

Socio-economic Status and Prestige as Determinants of English use in the Linguistic Landscape of the U.S. – Mexican Border.

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Linguistic Landscape (LL) studies show the linguistic configuration of an area through the study of the language of public signage (Landry and Bourhis, 1997). They can also “provide important insights and a different perspective on our knowledge about language” (Gorter and Cenoz, 2008: 343). The focus of this study is to investigate the LL of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico (a city bordering with El Paso, Tx. in the United States) and to understand the relationship between language use, prestige, and identity in the bilingual context of the U.S.-Mexico border.

With a population of around 1,512,450 (INEGI, 2020), Ciudad Juárez (CJ) is a profusely Spanish monolingual community (Teschner, 1995). The vitality of Spanish in CJ is quite outstanding despite its proximity to the U.S. border. To analyze the LL of CJ, we collected pictures of signs from different sectors of the city based on a map using data from the 2020 census (IMIP, 2020). The map divides CJ according to ‘wellness levels’ or the socio-economic status (SES): Very High, High, Middle, Low and Very Low. Signs were coded according to language choice, sign location, sign type, business type, main text and informative text (Franco-Rodríguez, 2008). We hypothesized that English, the prestigious language (Baumgardner, 2006), would be used more frequently in locations with higher SES and by international companies.

Preliminary results, based on an analysis of 260 pictures, confirmed our hypotheses. There was a strong effect of location ($p=0.002$) where sectors with greater SES have the highest rates of English-only signs (17%), while those with ‘middle’ SES have the highest rates of bilingual signs (45%) and those with ‘low’ SES have higher rates of Spanish-only signs (86%). Type of sign was also an important predictor of language choice ($p=0.003$) with the highest rate of English in corporate signs (franchises) (32.3%).

As for business type, English was used more frequently in signs from hobbies and entertainment, restaurant and catering, beauty, and communication businesses, potentially targeting both Juarenses with high socioeconomic status and Americans seeking lower prices south of the border. English-only signs may also be used as an attempt to signal higher quality and pricing. The reason for high English usage in communication and restaurant and catering signs could be due to some businesses being international companies or being global franchises.

Interestingly, our analysis of translation of texts revealed that only one (1/69) bilingual sign included a direct, word-for-word translation. The rest of the bilingual signs used code-switching, presenting different information in each language. Lack of translation in bilingual signs suggests that English is used to convey prestige and to symbolize modernization (Baumgardner, 2006). Thus, using English in signs in a border city like CJ has a dual benefit – it targets English speaking customers from the U.S. and it attracts locals with higher SES, as well as those who are not high SES but want to be perceived as such.

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