

The student's rejection of Spanish raises another important issue, namely, the loss of Spanish among U.S. Latinos. Research shows that knowledge of Spanish by U.S. Latinos declines across generations, which explains why a quarter of this population does not speak the language. The loss of Spanish follows a widely attested pattern for immigrant languages in the United States: the foreign-born generation (i.e., the first generation) makes wide use of the immigrant language, their children (the second generation) are bilingual with a strong preference for English, and their grandchildren (the third generation) are mostly English monolingual. Table 2.3 summarizes the results of a study of intergenerational loss of Spanish among Latinos. Notably, first-generation Latinos account for much of the Spanish heard in the United States.<sup>38</sup>

A second-generation Mexican American gives a firsthand account of this loss in her own family.

In Latin families Spanish is the main language for the older generations. In my family, my parents speak only Spanish. They spent their entire childhood in Mexico and moved to the U.S. after they

**Table 2.3 Language dominance, by generation (Suro 2002: w13)**

|                  | Total Latinos (%) | First Generation (the Foreign Born, in %) | Second Generation (in %) | Third Generation (in %) |
|------------------|-------------------|---|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| English dominant | 25                | 4   | 46                       | 78                      |
| Bilingual        | 28                | 24  | 47                       | 22                      |
| Spanish dominant | 47                | 72  | 7                        | —                       |

married. Here they adapted too many things, but never the language. They've been living in this country more than 20 years and they still haven't mastered English. They understand it but don't like to speak it because they don't speak it well.

In the second generation, my generation, things are different. All my brothers and sisters, except for my twin sister and me, were born in Mexico. In all, there are six of us children and, with the exception of my oldest sister, we all speak Spanish and English very well.

The third generation is the one that experiences the most dramatic changes. For them, English is far more common than Spanish. In my family, all my nieces and nephews speak English as their first language. They understand Spanish, but they cannot speak it well. They're also far more at home with American culture than with Mexican culture.

In each generation, language changes a bit, particularly the meaning of words. Some families keep their Spanish, but some others don't. In my family Spanish hasn't been extinguished yet, but it is definitely on that path. I think it's important to keep one's language and culture. We should teach our children to speak Spanish so that it will be an integral part of their lives.

If Spanish is being lost, why does it appear to be thriving? This is because incoming immigrants from the Spanish-speaking world serve to replenish the loss of speakers from one generation to another. However, even they are not above losing their native language. Research shows that 70 percent of children arriving in the United States at the age of 10 or younger, and 40 percent of those arriving between the ages of 10 and 14, eventually lose much of their Spanish.<sup>39</sup> 76. Ye says that they shift

Altogether, the facts belie the commonly held belief that Spanish is taking over English. To the contrary, it is Spanish that struggles to retain a place—even a reduced one—in the lives of Latino immigrants amid the unstoppable encroachment of English. Thus, the linguistic quandary faced by most U.S. Latinos is not whether to learn English—a language of many rewards—but rather, whether to exert any effort to retain Spanish, a language savaged by so many and with so few apparent rewards.

And still, as evidenced in Table 2.3, significant numbers of Latinos refuse to relinquish their linguistic heritage. How can that be?

Regardless of how long they've been in this country or how well they speak Spanish, most Latinos have deep emotional bonds to their mother language and culture. The students in the following text describe Spanish

as the language of familial bonds, music, home-cooked meals, and protection from the glare of the outside world:

1. I was in 7th grade and Roseann was her name. I don't understand why this girl made me feel so uncomfortable. She would say "Why are you speaking Spanish We are in America, you need to speak English." That would make me feel ashamed of who I was. Coming home and listening to my música made me feel good. I sat at the dinner table and ate the frijoles and arroz (beans and rice) that my mom would make, and everything would feel great again. Roseann was not the only one who attacked me this way. There were many others who wanted to strip me of my Spanish.
2. In school, speaking Spanish was almost seen as a handicap. I was never smart enough, probably because I was underestimated and never given the opportunity to try. Early on, I learned to be silent and hide in school. My only consolation was that I knew that when I got home speaking Spanish would be beautiful. This is when I began to associate the language with love. If I were to lose my Spanish I would lose my identity and my connection to my family.

