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The Language of Exploitation: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of How Employers Use Bilingualism in New York City Job Ads

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Recommended Citation

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by

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A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in International Migration

Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City

University of New York

2020

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal
Studies in satisfaction of the capstone project requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts.

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Advisor: Jamie Longazel

Abstract

In this globalizing world, bilingualism is increasingly being treated as a commodity, another skill to put on a resume that will increase one's chances of landing a lucrative job. However, in the case of Spanish, which is wrapped up in prevailing anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx sentiments and thus increasingly devalued, this is hardly the case: People who speak Spanish rarely receive additional compensation for possessing such language skills. Prior research has been conducted on resumes and interviews as sites of discrimination in the job market, but this study turns to the beginning of process, job advertisements. Specifically, it draws on a point-in-time analysis of job ads in New York City, which mention Spanish and were posted on the website LinkedIn on September 8th, 2019 (n = 95). The data show three notable patterns: Job ads often do not *require* Spanish skills despite having "bilingual" as a keyword in the ad, monetary compensation is rarely mentioned, and language skills are often mentioned in ways that promote language hierarchies. Considering this, I conclude by arguing that Spanish is a skill that loses value in the U.S. market because of the social stigma correlated to speaking Spanish, contributing further to the marginalization of Latinx immigrant communities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor Dr. Jamie Longazel for his patience, useful comments, remarks and engagement through the learning process of this thesis. The door to Dr. Longazel's office was always open whenever I ran into a trouble spot or had a question about my research or writing. He consistently allowed this paper to be my own work but guided me in the right direction whenever he thought I needed it.

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. media and politicians often portray immigrant groups – especially Latinx

populations – as resistant to learning English. The discussion around language acquisition in

Latinx communities usually leaves out the lack of resources available to learn English and that

this community does in fact learn English and subsequent generations also learn it more so than

Spanish (Dubord 2018). Although, there is a demand for bilingual speakers in the labor market

Latinx communities do not benefit from their bilingual skills. New York City alone has a

growing number of Spanish speakers that has grown from 1,473,001 in 2013 to 1,561,421 five

years later (Data Access and Dissemination Systems (DADS) 2010). With this growing number

of Spanish speakers, the labor market has also adapted to meet the new demands of language

work. This is reflected in how employers advertise jobs, some of which explicitly require

language skills while others, despite not requiring language skills, nevertheless take advantage of

employees who possess these skills.

Job-based discrimination against Latinx folks is often studied through resumes and job

interviews (e.g., Piller 2016). This paper brings an original approach, arguing that gatekeeping

strategies and language subjectivity can be identified way before resumes are sent out and

interviews are scheduled. The bias against Spanish as a language begin with the first step in the

job search, job ads. I show how job ads are a medium through which language is "regimented

and controlled," (Duchene 2013 1) and where language expectations are displayed using

subjective language that devalues bilingual speakers. I make the case that job ads are structured

in a way that creates a value system between languages. English is clearly the dominant language

as the ads are written in English and in ads it is most common that English requirements will be

positioned before Spanish. The value system is then created with subjective words used to describe the level of language skill needed. In this paper, I will explore how language as a skill, is typically treated as an asset that can benefit the speaker during the job search, and is often used by employers to position themselves to take advantage of such skills either without appropriate compensation to employees or in ways that reproduce language hierarchies.

First, I will look at the history and political economy of bilingualism starting with the shift from language used as a nationalistic and cultural symbol to language as a commodified "skill." Then I will look at language hierarchies under neoliberalism, where language hierarchies have become increasingly entrenched despite globalization. I will then discuss my methodology in collecting job ads as tangible evidence for these processes before turning to my analysis. Using a sociolinguistic lens (e.g., Duchêne 2013; Heller 2011; Piller 2016), I argue that ads can be understood as a site of discrimination in that they reproduce hierarchies and are rarely adequately compensated. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion on the implications of this research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

   a. The history and political economy of bilingualism

Language has a nationalistic history and was often used as a unifying force during nation building (Hogan-Brun 2017). Language still serves this purpose today, but under globalization the demand for language work has led to a shift toward treating language as a skill for the workplace. The marketing of multilingualism began in order to accommodate the employers needs for language speakers. Schools in the U.S. and abroad are expanding their marketing mechanisms to profit from language learning courses. As Gabrielle Hogan-Brun writes, in the

U.S. "the role of languages in enhancing employability skills and competencies of students is a firmly embedded marketing tag in the higher education sector" (Hogan-Brun 2017 74).

