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Language Policy and Language Repression: The Case of Spanish Basques and Mexican Americans

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Introduction

The importance of language as a communicative and symbolic means for expressing a range of concepts, feelings, and thoughts is not a novel idea. Throughout history various scholars have attested to the importance of language by publishing scholarly discourse on this topic. For example, Herodotus, a fifth century Greek historian who has been referred to as the "father of ethnography"

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(Lett, 1987, p. 41), expressed interest in the spoken languages he heard during his travels. Lord Monboddo, an eighteenth century Scottish philosopher, displayed his regard for language by publishing a book in 1774 entitled *Of the Origin and Progress of Language*. The early twentieth century produced one of the most famous and perhaps most controversial language scholars, Benjamin Lee Whorf. Whorf's premise that language shapes our view of the world around us continues to be debated by scholars.

Not only scholars exhibit an interest in language, however. Governments and political systems demonstrate a particular type of language concern by implementing policies that mandate societal language use. The determination of language policy is simply not demarcated by the spoken languages within a community. Rather, language policy is often bounded by bureaucratic decisions that are rooted in discriminatory and oppressive ideologies. In a 1921 Iowa case, *State v. Bartels*, the Supreme Court of Iowa convicted a teacher for teaching German to students. The decision in favor of the State of Iowa was made on the basis that teaching a foreign language might inculcate students with "non-American" ideas, and the best way to avoid this was by insisting on instruction in English (Mertz, 1982, p. 9). The notion that "non-American" ideas are infused through a foreign language is an example of a belief or folk idea. Often, the language policies that governments establish reveal collectively held beliefs or folk ideas about the relationship between language and culture (Mertz, 1982, p. 5).

This paper will focus on language policies, especially those dealing with the institution of school, imposed upon two ethnic groups: Basques in the Basque country of Spain and Mexican Americans in the United States. I will attempt to show that many similarities exist between the two situations and that the language policies imposed upon Basques and Mexican Americans have fuelled the linguistic and cultural subordination of the two groups. First, I will give a brief account of the historical context in which some language policies were developed. Second, I will present some of the language policies imposed upon each group. Third, I will discuss some of the consequences of language repression as well as some of the reactions Basques and Mexican Americans have had to the linguistic and cultural repression they have experienced.

Historical Contexts of Imposed Language Policies

Although the histories of the Basques and the Mexican Americans are substantially different, there are similarities between the two situations with

respect to language policy. Unlike many ethnic groups that migrate to a certain country, both the Basques and Mexican Americans have long inhabited their respective regions. Basques are said to have occupied the area of the Pyrenees mountains and seacoasts between France and Spain from time immemorial (Gallop, 1970). The Basques' lengthy inhabitation of the Pyrenees, however, has not played a decisive role in determining their linguistic and cultural autonomy. Several wars, including the First Carlist War (1833-1840), the Second Carlist War (1873-1876), and the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) resulted in increased Spanish political domination of the Basque region. As a consequence of these wars, many of the *fueros* or charters that had previously served to protect Basque interests were abolished. Losing the Spanish Civil War in particular resulted in the encroachment on the Basques' civil liberties as well as in an intense repression of Basque language and Basque culture (Zulaika, 1988).

Mexican Americans¹, originally inhabitants of Mexico, were incorporated into the U.S. after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The area that is presently the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah was annexed to the United States after the Mexican American War (1846-1848) and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (Barrera, 1979). When Mexico lost the war, Mexicans living in the area became Mexican Americans, a political minority population, even though they outnumbered their Anglo American counterparts (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

According to the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexican Americans, as new American citizens, were guaranteed certain basic rights, such as the freedom of expression, under the U.S. Constitution. The right of freedom of expression implies the freedom to use any language for meaningful expression. However, because each state determined its own policy regarding language use, in the public domain, including public schools, the ensuing years proved the treaty to be ineffective against the linguistic and cultural repression of Mexican Americans. For example, in 1918 Texas passed a law forbidding the use of languages other than English in classrooms (Zamora, 1990). During World War I many states joined in the prohibition of the use of non-English languages for governmental purposes and in schools (Kloss, 1977).

In short, histories of conquest and political domination have placed Basques and Mexican Americans in a comparable position with both groups having to struggle for their linguistic and cultural autonomy. Within the context of the dominant society, both groups are considered social and political minorities. Ogbu (1987), for example, specifically defines Mexican Americans as members of a caste-like minority. According to Ogbu (1987), caste-like minorities are

minorities that have been incorporated into a society involuntarily through conquest or colonization and then relegated to a lowly status. This definition characterizes the minority status of Basques as well. An important distinguishing feature of caste-like minorities is how they perceive, respond to, and interpret the treatment they have received (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986). The ways in which Basques and Mexican Americans have responded to and interpreted the treatment given them will be explored in the last section of this paper.

