings from this inquiry are shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Language Most Used outside the Home, by Percentage**



The results from Figure 5 show that the majority of our respondents indicate that they primarily speak English outside the home. Broken down by gender, fewer males (73 percent) than females (86 percent) speak English outside the home. The results of this inquiry mirror the previous data from Figure 4. Gender notwithstanding, these findings also show that a shift toward English is occurring among young Latinos in Northwest Indiana, and the results from this question are statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 8.242$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < 0.0040$ ).

## ANALYSIS

Latino youth in Northwest Indiana live in a bicultural and/or segmented environment where they are proud of their heritage, on one hand, yet are also becoming more “Americanized,” on the other. This conflicting dual identity construct is normal for young Latinos living in bilingual households where heritage values are cherished and celebrated while at the same time being exposed to the norms and standards of the majority culture outside of the home. This is not surprising when one considers the fact that the ethnolinguistic vitality of the heritage language and culture is high because of the urban density of the majority of the Latino population in Northwest Indiana and the proximity of the area to Chicago. At the same time, however, Latinos living in the region have more contact with the majority culture than typically occurs in the ethnically segregated Mexican and Puerto Rican neighborhoods of nearby Chicago (such as the East Side, Pilsen, Portage Park, Hermosa, Little Village, or Humboldt Park).

Findings from a study published by the Pew Hispanic Center (2004, 2009) indicate that older Latinos in the United States favor heritage media and cultural institutions over those of the host society. Not surprisingly, it was discovered that elder Latin Americans identify more closely with Spanish-language culture and seek to

maintain their ties to it. Because linguistic competence in English among older Latinos is often low, these individuals tend to remain within the familiar confines and comfort of their ethnocultural group concerning their social and commercial ties when possible (i.e., frequenting businesses in Latino neighborhoods). Although these types of links are important for older Latinos, youths from within the community do not always fit into this type of transnational mold because they have more of a bicultural outlook and construct. Our results show that few young Latinos in Northwest Indiana choose to identify themselves as American only, as the majority of these youths prefer some sort of combination or split designation. In other words, this bicultural identity is a simple representation of the conflicting environment in which most young Latinos situate themselves daily. For instance, heritage cultural values are transmitted to young Latinos by their parents or caregivers in the home and during visits to majority-Latino areas within the city of Chicago, while American cultural values are obtained via educational and social spheres outside of their residences and by their own life choices via music, television, and pop culture influences.

Because of their unique dual environment, Latino youth therefore have many more cultural and social options available to them than do their parents or other recently arrived adults in the community. Because young Latinos in Northwest Indiana are more willing to identify themselves in some sort of a dual manner, these youths do not feel limited or confined to their heritage group, as they take part in American culture as well. This bicultural identity should not be viewed as completely negative for these youths, as young Latinos in Northwest Indiana have a much broader assortment of social selections from which to choose than do their parents and/or monolingual Americans. In fact, this dual environment can be advantageous in certain respects. For instance, while many youths from the majority culture remain restricted to the Anglophone environment of mainstream Americana and older Latinos often are confined to Latin American cultural traditions, young Latinos will navigate between heritage and host constructs as the particular situation dictates. This dual-identity and bicultural lifestyle also affects and influences attitudes regarding language use and ability.

Regarding this latter subject, our findings indicate that most Latino youth in Northwest Indiana are using English over Spanish in nearly all circumstances, including within the home. Despite the fact that many of our respondents state that they are able to speak Spanish at a high level, their comfort and/or familiarity in English prevents them from using the heritage language more frequently. Although a majority of Latino youth (regardless of gender) in Northwest Indiana are able to speak Spanish to some degree (with some youths being more fluent than others), fewer and fewer of them are choosing to use their heritage language daily. These results regarding language use mirror those presented in previous research on the Latino community of the region by Attinasi (1985) and Mendieta (1995). Even when one considers native speakers and recent arrivals from Latin America, the exclusive use of Spanish daily cannot be assumed to be a typical linguistic choice among young Latinos in Northwest Indiana. For example, half of the males and a majority of young females surveyed indicate that they do not primarily speak

Spanish in the home, and most youths (especially young women) favor using English outside of the home as well.

Because our findings show that literacy skills in Spanish among young Latinos (as judged by them) are at the low or average level, these youths are less likely to feel fully confident in the heritage language. Although the Latino youth from our sample stated that they are able to speak Spanish at a medium to high level, they are far less literate in the language because of the lack of formal educational instruction in it. This lack of confidence and/or ability therefore affects the reluctance of many young Latinos to use Spanish at home and social situations. While researchers such as Mendieta (1995) and Hurtado and Gurin (2004) found that Spanish retains a strong symbolic value in the community, its continuance and future vitality depend wholly on demographic and defiantly strong social trends (such as a large and densely populated Latin American population who is maintaining Spanish use) in order for the language to grow among Latinos in Northwest Indiana. Because of the impermeable strength of the American cultural machine, however, the continuing flux of newly arrived Spanish-speakers to the region may not be enough to sustain and promote the vitality of the language among Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and others in the area.

