

“¡Así se dice!”: Spanish Textbooks’ Hold on Heritage Speakers

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Spanish has had a long and complicated history in U.S. schools. From a language punishable if spoken to the most-studied second language (e.g., Avendaño, 1979; MLA, 2022), it has gained a place of importance, but only if learned “correctly.” There are approximately 41 million native Spanish speakers in the U.S. (American Community Survey, 2020), many of whom enter the secondary school system, where they confront standard Spanish, considered by many to be superior to their own variety (e.g., Beaudrie et al., 2021; Leeman, 2005, 2012, 2018; Villa, 2004; Zentella, 2007).

Ideologies that promote standard Spanish are potentially propagated by pedagogies that encourage the acquisition of prestigious varieties and formal registers (Valdés, 1997). Although they may recognize the diversity of Spanish, they imply that certain ways of using the language are more “appropriate” than others (e.g., Leeman, 2005). Critical language awareness, on the other hand, celebrates local varieties, recognizes the sociopolitical processes that affect their use, and attempts to contest social hierarchies that threaten them (e.g., Leeman, 2005, 2018; Beaudrie et al., 2021). However, among young heritage speakers in a majority-Hispanic city in South Texas, such awareness does not seem present in their view of their varieties, despite the multiple programs designed for heritage speakers in their city (Author, 2019, 2021, 2022). It is possible that these ideologies came from their textbooks, which tend to favor standard varieties (e.g., Burns, 2018; Heinrich, 2005; Mougeon et al., 2004).

This study follows Burns’ (2018) methodology, focusing specifically on secondary-level heritage speakers. It examines Spanish textbooks used in the largest public school district and the archdiocese schools in the South Texas city. We conducted a careful reading of the Instructor’s Annotated Edition to determine if/how each book presents itself regarding U.S. Spanish, local varieties, and language variation. The indexes were examined for key terms pertaining to language variation, such as Spanglish, language contact, loan words, colloquialisms, dialects, etc. The pages were examined for lexical, pragmatic, and/or grammatical information with particular focus on U.S. Spanish, as well as sections focusing on the Hispanic/Latinx populations in the U.S (Burns, 2018).

Although the school district in question offers dual-language programs, their materials for families suggest that bilingualism can only be maintained through the learning of academic Spanish (Bilingual/ESL & Migrant Department, 2019). The results of the textbook analysis seem to conform to this ideology; while the culture of U.S. heritage speakers of Spanish is present, accepted, and celebrated, the same cannot be said for their language. Little attention is paid to language varieties, other than dialectal variation in Spanish-speaking countries. The lexicon tended to include only established and accepted borrowings, leaving aside the specifics of the variety spoken by the South Texas Mexican American community. The textbooks selected for use in majority-heritage speaker classrooms, in particular one textbook that consisted of the “Texas edition,” did not actually reflect the language of their students. If there is to be critical language awareness in such classes, it must come from the teachers themselves.

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