Language Policies Imposed Upon Basques and Mexican Americans

Like Mexican Americans, Basques have experienced language repression in many spheres of society. Using Basque for interpersonal communication was outlawed in churches, schools, and seminaries among other places. For Basques, the era of Franco's dictatorship brought the most severe linguistic repression. However, as early as 1856, the Spanish government outlawed local efforts to teach Basque children in their native language (Clark, 1979).

The prohibition of written or spoken Basque in public or private schools was perhaps the most serious act of suppression. For example, it was not uncommon for teachers who were loyal Francoists to have students act as informers and point out classmates who had been speaking Basque in school (Zulaika, 1988). Urla (1987) describes the punishment for speaking Basque as not only cruel but often humiliating as well:

Less amusing or compassionate were the deliberate shaming tactics used in the schools to reprimand children who used Basque when they did not know Spanish. One woman described that the nuns made girls who spoke in Basque, stand up and pull their dress up over their heads as punishment. This was especially embarrassing, she said, for children from poor baserris whose underwear might be torn or dirty, if they had any at all. 'The teachers made us the laughing stock of the class, and this,' she told me, 'was more detrimental to Basque than any prohibition of law.' (p. 284)

Many school age children came from rural areas in which Basque was the predominant language. These children were forced into a sink or swim approach to learning. In school, the children had to make sense of new content material, and they had to do so in a new language, making the task more difficult than if the material were presented in their native tongue. In this manner, schools were functioning to enculturate Basque children into Spanish language and culture without regard for the children's native language and culture:

The school has been a means of imposing the official language, Spanish, and

it is partially responsible for the loss of the communicative function of the language (Basque) which was never afforded the opportunity to realize its influence. This point is evidenced by the many autobiographical accounts of the physical and symbolic repression that the Basque community has experienced in the schools. (Tejerina Montana, 1990, p. 32; my translation)

By the 1950s the stringent limits on the use of Basque were beginning to soften ever so slightly. The first magazine to be printed in Basque appeared in 1950, followed by the initiation of a chair of Basque studies at the University of Salamanca (Clark, 1979). One of the most significant changes came in 1970 with the passing of the Law of General Education. This law authorized the teaching of regional languages in primary schools, but gave no specific information on how to incorporate the regional languages into the curriculum. In 1975, a decree was made public that clarified the nonspecificity of the 1970 law. Simply stated, Basque was allowed on an optional basis, after school, and at the discretion of the principal (Clark, 1979). In addition, the decree stated that Spanish would continue to be the only official language used in government settings such as courts and legislative assemblies.

At first glance the newly enacted language policies seemed to be a substantial victory for the Basques. However, years of language repression and discrimination were not wiped out by the mere introduction of policies. While the policies declared that Basque could be taught in the state-supported primary schools after hours, no provisions were made for training or recruiting teachers (Clark, 1978). Thus, the Spanish government made no formal attempt to implement Basque as a language of instruction. In addition, monies were not made available to assist in the recruitment of teachers.

The first official language mandate for bilingualism finally came after the Spanish Constitution (1978) and the Basque Statute of Autonomy (1979) (Urla, 1987). The Basque Statute of Autonomy (1979) ensured the protection of an individual's right to know and use either Basque or Spanish. Following these mandates, several decrees were incorporated into the legislation that gave the Basque government control over all nonuniversity education. The Language Normalization Law, which was passed in 1982, was especially important because it specified the conditions under which both Spanish and Basque could be taught in school and gave the government authority to implement whichever bilingual model the government deemed appropriate (Urla, 1987).

Mexican Americans have also passed through many generations of linguistic and cultural repression. Unlike the Basques, however, Mexican Americans did not experience a Francoist-like repression of their language and culture. Nevertheless, the use of Spanish among Mexican Americans has not been

received favorably by the English speaking majority. Spanish spoken by Mexican Americans has been considered to be a double-edged sword. Not only is Spanish a foreign language, but the variety of Spanish used in Mexican American communities carries the additional stigma of being considered nonstandard by some monolingual Spanish speakers.