There is no denying the power, reach, and vigor of music and social media outlets among youths in the United States and across the globe. American pop culture plays a considerable role in everyday life in areas of fashion, attitudes, and consumer influences in the United States, and Northwest Indiana is certainly not outside these formidable cultural persuasions. It is therefore not surprising that young Latinos would be influenced and motivated by these dominating outer mediums concerning their own lifestyle choices, including language use, to the detriment of their heritage cultures.

Although the parents of Latino youth in Northwest Indiana might exclusively listen to *Salsa* or *Ranchera* music while perusing Chicago-based Spanish-language daily newspapers such as *Hoy*, in addition to attending neighborhood heritage events and watching *telenovelas* on Spanish-language television, younger Latinos may or may not listen to heritage-motivated sounds (such as the youth-driven *Reggaeton*) at all. More often than not, Latino youth will respond more favorably to American pop, hip-hop, or rock music while perusing English-language social-networking Web sites, in addition to being motivated by the latest fashion trends as seen on popular youth-driven television networks such as MTV or BET. This type of powerful input will ultimately influence their linguistic choices as Latino youth gradually move toward English.

Because of the power and reach of American pop culture, findings such as ours contradict the popular stereotypes (often generated by ratings-driven, sensationalized American media outlets) concerning heritage language preservation among Latinos in the United States. Interestingly, Latino youth are usually omitted by media pundits in their reports concerning the supposed proliferation of the Spanish language and cultural preservation among Latinos in American society. Although Spanish use in the United States is indeed growing and the language is being heard more than ever before, in most cases, the continued maintenance of it decreases when one considers the age and

generational status of the speaker. As was the case among preceding generations of immigrants, use of the heritage language decreases over time; our findings reflect this trend. Although population density and language loyalty slow this linguistic shift toward English among some young Latinos in Northwest Indiana, we found that the shift is occurring nonetheless.

## **GENDER CONSIDERATIONS**

The linguistic shift from Spanish to English is especially acute among young Latina females from Northwest Indiana, as pressures for them to move toward some of the norms of the majority culture are stronger than is observed with young males. What, then, is the rationale for this particular type of language transfer based on gender? From a social perspective, young Latina females are subjugated to a “quadruple minority” status position because they are dominated in the following four facets: *culturally*, due to the diverse Latin American origins and traditions that distinguish them from those of the American majority group; *racially*, due to racial differences that separate them from the European-American power structure; *linguistically*, due to the association with the Spanish language among Latinos; and finally, and perhaps most importantly, *due to their gender*, owing to the fact that women in general are in a subordinate standing vis-à-vis men in North American society.

These four reasons will influence young Latina females to reevaluate their social position, and this assessment affects their self-identity and language use as they attempt to soften or eliminate some of the societal barriers that they face; however, although young Latinas view certain traits of American majority culture as favorable ways to elevate their social status and to reduce the layers of their quadruple minority status, a complete and total transfer away from the heritage community toward the host one does not occur. Koss-Chioino and Vargas (1999) found that Latina youth will disassociate themselves from the heritage culture in certain manners (e.g., linguistically) while maintaining ties to it in others; our findings fully reflect this trend.

Contrary to what was observed among males, the majority of young Latina females from our sample identify themselves with the heritage culture alone (e.g., Mexican only) rather than choosing a split (e.g., Mexican American) or societal (e.g., Hispanic) designator. Linguists such as Tannen (1990) argue that women are the cultural brokers and nurturers of the familial hearth; thus, because many young Latina females are strongly associated with the heritage culture via their home life, fewer personal exchanges with non-Latinos may occur. This lack of social engagement with the host culture will ultimately result in the maintenance of deeper communal connections to the heritage group as a self-identifier. Moreover, Latina females also have more interactions with monolingual family members living at home (e.g., mothers and grandparents) and are immersed in familial cultural traditions more closely than are young males. Because young Latina females can be classified in a subordinate position in American society as a quadruple minority, identification with the heritage paradigm is seen as advantageous and comforting; however, association with their Latino culture(s) is not wholly exclusive for

young Latinas in Northwest Indiana, as they are also influenced by societal motivators emanating from the majority group.

In matters concerning language use, English provides an area of comfort, as competency in it will soften or reduce any limiting social boundaries for young females of color. Linguists have long argued that women are more status conscious and aware of their subordinate social position than are men. Researchers such as Tannen (1990) maintain that women are the instigators of language shift because they are the cultural brokers of the home and because the adoption of the host language is one way in which to reduce barriers with the receiving culture (though gender itself remains a societal obstacle because of the subordinate position of women in the United States and in Latin American cultures).