Anecdotes about being criticized for using Spanish abound in this chapter and explain why so many Latino children eventually lose this language. Some avoid using it, feeling frustrated and embarrassed by their inability to express themselves with ease. Others abandon Spanish because they come to view it as inferior to English or as an obstacle to getting ahead in school. Still others outright reject it, as a result of being shamed, shunned, or called derogatory names for speaking it. Eventually, they all forget whatever Spanish they knew, becoming monolingual in English.

This process, known as *subtractive bilingualism*, whereby the second language is added at the expense of the first language and culture, carries negative social and psychological consequences that are not fully appreciated by Latino children or their parents until after it's almost too late to change course. Blogger Chantilly Patiño describes the challenges associated with recovering Spanish, once lost:

As a family, we're facing another challenge together; how to raise a confident, bilingual, Latina daughter. Sounds easy, right? But how do you teach your child Spanish when you're not fluent yourself? How do you include Mexican heritage in your daily life when you've missed out on so much of it? How do you raise your daughter to be confident and shake off criticism when you struggle with it so much in your own life?<sup>40</sup>

We turn our attention to these and other issues in the context of taking inventory of the linguistic challenges faced by Latino youth.

## LIFE UNDER THE SHADOW OF TWO LANGUAGES

This section draws its title and inspiration from Rosina Lippi-Green's words (reproduced next, from the beginning of this chapter). Here we examine six different linguistic burdens associated with living under the shadow of English and Spanish.

As a speaker of a variety of U.S. English which is not stigmatized, on occasion I feel inferior about my own language. . . . But because I belong to the social (and hence, to the language) mainstream which isolates me from the process of subordination, any feelings of inferiority are my own making. Other value systems are not forced on me. I am allowed the consolation of my mother tongue. *I am free of the shadow of language, and subject only to the standards that I accept for myself* (emphasis ours).<sup>41</sup>

## THE BURDEN OF BEING UN-AMERICAN, ANTISOCIAL, OR UNINTELLIGENT FOR SPEAKING SPANISH

As discussed in Chapter 1, speaking Spanish in school can earn a child the reputation of being unintelligent. The following comments bring to light two other perils of speaking Spanish in school, namely, being perceived as un-American and antisocial:

1. Our teacher sometimes thought we were speaking behind her back but we never did. She would ask us to stop speaking Spanish. She would say, "You're in America, speak English. Go back to Mexico if you want to speak Spanish." I started to feel I was doing something wrong to the point where I felt Spanish was inferior and would be worthless to keep up with.
2. When I was in third grade I had a teacher who didn't want her students speaking Spanish in her class. She would punish us harshly and tell us that in the U.S. we should only speak English. At that tender age, I didn't realize that she didn't know what she was speaking about.
3. I was one of only 20 Hispanics in my high school. When my best friend and I would speak Spanish, the non-Spanish speakers would look at us with anger. One day, a fellow classmate interrupted a conversation and said "Will you please stop talking about us! Why don't you

speak English and leave Spanish for the other Mexicans in Mexico.” I got really offended and responded: “First of all, Mexicans are not the only ones that speak Spanish. Second, I am not Mexican, I am from Honduras. And third, what makes you think I’m talking about you? Am not even looking at you. So please, turn around and mind your own business.” I couldn’t believe that this girl had just labeled all Spanish speakers Mexicans.