As noted previously, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo did not resolve the issues of language and cultural differences. Once incorporated in the United States, Mexican Americans became subject to the authority of the states within which they resided. Although laws were passed by states prohibiting the use of any language other than English in places such as churches, the gravest repression was eventually and most strongly felt within the schools. A 1930s report from the Southwest reflects a generally held attitude toward educating Mexican American children:

Mexican [children] are diligently enrolled on the census, while the revenues are applied principally to the education of the American children. The practice is justified by the fact that the Americans are the principal taxpayers. The prevailing opinion is that "educating the Mexican is educating him from his job. . . . He learns English and wants to be a boss. He doesn't want to grub. . . . Someone has to transplant onions. . . . What would we do if 50 percent of the Mexican pupils showed up? It would take more teachers and school houses. We would not have enough lumber for school houses nor enough teachers in Texas...." The dominant view of the local Americans is that it is undesirable to educate the Mexicans. (Moore & Pachon, 1985, p. 146)

One of the primary objectives of schools was the Americanization of Mexican American students—a linear assimilationist approach focused on teaching English and mainstream culture and values (San Miguel, 1978). Children were forced to learn English and were often ridiculed or punished for speaking Spanish. Furthermore, many children who have been submersed into English-only classrooms have dropped out prior to reaching high school (NABE Newsletter, 1990, p. 2).

Even though some states have periodically approved the use of languages other than English within schools, it was not until the passage of The Bilingual Education Act of 1968 (BEA) that the federal government began to mandate the provision of bilingual schooling for certain student populations. The BEA was the first incidence of widespread federal support for native language bilingual education in the United States. Several factors were instrumental in swaying support for the BEA. Among these were the following: (a) movements such as La Raza that stressed ethnic revitalization; (b) scholarly research indicating a positive relationship between bilingualism and intelligence; (c) the 1960 census

data that indicated the Spanish surnamed population had increased by more than 50%, from 2.3 million in 1959 to nearly 3.5 million in 1960; and (d) data indicating that Spanish-speaking children were not faring well in schools (Judd, 1978).

The 1970s produced several changes in the original BEA that spawned greater support for the language and culture of Mexican Americans as well as for other language minorities. For example, The Office of Civil Rights sent a memorandum to school districts having limited and non-English speaking students (Malakoff & Hakuta, 1990). Based upon conditions that were set forth in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the memorandum stated that school districts must take steps to alleviate language deficiencies in cases where the "inability to speak and understand English excludes national origin minority group children from effective participation in the educational program" (Malakoff & Hakuta, 1990, p. 33). The memorandum did not spell out, however, what steps should be taken to correct the problem; nor did it specify teaching students in their native language as the only remedy (Malakoff & Hakuta, 1990). Out of the Civil Rights memorandum grew a series of legal battles over school districts' obligation to adhere to the guidelines of the act. The outcome of legal battles such as *Lau v. Nichols* coupled with the Equal Educational Opportunity Act of 1974 (EEOA) resulted in the following guidelines for school districts: (a) all non-English speaking students must be identified, (b) non-English speaking students' language proficiency must be evaluated, and (c) a transitional bilingual program must be provided (August & Garcia, 1988).

Like the most recently enacted language policies regarding Basque, the Bilingual Education Act of 1968 and its subsequent amendments have not resulted in an instant solution to the linguistic and cultural repression of Spanish speaking Mexican Americans. While the BEA recognizes that many Mexican American children enter school speaking a language other than English, its main objective is the transition of Spanish speaking students into English-only classrooms. Although Mexican American children may now be eased into the English language and Anglo culture, no attempt is made to maintain their language and culture at a societal level.

Consequences of and Reactions to Language Repression

The most serious potential consequence of language repression is, of course, language loss. Basques and Mexican Americans have struggled to keep their languages thriving. According to Tejerina Montana (1990, p. 30), the family has

played the major role in the maintenance of Basque:

Only the institution of family and the private space as an extension of that institution appear for the collective memory as a positive factor in the maintenance of the Basque language. (My translation)

For Mexican Americans, Hernandez-Chavez (1978) has reported a similar situation. That is, among Mexican Americans there is a tendency for Spanish to be supported for use primarily in the home. Language maintenance in the private domains has not been the only concern of Basques and Mexican Americans. They have also fought to make their languages acceptable for use in more public domains, such as government offices, churches, and schools. For both groups, the past twenty years have been the most significant in bringing about changes that support their linguistic and cultural freedom.

One of the groups that has been instrumental in effecting change in the interests of the Mexican American community is the *La Raza Unida* Party (LRU). The LRU was formed as an outcome of the ethnic revitalization movement of the 1960s (Moore & Pachon, 1985). The ideology of the LRU Party was designed to reflect the culture and values of the Mexican American community. For example, the LRU rejected the notion of striving for material gains based upon individualistic achievement (an Anglo approach) and instead favored La Raza oriented goals directed toward the benefit of the group.

Many facets of American society including the job market, politics, and education were deemed repressive by the LRU. Of these three areas, the LRU made its earliest impact on education. Ethnic studies programs, ethnic heritage classes, and numbers of ethnic personnel were expanded at universities as a result of demands made by the LRU. The LRU strongly advocated the need for bilingual-bicultural education and stressed the importance of language (Spanish) as an ethnic marker.

