Racializing language, regimenting Latinas/os: Chronotope, social tense, and American raciolinguistic futures

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Jonathan Rosa

Stanford University, 485 Lasuen Mall, Stanford, CA 94305, USA

A B S T R A C T

In this article, I introduce a race-based reconsideration of chronotopes that frame conceptions of language, Latinas/os, and the American future. Specifically, I argue that conceptions of the pastness and futurity of the Spanish and English languages differ depending on language users' ethnoracial positions. Focusing on a range of recent popular cultural representations of language and Latinas/os, I suggest that these space-time narratives reflect a racialized social tense that perpetuates the marginalization of Latinas/os by continually deferring their claims to societal inclusion to an unnamed future. I argue that these Latina/o-oriented time-scales characterize the contemporary political economy of racialized language and identity.

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1. Introduction

The relatively recent demographic emergence of Latinas/os[1] as the largest minoritized U.S. ethnoracial group is often invoked in popular media portrayals such as the following news headlines: "How Latinos Are Shaping the Future of American Cities,"[2] "Latino Children are this Country's Future,"[3] "The Census, English, Spanish, and the New U.S. Latino,"[4] and "The Sound of the Latino Future? It's English."[5] These popular media portrayals reflect some of the different ways that representations of Latinas/os are saturated with discourses of language and the future. While invocations of language and the future are consistent in such representations, they differ in their focus on perspectives from which Latinas/os embody a renewed American future versus those from which Latinas/os pose a unique threat to the future of American identity. For example, a December 2010 National Public Radio story titled "Latino Mayor May Be A Glimpse of Things to Come"[6] presents a relatively positive portrayal of Latinas/os:

> There's a good chance America will eventually look like San Antonio. Demographically, the Texas city is a glimpse into the American future — a majority Latino community, where English is the language of choice…The mayor of San

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> Antonio, Julian Castro, is young, photogenic, well-educated and barely speaks Spanish. Yet he may very well be the model of a new kind of Latino leadership.

In this story, Castro's potential for Latina/o leadership is framed in inverse relation to his Spanish language abilities.

In a more recent, less optimistic portrayal of language and Latina/o identity, widely recognized conservative political figure Linda Chavez, former President of the English-only organization U.S. English and George W. Bush's nominee for Secretary of Labor, penned an April 2012 nationally syndicated column titled "Why so few Latinos ID themselves first as 'American.'"[7] Citing a 2012 report by the Pew Hispanic Research Center, Chavez laments the finding that "only 8 percent of immigrant [Hispanics], 35 percent of second-generation Hispanics, and 48 percent of third-generation Hispanics" identify themselves first and foremost as Americans. She suggests that this unwillingness to identify as American distinguishes Latinas/os from previous immigrant groups, and attributes this shift to multicultural education gone awry and the promotion of distinctive ethnoracial identities by schools and other mainstream institutions. In contrast, she celebrates the findings that Hispanics "overwhelmingly believe in the importance of learning English" and "nearly all U.S.-born Hispanics say they read and write English well." While the NPR story and Chavez column differ in their portrayal of the status of Latinas/os vis-à-vis American identity, they both position the English language as key to Latinas'/os' current and future impact on America.

These discourses of language and national identity are commonly associated with notions of culture and ethnicity in efforts to conceptualize group identities. However, I follow Williams (1989), Goldberg (2002), and Torres-Saillant (2003) in connecting conceptions of nationality and ethnicity to race on the one hand, and Hill (1998), Dick and Wirtz (2011), and Alim and Smitherman (2012) in connecting conceptions of language and culture to race on the other. This emphasis on race highlights particular questions about power, hierarchies, and modes of exclusion. Specifically, I consider how Latinas/os are positioned as particular types of ethnoracial *others* in the U.S. context, how language is used to gauge the characteristics of this *otherness*, and how the *raciolinguistic* management of Latina/o identities is organized in relation to imagined futures.

Building on these insights and considerations, the aforementioned representations demonstrate how conceptions of Latinas/os are closely linked to ideas and anxieties about language and America's ethnoracial future. At times, Latinas/os are characterized as another in a long line of American immigrant groups possessing a range of ethnic differences that are to be celebrated in our nation's multicultural melting pot. In many ways, the NPR story about Julian Castro is an example of this characterization. That is, a conception of Latina/o identity as something that is only implicitly racialized (i.e., Latinas/os could be unmarked Americans in the future, implying that they currently occupy a marked ethnoracial status), aspirationally professional, and increasingly English-dominant, although with continued knowledge of a minimal amount of Spanish. In contrasting accounts, Latinas/os are often described as a highly racialized, stubbornly unassimilable group that must be managed carefully in order to prevent them from undoing the nation's cultural fabric. Chavez's column invokes this countervailing view by framing Latinas'/os' ethnoracial self-identification as a problem to be combatted.

Dávila (2008) and Chavez (2008) have formulated this narrative dynamic as "Latino Spin" and "Latino Threat," respectively. Dávila persuasively argues that seemingly contradictory representational tropes associated with Latinas/os, such as "illegal, tax burden, patriotic, family-oriented, hard-working, and model consumer" (2008, p. 1), should be understood as efforts to reproduce normative American ideals rather than empirical representations of Latinas'/os' fundamental character. She suggests that "Latino Spin," which involves efforts to present Latinas/os as model Americans, is a way of whitewashing Latinas/os. Meanwhile, Chavez shows how "Latino Threat" narratives racialize Latinas/os by positioning them as a problem population in need of careful management. This attention to race sheds new light on the (re)production of societal hierarchies, as well as the ways in which particular practices and groups can be alternatively ethnicized as national ideals or racialized as targets of national exclusion (Urciuoli, 1996). Language is a key practice in these dynamics. Indeed, both "Latino Spin" and "Latino Threat" narratives position language shift from Spanish to English as a sign of progress. Whereas the aforementioned examples of Castro (Latino Spin) and Chavez (Latino Threat) might appear oppose one another, a focus on language reveals the ways that these representations are linked in their positive portrayal of Spanish-English language shift.

In this article I analyze the centrality of notions of language, race, and the future in contrasting representations of U.S. Latinas/os, as well as the ways Latinas/os respond to these representations of language and identity. I suggest that this *raciolinguistic* approach to analysis (Flores and Rosa, 2015), which directs attention to the co-naturalization of language and race, can contribute new insights regarding the ways that particular populations and cultural practices – linguistic and otherwise – come to be imagined in relation to American pasts, presents, and futures. I interrogate a range of popular representational scales and contexts that frame Latina/o raciolinguistic identities, and introduce a race-based reconsideration of two recent theoretical developments in semiotic anthropology: *chronotope* and *social tense*. The Bakhtinian (1981) notion of chronotope, or chronos as in time and topos as in space, highlights the ways that space, time, and models of personhood are linked in narrative frameworks. Building from the ways that chronotopes have been theorized within linguistic anthropology (Silverstein, 2005; Agha, 2007), I am interested in how ideologies of specific Spanish and English language practices play a central role in space-time constructions that figurate Latinas/os in imagined U.S. pasts, presents, and futures. I suggest that these space-time constructions reflect forms of "social tense" (Povinelli, 2011) – the legitimation of contemporary circumstances by implicating them in relation to other past, present, and future circumstances – in which Latinas/os are continually

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