Of course, these types of experiences are not confined to the school context, but are present in society at large. They are even present among Latinos, as attested by the following comments:

1. There was this couple where the wife was Latina and spoke Spanish. They had two girls who did not speak Spanish. When I asked them why they hadn’t taught their children to speak Spanish, they answered that they didn’t want them to grow up to be dishwashers. What bothered me the most is that the mom was ok with not teaching her children about her culture.
2. I remember one time in 5th grade when a boy who spoke English and Spanish put a girl down for speaking Spanish. The girls also spoke both languages but because she decided to speak Spanish, he called her a “wetback.” The amazing thing is that most of us were bilingual but speaking Spanish was almost seen as being un-American.
3. Many years ago, something very unpleasant happened to my mom. I was seven years old and my brothers were four and five and my dad was still in Argentina. My mom, my brothers, and I had just arrived in San Clemente from Argentina and we were staying in a hotel while we looking for an apartment. I remember that day very clearly because my mom was very tired and frustrated. She kept calling rental offices and they would hang up on her. There was one lady in particular. My mom tried talking to her, but she kept saying . . . sorry, I don’t understand and I can’t help you. Feeling very frustrated, my mom asked a friend for help. He called up this lady and received a very positive response from her. They set up an appointment to see the apartment that very afternoon. I remember my mom felt relieved but also sad because of the way she had been treated for not speaking English well. When we got to the apartment, the lady who had refused to help my mom was actually speaking perfect Spanish to some workers. My mom got very angry and canceled the appointment. She told the lady that she would

never live in a place with Latinos that had forgotten where they came from and their native tongue.

4. Once I was standing in line at a store and a man asked a Latina sales lady for help in Spanish. She hesitated a moment and then answered him in English. I was astonished because I expected her to speak Spanish. The man did not understand anything and looked frustrated and embarrassed and so I decided to step in and help him. As he was leaving, he thanked me profusely for my help and commented in a loud voice that some people are so ignorant they don’t deserve what they have. The saleslady stared at us, as if she had understood exactly what he had said. I looked at her and laughed.

Amid these negatives, many Latino children abandon Spanish. Those who retain this language often manage to do so by leading a double life—relegating it to the home and pretending to speak only English in school. As shown in the following text, this ruse serves different strategic purposes, from helping Latino youth blend in among their peers, to sparing them from needless instruction and testing.

1. When I started middle school I didn’t want anyone to know that I spoke Spanish and was Hispanic. I couldn’t hide being Hispanic, but I could avoid speaking Spanish when in school. All my friends spoke English and I didn’t want to be the only one who spoke Spanish. Even when I spoke to my mom on the phone, I would speak English, and she didn’t even know English very well!
2. When I was nine they gave us an English exam in school. I remember thinking it was strange, because they only gave it to the Latino children. The test was so easy that it was silly and even insulting—stuff like “draw a line, a circle. . . .” Then they asked me questions about my family. Remembering that my brother had told me that in school they didn’t like people who spoke anything other than English, I told them that we spoke English at home. It was a lie, but I didn’t want to be in ESL any more. I wanted to be with the rest of the students. My friend Susana’s parents got angry at her because she said that her first language was Spanish and that she spoke Spanish at home. They put her in ESL because she “needed help.” Ever since then, I never admitted that I spoke Spanish first. I felt bad, but that’s what I had to do. And that’s how I spent my years in school, pretending not to speak Spanish and watching those who spoke it being taken out of class to take stupid exams.

## THE BURDEN OF NOT KNOWING SPANISH

With so many negatives associated with using Spanish, many children abandon this language, eventually losing the ability to speak it. This loss comes with a heavy price tag.

As evidenced by the following comments, for children who lived their earliest experiences in Spanish and who associate this language with the comfort of home, this loss brings a sense of melancholy and disconnection from the past, as well as loss of identity. Also, as evidenced in the following text, the loss of Spanish generally starts in the early years of school. The college years mark a reversal of this pattern. During this time, many college students from immigrant households actively seek to recover their lost skills as a way to find their identity.