The marketing of bilingualism suggests a monetary incentive, but this is complicated in a context where employers are seeking to maximize profitability. Ana Zentella conducted a study on a Puerto Rican bilingual community in NYC that followed applicants through the job application process. The results showed that language speakers did expect to make more money or see social mobility because of their bilingual skills but this was not the case (Zentella 1997). The study on the Puerto Rican community gives us an insight on the outcomes of the commodification of the Spanish language from the point of view of the applicants. My focus is on job ads in particular, which are important considering they in many respects represent the beginning of this process. Studying ads is also important to the extent that they represent sites of socialization. Applicants search through hundreds of job ads when applying to jobs. The language they see in these job ads is socializing the applicant on the importance of some skills over others and teaching the applicant which skills are not only needed but valued by employers. It's not unreasonable to assume that these values given to certain skills might be internalized by the job seeking public.

b. Language hierarchies under neoliberalism

The value and devaluation of bilingualism can be seen in the language employers use in job ads. It has become a socially established idea that learning English can ensure job placement. In job ads, the importance of communicating effectively is also key. By placing importance on verbal communication skills such as speaking clearly and professionally we see cultural gatekeeping strategies at play. The emphasis on clear communication in English is highlighted in ads but if bilingual applicants are being targeted the applicant's skill level will vary. With a

requirement such as superior and advanced verbal skills language hierarchization is at play as well as devaluation of certain speakers and their language skill. The value given to English and devaluation of a native languages in migrant groups lessens their chances to enter the workforce.

Christopher Chavez explores hierarchies and gatekeeping strategies in Hispanic advertising productions through interviews he conducts with employees. Chavez's findings show that "English is the language spoken by those who hold dominant positions within the field, Spanish will only have value in specific, professional contexts" (Chávez 2014 35). This finding shows how language hierarchies control the value given to Spanish. The language used in job ads are products of language hierarchies where English is given a higher value than Spanish. Language hierarchies are also maintained by seeing "the Latino consumer as the non-English-speaking "other" only ensures they remain foreign, perpetually disconnected from the general market..." (Chávez 2014 35). This isolation especially affects migrant communities who are considered outcasts for not learning the English language.

Callahan and Gándara speak to this in their book *The Bilingual Advantage: Language, Literacy and the US Labor Market.* Looking into why wages do not seem to compensate bilingualism as a skill, they found that "Spanish bilingualism might not be economically rewarded, even when individuals speak English very well, due to the relatively low wages of Hispanics in the US labor market" (Callahan & Gándara 2014 139). This finding correlates with the fact that Latinx wages are lower than their white counterparts. Spanish in the U.S. labor force has also historically been associated with low-skilled labor or a language spoken by Latin American immigrants. This stigma follows speakers when they apply to jobs and despite being highly skilled in speaking both English and Spanish.

Callahan and Gándara use El Paso, Texas as a case study to argue that the stigma around

Spanish at the border will make it difficult to find compensation for language workers. This also supports the reasoning as to why there is a lack of language workers at the border. Callahan and Gándara references ethnographic work at the border that suggests the "Spanish language is often treated in employment processes (hiring, compensation, promotion.) as an uncompensated 'heritage' language freely available from the extensive Mexican-origin community" (139). Therefore, it is important to see the important role geography plays in the value given to bilingualism. In El Paso most employers do not recruit for bilingual speakers as they conclude that it will be an inherent asset that the applicants will have and therefore these workers are not rewarded for their language skill.

      c. Bilingualism as a skill

Under neoliberalism, English language learning is stressed to enter the job force. Language learning has shifted the rhetoric used to describe an ideal candidate who is expected to know English as well as another language to apply for a job. Duchêne discusses this as "'technologies of the self' and linguistic technologies such as the interview... the commodification of so-called soft skills which become the new cultural capital that migrant professionals are expected to acquire (Duchêne, Moyer, & Roberts 2013 11). In short, the responsibility is put on the applicant to be able to communicate in English at a "professional" level. This idea of the entrepreneurial self has driven many to learn more than one language. In other words, learning a language has changed from being about cultural exchange to being about acquiring "economic value." Students are encouraged to learn a new language to have one more thing to add to a resume. Although the idea is to get into the workforce with the added skill of being bilingual, ads show that economic value is not necessarily given to being bilingual. In Monica Heller's work in Canada she noticed that "providing bilingual services means dealing

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with language for the first time as a commodity. Some workplaces continue to treat it as a talent people just happen to have; handling it this way makes it possible to avoid paying for it" (Heller 2011 166). Heller's findings suggest that language skills have been commodified and therefore bilingualism does not necessarily translate into economic gain for workers.

John Patrick Leary's book *Keywords: The New Language of Capitalism,* provides a framework for thinking critically about everyday keywords used in the capitalist market which can be brought to bear on a critical analysis of the word's employers use in job ads to send signals about language (Leary 2019). Leary dives into words "like **best practices** and **human capital**," noting how such terms "are relatively new coinages that teach us to thrive by applying the lessons of competitive **marketplace** to every sphere of life. And they all model a kind of ideal personality: someone who is indefatigable, restless, and flexible, always ready to accommodate the shocks of the global economy and the more mundane disruptions of working life…" (Leary 2019: 4, bold in original). Leary identifies how the commodification of human skills puts responsibility on the individual to "catch up" and to have all the skills the capitalist market may require.