As stated earlier, the data from our sample show that Latina females have a lower spoken and reading ability in Spanish than males. Because of this distinction, these young women will be less likely to use the heritage language as their principal or daily vernacular. Although a majority of Latina youth in Northwest Indiana self-identify with the heritage cultural group, they are also shifting toward English far more quickly than are Latino males. In fact, by doing so, these young Latinas are obtaining a linguistic edge that might help them gain employment, advance through educational facilities, or acquire a certain social or societal advantage over their older brethren in the larger Latino community. Alignment with the more opportunistic majority society in terms of language use is therefore one way for young Latina women to soften their subordinate status as a quadruple minority.

Paradoxically, our data also illustrate that young Latina females do not strongly identify themselves with the heritage culture outside of this linguistic shift toward English. On the surface, this may appear confusing. Why the move toward the majority culture in one manner and away from it in another? Language is a powerful symbol of attachment (or detachment) from the majority culture, and self-identity, while symbolic as well, is less visible. Although these young women are more willing to associate themselves culturally with the heritage culture (with a majority indicating that they are “Mexican/Puerto Rican only”), they do not wish to be confined or restricted to it in a complete sense (i.e., linguistically). Because these young Latina females are already relegated to a subordinate position because of their minority status as Mexicans or Puerto Ricans, for example, the additional weight of also being restricted based on their gender (with the added potential negative of being further classified as “outsiders” by/from the majority culture because of the minority linguistic position of their heritage language) influences their decision to move toward English at home and in social situations. If one considers young Latino men with regard to this topic, this is simply not the case.

For example, young Latino males in Northwest Indiana are more likely to identify themselves using a split heritage (e.g., Mexican-American) or societal (e.g., Hispanic) designator than by associating with a single label (e.g., Mexican only). Because of their sex as males, gender-driven societal pressures do not influence young Latino men to strengthen or limit their association with the heritage culture in regard to their self-



identification. Furthermore, because Latino males are typically employed outside the home and will therefore engage in various and more numerous encounters with majority society, they are more likely to associate themselves with American culture in certain ways, such as being motivated by mainstream or “urban” music or fashion. As males, it is far easier for them to identify with *some* of the social and cultural contours of American society than for females, as their gender (as men) eliminates one divisive societal barrier for them.

In matters concerning language use, our data show that young Latino males in Northwest Indiana are also moving toward English in the home, as well as socially outside of it, but the pressures for them to shed completely their heritage language are not as prevalent as observed among females, and their linguistic shift is slower. Our findings demonstrate that a greater percentage of Latino males than Latina females speak and read Spanish at a high level. There are a few reasons for this statistic. First, transnational connections to the heritage culture, coupled with the constant arrival of younger male migrants to the region, serves to sustain and nourish the use of Spanish. Additionally, because young Latino males have a greater ability in Spanish than females, they are more likely to use it regularly or occasionally as a visible cultural badge of distinction from American majority society. This mirrors findings from other studies that investigate language choices and young men of color in the United States. For instance, Ogbu’s (1978) acculturation theory regarding youth of color and the formation of an “oppositional culture” resistance model can be applied in this circumstance. In other words, language attachment influences young Latino males to maintain linguistic connections to Spanish as a means to self-solidify their status as being openly and orally/aurally distinct from the majority culture, owing to the segregation and racialization of young males of color as the “other” in the United States. Thus, the more young Latino males are ostracized from the majority culture, the more they will attach themselves (either wholly or partially) to various outer cultural symbols that are more symbolic or obvious, such as language (without regard to fluency, as many young Latino males who have a lower spoken ability in Spanish will code-switch or pepper their English speech with words and phrases borrowed from the heritage language). That said, linguistic shift is indeed occurring among young Latino males, albeit at a slower pace than among females. Put otherwise, the notion of ethnocultural status without the negative pressures of being limited or motivated because of one’s gender is not enough to spark a more forceful move toward an *exclusive* use of English among young Latino males in Northwest Indiana. In addition, gender distinctions motivate young Latino men to self-identify less with the heritage culture *alone* than do younger females who are more apt to attach themselves to this construct, despite a stronger linguistic transfer toward English because their status as males in the United States provides them with a more elevated social position than Latina females.