1. At a young age I realized I had to master the English language in order to be successful at school and any other future career I dreamed of. I started to ignore my native tongue. It wasn't until I came to college that I realized I was losing a part of me. I started to forget some of the Spanish language, and most importantly, my background.
2. The people in my life either spoke only Spanish or were bilingual with English. As I progressed through school, I felt like Spanish was becoming less important because my friends and classmates stopped speaking it. Spanish also became a thing of the past at home because although my parents spoke it occasionally, most of our communication was in English. It wasn't until college, that I heard Spanish spoken in an exclusive setting. It was then that I realized that Spanish was becoming extinct in my life. And if Spanish was becoming extinct . . . what was to become of me? There is a link between people who share a common language.
3. Spanish was always my first language growing up. My father taught me English, and I would speak English with many of my neighbors, but at school I would usually speak Spanish. It was not until the second grade that I realized that I was supposed to speak English in school. I always thought our ESL workbooks were pretty easy, but I liked having time to talk to my friends, so I never told my teacher that I already knew how to speak English well. However my teacher realized it and he decided I should be put into a regular English class. I was distraught about this! I would cry and beg my mother to tell my teacher I didn't know how to speak English. I wanted to speak Spanish and only Spanish. This class was hard for me because I was not allowed to speak

Spanish any more. From what I recall, I would only be allowed one hour a day to speak Spanish with our teacher's aide. This was precious time for me. After third grade, I remember never having another teacher who could speak Spanish, which forced me to speak English all the time. I do remember speaking it at home, but it became less and less common over time. Second grade was the last time I considered myself a true Spanish speaker.

For children whose parents or relatives do not speak English or don't speak it well, the loss of Spanish radically alters family dynamics for the worse by rendering communication impossible or very difficult.

1. Spanish has always been in my life. When I was born, I learned Spanish first, from my Guatemalan parents. Once I started school I remember not being able to talk to anyone because I did not know English. That didn't last long. I quickly learned English, but I lost Spanish. This made it a struggle for me growing up. I can still remember not being able to talk to my grandparents or my family in Guatemala. I have come a long way since then though. Now I can speak both languages, though I still have some difficulty speaking Spanish, not because I cannot express myself but because I have an accent. I am still intimidated to talk to my family. For the most part, here in the U.S. it doesn't bother me. It does get to me when I go visit my family in Guatemala.
2. My parents didn't try too hard to teach us Spanish and my grandparents expressed disappointment to us that we couldn't speak to them in Spanish.
3. The way I got out of ESL was by speaking English all the way. I would always speak English at school, home, and everywhere else. Even my parents learned to speak English better. I started to speak only English to them and I regret it. The reason I regret is because when I went to El Salvador years ago, I couldn't have a real conversation with my relatives.

The loss of Spanish also exposes Latinos to the criticism and ridicule of other Latinos. Flipping the script of "the burden of being un-American for speaking Spanish," Latino children who don't speak Spanish face critiques of inauthenticity.

1. My boyfriend is Mexican but he doesn't speak Spanish. This bothers me because he can't communicate with my parents. One time, my

grandmother tried to talk to him, but he couldn't reply. I've always been embarrassed about my Spanish, but at least I can speak it, not like my boyfriend. My parents have told me that being Mexican or Mexican-American, we should speak Spanish without shame or embarrassment.

2. I am the only one of my group of friends that speaks fluent Spanish. I knew many girls in my school whose parents spoke Spanish, but they didn't. I think it was because they chose not to speak it. Most are "white washed" or *pochos*.
3. My high school was just minutes away from the U.S.-Mexican border. We had a lot of preppy kids who spoke Spanish really well. For them, a kid like me who did not know Spanish was a disgrace.
4. When I was little, I used to hang around kids of all races. At the time, I didn't know Spanish, but many people thought I did because of my looks. Kids would come up to me and start speaking Spanish and I would just look at them and say "Sorry, I don't speak Spanish." Then, they would look at me with this disgusting facial expression that would crumble any person to lost pieces of identity. I pushed myself hard to learn the language. But then, I struggled with being made fun of for speaking Spanish in a broken way. To this day, I still get ridiculed for the way I speak Spanish, and sometimes English, but I don't see the errors. I feel like I don't belong anywhere, not among my own race or any other.

