Sociolinguistic Indexicalities and Linguistic Policing among youths in NYC and Barcelona: a comparative study

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Matched year-long ethnographic studies at diverse working-class secondary schools in NYC and Barcelona show sociolinguistic indexicalities and linguistic policing of dialectal differences linked to racialized identities.

NYC data revealed three asymmetries:

Black, White, and Latino identities were indexed by associated features; East Asians, South Asians, and Middle Easterners although present were dialectally invisible.

"Sounding Black” referenced AAE and indexed lower SES; "sounding White” indexed high SES, but referenced stereotypically California features not NYC vernacular. "Sounding Spanish” responded to Spanish substrate features without SES indexicality.

Policing focused on Whites using variants expected from Blacks and Blacks and Latinos not using expected variants.

Policing involved accusations of inauthenticity. Targets ”wannabe something they are not.”

In Barcelona language indexed SES from high to low as follows:

Catalan
Standard Peninsular Spanish
Vernacular Peninsular Spanish
Immigrant L2 / Latin American Spanish.

Yet policing was limited to older-arrived (Gen 1) Latinos, mocking each other’s use of Peninsular shibboleths. Gen 1.5 and 2 immigrants’ Spanish was predominantly Peninsular. Also, although strongly working-class identified autochthonous participants and most Gen 1 Latinos scrupulously avoided speaking Catalan, there were no reports of policing its use. By contrast, upwardly mobile youths overtly prized bilingualism.

Analysis shows complex interactions between class and racial/ethnic identities at both sites. NYC policing reflected preoccupation with personal identity and flourished despite considerable cross-racial socializing; White youths spoke local White vernacular, thus avoiding locally stigmatized White high SES identity. Barcelona policing involved group boundaries and so was limited to the homogeneous group of Gen 1 Latinos. Gen 1.5/2 immigrants and upwardly mobile autochthonous youths favored cosmopolitan identities through bilingualism and heterogeneous social networks.

Findings support viewing linguistic policing as operationalization and interaction of folk social and linguistic categories. As such it provides valuable information on how these categories are constructed.

Keywords: Indexicality, Folk Linguistic Categories, Linguistic Policing.