Language practices and identities in transit: Spanish and Portuguese in a Uruguayan school community near the border with Brazil

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We describe how members of the local community around a public school in the outskirts of the city of Rivera, Uruguay, understand the Portuguese and Spanish linguistic repertoires with which they conduct their daily routines along the Brazilian-Uruguayan border. We highlight the local values attached to language choice in the participants’ language practices, as they often shift orientations between the local linguistic market and more prestigious centers of linguistic capital, thus producing various transitory identities in linguistic performances forged according to situated demands. Given Uruguay’s traditional ”one nation, one language” ideology, Portuguese-speaking Uruguayans were seen as a problem, and Portuguese was strictly forbidden in schools up until the close of the 20th century, when a Spanish-Portuguese bilingual education was put in place in public schools along the border region. The data for the investigation reported in this study was gathered through participant-observation, informal interviews and the collection of written materials at various settings within the school and the local community, including a number of students’ homes. Analyses indicate that the research participants, while they perceive their language choices as appropriately in transit between Portuguese and Spanish in local community settings, they must conform to strictly monolingual language ideologies elsewhere. Despite the fact that current language education policies in Uruguay now recognize Uruguayan Portuguese, speakers still face prejudice, given the entrenched perception of languages as stable, homogeneous entities, by which Uruguayan Portuguese is seen as inferior and deficient vis-à-vis much idealized Standard (Brazilian) Portuguese and Standard (Montevidean) Spanish. Thus, even in a school run within an official bilingual education program, two strictly separate monolingual regimes must be kept in place, regardless of the surrounding local practices, which are clearly otherwise.

Keywords: Uruguayan Portuguese, language ideology, bilingual education.