Captured in the last comment is one of the greatest ironies surrounding the use of Spanish in the United States: Latino children who try to overcome the burden of not knowing Spanish by trying to learn it run up against another burden, namely, that of never being good enough. Chapter 1 offered a glimpse of this burden in the discussion surrounding the treatment of Spanish in school. The next section offers a more in-depth view of this phenomenon.

### THE BURDEN OF NEVER BEING GOOD ENOUGH IN SPANISH

The fact that U.S. Latino children are not as fluent in Spanish as their peers in the Spanish-speaking world is not surprising. Raised in this country and schooled in English, their exposure to Spanish is quite limited. Despite this, they are expected to speak it well, if not to perfection,

and are subjected to harsh condemnation for their mistakes, however small.

1. Since childhood I was never able to speak perfect Spanish. My mother used to speak English and Spanish, but my father only speaks Spanish and would speak to us in Spanish. I was never able to speak Spanish well. I also had problems understanding Spanish. In school I never had the need to speak Spanish, only when I was with my friends. Now that I am in college and am working, I realize the importance of speaking Spanish.
2. I can recall times when other Latinos have made fun of me for not speaking perfect Spanish. I felt bad but never paid much attention to it. Now I feel I have to practice Spanish more because I realize it's important for my job and to be able to communicate to my family.
3. Every year my family and I go to Mexico to visit our relatives. It's a great experience but some people have problems with the *nortehños*, Northerners. Sometimes when I'm with my cousins and her friends and I say a word wrong, they laugh at me. I don't get angry, I just ask them how to say it correctly. But I have seen other people react very differently. They get angry or snap at those who make fun of them. This gives Mexicans the impression that Mexican-Americans are cranky, arrogant, or that they don't care about their roots. That may be the case for some of us, but it's not right to make fun of us because we make mistakes.
4. My grandmother gives my mom and my aunts a very hard time because they didn't teach us (i.e. the grandchildren) to speak perfect Spanish. It's very intimidating. None of us wants to mess up in Spanish when we speak with grandma.
5. I am proud of being a bilingual Latina in the United States. But it is hard to live up to the expectations of others when it comes to speaking, writing and understanding proper Spanish.
6. The first time I went to Mexico it was very difficult for me. My Spanish was not very good. I did everything possible to talk to my cousins but they made fun of me for not speaking it perfectly. They spent much of their time correcting me. At first it didn't bother me, but then I started to feel really bad. I had been so excited to meet my cousins and all they could do was make fun of me. That trip happened a long time ago when I was very young. Now my Spanish is much better, but I'm still feeling the effects. I'm shy about speaking Spanish. I know that there are plenty of people that speak Spanish better than me and there are others who

don't speak it very well. I just need to develop more confidence. I hope that my Spanish will continue to improve.

Overwhelmed by the burden of never being good enough in Spanish, some children become their own worst critics, to the point of silencing themselves.

A while ago, I offered to pair up with another student to give a tour of my university to Spanish-speaking parents. As soon as I started the tour, I felt extreme shame for not being able to speak fluently. I felt as though they looked at me as a disgrace for being Latina and not speaking Spanish. When I spoke, I could not think of certain words or I would use the wrong conjugation of verbs. As the tour went on, I spoke less and less, until I said nothing at all to save myself the terrible embarrassment. A couple of mothers had questions for me. I wish they hadn't asked—not because I didn't want to help them, but because I was incapable of being any help.

Taken together, the burden of being un-American, antisocial, or unintelligent for speaking Spanish and the burden of not knowing Spanish speak to one of the most vexing linguistic contradictions that U.S. Latinos have to contend with: paying a hefty price both for speaking and for not speaking Spanish.

## THE BURDEN OF FALLING IN-BETWEEN LANGUAGES

Closely connected to the burden of never being good enough in Spanish is the burden of falling in-between languages. The sense of being alingual—that is, feeling inadequate in both English and Spanish—haunts many U.S. Latinos. Some of the background issues behind this burden are as follows:

1. As a Hispanic student in higher education, I feel that I'm at a slight disadvantage because my English isn't grand and my Spanish is far from perfect. I'm in the middle of two languages. Through the eyes of my family my English is great and my Spanish is completely broken. At the university I feel as if my English skills are so-so and according to the Spanish department my skills are considered native, which my family would never consider. It is strange how my ability to speak each language is analyzed differently by two diverse sides of my life.