Such is the new neoliberal discourse around language work as well. Bilingual speakers are sought after by those hiring, but language hierarchies continue to be in place, thus devaluing Spanish in the job market. Employers get around this by expecting to have flexible workers adjusting to this neoliberal discourse and who can be "expected to do language work as part of their duties. However, there is no recognition of this in terms of salary or official status." (Duchêne 2013, 211). The language worker is then left with no monetary compensation which affects their social status and mobility. Once again, the bilingual worker must be responsible for acquiring skills "imposing, even on the speakers themselves, a managerial conception of

languages and language activity, no longer seen as a "source of pride" but a "source of profit."

The brutal introduction to the economic market of languages and language activity." (Duchêne &

Heller 2013 208)

METHODS

I collected job advertisements from the popular social networking site, LinkedIn to have a

tangible object to analyze when looking at the value given to the commodified skill of being a

bilingual Spanish speaker. To collect data on Linked in I used the "point-in-time" method, which

is designed to provide a "snapshot" of larger trends as they exist in a particular moment in time

(e.g., Kerwin 2015). I narrowed down my search to get results on bilingual speakers. I filtered

for "Spanish" in the keywords section and by distance to include New York City. I collected a

total of 104 advertisements on September 8th, 2019. The original sample included 104 ads,

however after removing duplicate cases and ads with "bilingual" in the job title but no

description about Spanish in the body of the ad, I was left with a total of 95 advertisements. I

organized the findings by how many ads required Spanish and how many did not, creating the

numerical data I describe below. In turn, I conducted a content analysis on the ads in each of

these categories.

For this project I use sociolinguistics as a lens for analyzing job ads. With a

sociolinguistics lens that treats language and society as interconnected, we can examine how

words influence social and cultural norms (Calefato 2009). This lens is important to give

importance to the literal text being used in the job ads. The ads serve as a gatekeeping

mechanism and we can see this through the words they use.

RESULTS

In the data set 62% of ads (59) did not require the applicant to have the Spanish skills in the ad for the job, compared to 38% (36) where Spanish is required. Some job ads that did require Spanish used caps or exclamation points in the sentence regarding language skills. The remaining 62% of job ads had the word "Spanish" in the body or title of the ad, but due to the subjective language, it was clear that language was not a deciding factor for getting the job. The word "plus" appears in 20% of the ads, suggesting that language skills are an asset, but that they will not necessarily receive monetary compensation or land a Spanish-speaking applicant the job. The ads discredit the idea that language is an asset that can provide social mobility or make the applicant more marketable when looking for a job. Instead, a Spanish-speaking employee may have to put their language skills to work on the job despite not being compensated for it.

One ad for a Certified Pharmacy Technician, for example, said, "Bilingual Spanish speaking skills a plus." This job is also a client-facing job where the pharmacist may have to speak in Spanish but in the workplace, this would be an exploited skill as it is not required but would likely be utilized if the situation arose. A delivery personnel job ad similarly stated, "Spanish speaking a plus!" The exclamation gives it an almost inviting aspect but would not be compensated for as it is not required. The exclamation point also produces subjectivities as it is not required, and skill level is not defined. Spanish did not only come up in these client-facing jobs, but also in an ad for a Director of Homeless and Supportive Services position which mentions that "Spanish speaking a plus." These ads all leave compensation and proficiency aside which would be more telling of what the employer is looking for. In Chavez's study of Hispanic advertising companies, he found that "Compared with foreign-born counterparts, U.S.-born Latinos were seen as less proficient in Spanish and, therefore, less qualified" (Chavez 2014 31).

This assumption would affect the large U.S.-born Latinx community as they may be inclined to apply for a job but may not be qualified.

Language commodification can also be seen in ads that seek bilingual *speakers* – a person who can speak two languages fluently – even though the job description requires language *translation*. The problem here is that translation is a different skill than verbally speaking a language fluently. Thus, the ad assumes (and therefore doesn't appropriately compensate) that a bilingual speaker will also possess this skill. In an ad titled "Bilingual Spanish English Customer Service Representative" the description states (all typographical errors are part of the original ad):

Special Requirements

All Candidates MUST have proof of Education (ie. GED, HS Diploma, Official transcripts, College degree)

Corresponding work history: Diploma-GED-2 yrs. of Customer Service Work History/Associates Degree-1 yr. of Customer Service Work History/Bachelor's Degree Must be available to work full time including weekends

Must be able to translate English, written and verbal, into Spanish

The job ad is seeking a bilingual customer service representative and experience in this field is requested, but, again, the bilingual requirement is mentioned at the end. Translation is also listed although this is a different skill than being able to verbally speak a language. The "must" in the ad also signals that there will be no added compensation for the language skill, as it is required to get the job. Language becomes one more skill listed in the job ad alongside the GED or high school diploma desired. This job does not require any special education in translation; it is just

assumed that the speaker will be able to do the verbal and written work.