By the early 1980s LRU had lost most of its initial momentum and support for change (Moore & Pachon, 1985). LRU's loss of clout came at a time when the federal government was just beginning to reduce funding for social programs and education, and programs that had been supported by LRU and the Mexican American community in general were among the first to be cut from the changing federal budget.

In the Basque country as well as in the United States, the 1960s reflected a time in which political and social struggle predominated. Although Basque resistance groups were active prior to the 1960s, Basque politics and the ETA in particular have become increasingly powerful in the last two decades.

One of the rallying points of the ETA is the belief that ethnicity is marked by language. A declaration by the ETA that was published in 1963 in its magazine,

Zutik!, illustrates this point: "The day that Basque ceases to be a spoken language, the Basque nation will have died; and in a few years, the descendants of today's Basques will be simply Spanish or French" (Urla, 1987, p. 1).

Basque activists believe that Basque should be implemented in all domains of society as a means of ensuring the longevity of the language. The use of Basque solely in private domains is unacceptable to the political demands of the ETA and other Basque activists. In fact, the ETA has incorporated into their political literature, scholarly discourse on diglossia as evidence of the linguistic subordination of Basque (Urla, 1987). According to Basque activists, a fundamental way to change the subordination of the Basque language is through the use of Basque as a language of instruction in the public domain of schools. Basque activists consider native language instruction and the teaching of Basque culture paramount to the advancement of status and preservation of Basque language and Basque culture (Urla, 1987).

Basques have been more successful than Mexican Americans in establishing schools that teach children through their native language; namely, Basque. Perhaps, the Basques' active participation in language planning has been beneficial to the language reform movement. A comparison of Basque speakers from 1981 to 1986 indicates that there is a general increase in the percentage of the Basque speaking population (Tejerina Montana, 1990). This should not suggest, however, that language reform measures have had an immediate impact or that language policies are not disputed. There are still many unresolved pedagogical problems with respect to language planning and the structuring of bilingual programs (Urla, 1987).

Both Basques and Mexican Americans have reacted to years of linguistic and cultural discrimination. Resistance to the majority group's domination has taken many forms including militant activism and legislative reform. According to Ogbu (1987), the reactions that caste-like minorities have to the dominant society are different from the reactions of other types of minorities. For example, caste-like minorities, such as Mexican Americans, develop what Ogbu (1987) calls an "oppositional cultural frame of reference" as a means of maintaining and protecting the group's social identity. This oppositional cultural system symbolizes the minority groups' belief that they cannot advance by adopting the behaviors of the dominant group. This belief may have some bearing on the fact that Mexican American students have the highest high school dropout rate (*NABE Newsletter*, 1990) and that Mexican Americans comprise one of the two ethnic groups that have the largest number of gang members (Vigil, 1988). Both of these facts present evidence that Mexican American youth are expressing their opposition to cultural boundaries established by the dominant group. In this

vein, Ogbu (1987, pp. 94-95) contends that Mexican Americans and caste-like minorities in general perceive certain behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings as inappropriate for them because they are representative of the dominant group.

It is conceivable that some of the reactions Basques have had to the linguistic and cultural repression they have experienced can also be identified as oppositional. The rise of nationalism and an intense demand for Basque linguistic and cultural autonomy are factors that indicate the Basques' opposition to the linguistic and cultural boundaries imposed upon them by the dominant group. Political statements made by members of the ETA exemplify their belief that in order for Basques to gain autonomy, they must completely remove themselves from Spanish rule (Zulaika, 1988). By rejecting Spanish authority and everything that is associated with it, the ETA and other activists may be functioning within an oppositional cultural frame of reference as a means of protecting their cultural identity.

Conclusion

Language plays an integral role in all human cultures. Human thoughts, feelings, ideas, symbols, and countless other notions can be shared through the medium of language. The idea of denying a people the means to express thought and meaning through their native language is reprehensible. Through historical accounts we learn that linguistic repression is not a new phenomenon. Our understanding of the contexts within which language repression occurs, such as in the cases of the Basques and Mexican Americans, is enhanced by historical and ethnographic accounts.

Knowledge of past and present cases of linguistic repression may not be enough to invoke any sort of amelioration. In order for culturally repressive behaviors to change, it may be necessary for a significant segment of the population to acquire what Bennett (1990) termed "informed empathy"-- an intimate understanding of the feelings and thoughts of others based upon shared cultural knowledge.

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Endnote

¹ The term Mexican American as used in this paper refers to people of Mexican origin who were either incorporated by conquest (as of 1848) or “who later immigrated from Mexico and were accorded the subordinate status of the conquered group” (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986, p. 90).