2. I don't just have one language, but two. The first is Spanish—the language of my childhood and of my essence. The second is English—the language I had to learn to study and progress in this country. My English will never be perfect like that of an American and my accent will never go away. Some people have no idea of how difficult it can be to learn another language. There are so many memories that I would like to forget, like the time a teacher told me that if I didn't speak English I had no business being in school. I felt so bad that I didn't want to go back to school.

To a large extent, the feeling of falling in-between languages—that is, of never being good enough in either—is rooted in the belief that true bilingualism entails having native-like ability in two languages. This common misconception defies reality and sets Latino youth up for disappointment, for the reasons explained by Stanford University professor Guadalupe Valdés:

While absolutely equivalent abilities in two languages are theoretically possible, individuals seldom have access to two languages in exactly the same contexts in every domain of interaction. Neither do they have opportunities to use two languages to carry out the exact same functions with every person with whom they interact. Thus, they do not develop identical strengths in both languages.<sup>42</sup>

Latinos' linguistic insecurities also stem from the low regard that society has for the type of bilingualism they exemplify. Known as circumstantial bilingualism, this type of bilingualism is characteristic of individuals who come to learn a second language by virtue of their life circumstances, as is the case, for instance, with immigrants. Circumstantial bilingualism contrasts with elective bilingualism, which is characteristic of individuals who choose to learn a second language, typically, by enrolling in a class. Elective bilingualism is sometimes referred to as "elite bilingualism" because it is associated with higher socioeconomic status learners.

Though circumstantial bilinguals often attain high levels of proficiency, their language skills are often the target of criticism. The opposite is true of elective bilinguals: their skills are usually appreciated, regardless of how limited. Issues of prestige and power bear much to do with this state of affairs, as explained by sociolinguists: "Many Americans have long been of the opinion that bilingualism is a 'good thing' if it was acquired



via travel (preferably to Paris) or via formal education (preferably at Harvard) but that is a "bad thing" if it was acquired from one's immigrant parents or grandparents."<sup>43</sup>

All circumstantial bilinguals, the following students, are very critical of their linguistic abilities in English and Spanish. No doubt, the severe criticism that they have been subjected to in school (as discussed in Chapter 1) and other places has something to do with this. But the myth of equivalent—and native-like—abilities in two languages and the low status of circumstantial bilingualism also play a significant role.

1. It seems that the more English I learn, the more Spanish I forget. That is a problem because a lot of times I am looked down upon when I cannot hold a conversation in Spanish. Not knowing English or Spanish makes Latino students feel like they're outsiders like they don't belong.
2. Sometimes it is hard to go back and forth between languages. To speak proper English/Spanish can be very hard sometimes. At school all my friends speak proper English and no Spanish, but at home my family and I speak Spanish, though not proper. *challenge this notion*
3. My parents are from Mexico and they like to travel at least once a year there. My two siblings and I are all bilingual but going to a country that speaks only Spanish may be hard sometimes. Every year when we travel to Mexico we have a hard time communicating in Spanish. My siblings and I fluently speak Spanish but sometimes we feel more comfortable speaking in English. If any of our family members hear us speak English they give us a look that seems to say "don't speak that language." Every time we go to Mexico we try not to speak English at all. Sometimes my brothers and I feel like if we're here in the U.S we have to speak perfect English, but then if we're in Mexico we have to speak perfect Spanish. However, this becomes very difficult if at school you only speak English and almost no Spanish. I think that this shows that it may not only affect the U.S but sometimes it can affect part of the culture itself.

Latinos speak different types of English. Foreign-born Latinos speak a nonnative version of English, typically with an accent. However, the presence of a foreign accent in such speakers is not necessarily an indicator of poor command of English. Indeed, there are many individuals with a strong command of English grammar and a large vocabulary, who also