The pattern of language commodification is clear, but this pattern leads us to another pattern which is language hierarchization. As we saw in both previous examples, Spanish is listed at the end of the ad. An ad for a Marketing Communications at B2B says "Spanish language fluency would be an asset" and an ad for a Bilingual Assistant Customer Experience Supervisor says, "Bilingual fluency in written/spoken Spanish strongly preferred." The ads also often use words like "proficient" and "fluent." These words are *language measurement* terms, used to identify one's skill level in navigating a language. But these terms are subjective; there is no one way to measure proficiency and fluency. These words are important when thinking about immigrant communities who are non-native speakers and their fluency will vary and make them subject to discrimination (Scasa 1994). The employer and employee could very well have different subjective interpretations of the applicant's skill level. Some job ads look to measure proficiency and fluency with a test (two in my sample), but most ads did not mention measuring the skill. The U.S Department of State uses a chart that defines language proficiency as "4 – Full Professional Proficiency: Speaking definition: Able to use the language fluently and accurately on all levels pertinent to professional needs. Reading definition: Able to read all styles and forms of the language pertinent to professional needs."[7] This chart repeatedly uses the word "professional" which creates a value system with this subjectivity by placing value on language only if it is "professional." The interviewer and employer who will interview the bilingual speaker will have their opinion on what fluent and proficient look like and the applicant themselves will be forced to reflect which category they fall into.

These ads also create a hierarchy of not only skill level but of languages themselves. Often English is mentioned before Spanish, implying more value to English as it comes first

when listed in the ads. While the previous ads used the word "proficiency," 25% of the ads used the word "fluency." The Care Manager Social Action Center description states "Language: Fluent English and Spanish (Required)" but English is stated prior to Spanish and no additional compensation is provided since both English and Spanish are required in this case. The DSNP Retention Specialist Spanish Bilingual job ad is one of the most specific ads about language skills. It says, "Required qualifications: Bilingual in Spanish/English language fluency (ability to read, write and speak)." This ad, again, also treats translation work and language fluency as interchangeable.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I looked to explore the devaluation of language skills in job ads. In the data set we can see the being bilingual is a skill that is often exploited. Spanish as a skill is also often not given additional value when job ads include this word but do not require it for the job. With these trends we can see that although language skills are marketed in a way that promotes higher pay or accessibility to the job market, this is not actually the outcome.

Sociolinguists like Duchêne, Heller, and Piller have done interview and workplace studies showing that show that the patterns in the language used around language skills is reflected in workplace dynamics. This analysis of job ads contributes to this discussion by showing how the social portrayal of Spanish can be seen in the language used in job ads targeting bilingual speakers. With this data set we were able to identify trends regarding devaluation of the Spanish language as well as language hierarchization. These trends are informative, but with more time and resources it would be interesting to get the bilingual applicants' perspective. In the future, scholars may consider having Latinx bilingual applicants come into a computer lab and read ads that use the word Spanish. During the time spent reading

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the applicants will write down words and phrases that stand out to them. After reading the ads I would also prepare a survey with questions starting with their preconceptions of Spanish as an asset in the global market and if it will be compensated either monetarily or help the applicant get the job. The following part of the survey would question if their assumptions were accurate and if not, what surprised them about the language used in the ads. The data for this future project would be the survey, the applicants notes and the ads they read. With this additional data we can make connections between the ads and the impact the ads have on the applicant in order to continue to look for patterns of Spanish devaluation and connecting it with how it impacts the applicants directly.

Analyzing job ads is a step towards proving that the marketing of multilingualism does not benefit the speaker / (prospective) employee, particularly in the case of Spanish – a trend that likewise disaffects Latinx communities, especially immigrants. The information presented here is important for language educators who may participate in marketing language as a skill. It is also important that as the number of Spanish speakers in NYC and elsewhere increases, we do not continue to market Spanish as a skill if it eventually does not get compensated as one. Instead, we must question why Spanish bilingualism loses value in the U.S., and how this further stigmatizes immigrant communities who are stigmatized for not assimilating and acquiring English. In other words, what we see here is not unlike the broader pattern whereby immigrants are welcomed for the cheap labor they offer but are ultimately exploited in the labor force (Calavita 2009). In this case, while English-Spanish bilingualism is embraced as a skill by employers under neoliberalism, bilinguals themselves hardly reap any of the benefits, but instead are exploited and left to endure the anti-Latinx sentiments which accompany the devaluation of Spanish.

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