Nearly two decades ago, Mendieta (1995) discovered that the ethnolinguistic vitality of Spanish is rapidly decreasing in Northwest Indiana. Because our findings show that young Latina females are shifting toward English, without the continuous arrival of Spanish-speaking immigrants to the region, the vitality of the language will continue to

decline. In general, women are the harbingers of language adaptation and change, and because females are the primary caregivers of children and the nurturers of the family unit, language use, maintenance, and preservation hinge on them. The only social domain where the heritage language is guaranteed an elevated status is in the home among family, and if Spanish loses its intrinsic cultural position in this space, a more rapid movement toward the majority language will occur. Although continuously arriving (often older) Latina migrants are keeping the Spanish language alive in Northwest Indiana, younger females are slowly moving away from its exclusiveness as the principal vernacular, especially outside the home. Moreover, with more Latinos continuing to move to suburban areas, away from traditional communal urban enclaves (such as in East Chicago) where linguistic loyalty is higher, the preservation of Spanish will become less of a necessity and/or priority among these upwardly mobile and increasingly suburban members of the Latin American community. Developing social demographics such as these will therefore influence the things connected to how one identifies as Latino, as this social designator becomes more associated with those individuals sharing a similar cultural experience rather than with those having linguistic competence in the Spanish language.

## **CONCLUSION**

As was the case with previous waves of young immigrants, Latinos in Northwest Indiana are integrating into mainstream society, albeit in their own unique manner. Although Latino youth in the region are not fully melting into the American mainstream, they are also not resisting it. Similar to integration issues as felt among many young Latinos across the entire United States, youths in Northwest Indiana possess a competent repertoire in the two omnipresent paradigms surrounding them, and they will navigate between both in ways that are conducive to the particular circumstance at hand: among family, with friends, and in professional and personal circumstances. Gender plays a major role in how young Latinos identify themselves, as well as motivating their language choices and abilities, both inside and outside the home. Distinctions such as these are indeed noteworthy, and they should be further examined in any future research on the Latino community at large.

While the present paper briefly introduces and discusses data relating to the complexities of language and identity as experienced by young Latinos in Northwest Indiana, much research remains to be conducted on other topics related to acculturation in the region.<sup>4</sup> Further studies are needed to obtain a better understanding of how dual linguistic and cultural identification may affect various societal disparities faced by Latino youth in the region. For instance, how is dual identity challenging for youth in the community in regard to a broad array of social situations that affect adolescents? In gaining an understanding of how this bicultural conflict affects young Latinos, regional social service agencies will be able to develop better strategies to help eliminate some of the negative statistics affecting the Latino community in Northwest Indiana (such as low educational attainment, elevated unemployment rate, and high percentage of youths

living in poverty). As Latino youth in Northwest Indiana continue to increase their cultural and linguistic competency vis-à-vis the host and heritage paradigms and the Latin American community at large becomes further entrenched in the regional mosaic, understanding the unique societal needs and choices that motivate these youths becomes more important than ever.

## ENDNOTES

1. The author would like to acknowledge the *Centre for Regional Vitality* at Indiana University Northwest for their support in regard to this study. We would also like to thank Miss Sendy Lechuga and Ms. Gabriella Tirado for their assistance in the data collection, translation, and investigative fieldwork.
2. For example, when asking respondents about their literacy skills in Spanish, we carried a Spanish-language newspaper with us (the Chicago daily *Hoy*) to use for examination purposes to reduce the overestimation of abilities. Moreover, concerning our inquiries about which language was used *most* inside and outside of the home, the respondents were instructed that the answer of “both” was not an option. Although neither of these approaches can claim to be foolproof, we do believe that we minimized possible limitations regarding these inquiries.
3. The five categories that ranked linguistic competence on a Likert scale in our questionnaires are consolidated in Figures 2 and 3 as such: Rankings 1 and 2 are presented as “low,” 3 is presented as “medium,” and 4 and 5 are presented as “high.”
4. Readers will note that the current study does not categorize the results of our queries by birthplace. With regard to our sample, the overwhelmingly majority of respondents indicated that they are second-generation (and some beyond) Latinos in Northwest Indiana. Of those youths who stated that they were born outside of the continental United States, most arrived to the region at a young age, and it appeared to the researchers that nearly all respondents had good fluency in English (although our intention was not to examine linguistic ability in English—some of the respondents spoke to us in Spanish or code-switched between the host and heritage languages). Interestingly, our findings on the questions published in this paper did not indicate much of a distinction in terms of birthplace, with both first- and second-generation respondents answering our questions similarly (aside from the question dealing with the primary language most spoken in the home). For this reason, we chose to focus on young Latinos without regard to birthplace and to concentrate instead on gender differences in reference to identity and language use. Interestingly, even when we analyzed the results of this particular query concerning the language most used in the home, we still noticed that a shift toward English is slowly occurring, especially among females. That said, we are currently deconstructing and codifying our findings regarding birthplace (because we asked other questions where this distinction becomes more important and the results more evident), and we plan to publish our work on this topic in the future. For now, we believe that the findings from the current study will assist social service workers, teachers, and others to

understand some of the feelings possessed by young Latinos in Northwest Indiana as their numbers continue to grow as they further enrich the region.

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