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## Desgarrandonos de Nuestra Lengua: Ripping Us from our Language

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### Abstract

Using a *testimonio* methodology, this study provides insight on how language ideologies, family, and education in the Texas Borderlands impacted two Latina teachers' view and understanding of their identity. Through our personal experiences as PK-16 students, classroom teachers, and doctoral students, we were able to understand the colonization of our language and the subsequent endangerment of our bilingualism, which upon reflecting, had an impact on how we see ourselves as individuals, bilinguals, teachers, and Latinas. Our experiences with our bilingualism affected the way in which we perceive ourselves and our community. The reflection and analysis of our experiences allowed us to adjust our mindset towards a culturally sustaining lens, to improve our instructional practices, and to accept ourselves for who we are and where we were raised. Findings reveal how others' ideologies about language and education can have a lasting consequence on us as well as how we go about changing our mindset to one of acceptance and pride.

### Keywords

testimonio, bilingualism, culturally sustaining pedagogy

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### Acknowledgements

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## Desgarrandonos de Nuestra Lengua: Ripping Us from our Language

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Using a *testimonio* methodology, this study provides insight on how language ideologies, family, and education in the Texas Borderlands impacted two Latina teachers' view and understanding of their identity. Through our personal experiences as PK-16 students, classroom teachers, and doctoral students, we were able to understand the colonization of our language and the subsequent endangerment of our bilingualism, which upon reflecting, had an impact on how we see ourselves as individuals, bilinguals, teachers, and Latinas. Our experiences with our bilingualism affected the way in which we perceive ourselves and our community. The reflection and analysis of our experiences allowed us to adjust our mindset towards a culturally sustaining lens, to improve our instructional practices, and to accept ourselves for who we are and where we were raised. Findings reveal how others' ideologies about language and education can have a lasting consequence on us as well as how we go about changing our mindset to one of acceptance and pride.

*Keywords:* testimonio, bilingualism, culturally sustaining pedagogy

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### Growing up in the Texas Borderlands

*We have room for but one language in this country and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding house. Theodore Roosevelt ([1919] 1926: XXIV, 554 as cited in Crawford, 2001, n.p.)*

Bilingualism is the ability to speak two distinct languages. Individuals may be bilingual either by exposure during childhood to both languages or by acquiring a second language later in life. In the Texas Borderlands, bilingualism came easy to us. We understood that a person's bilingualism is a gift that not everyone experiences. Life along the border is about dancing *cumbias* and two-stepping, *carnes asadas* and brunch, jumping between Spanish and English freely. Though we may not have realized at a young age, growing up in the Texas Borderlands raised us to be proud Latinas, proud Texans, and proud bilinguals. Living here, we are surrounded by our Mexican-American culture and the intersection of two distinct cultures.

The purpose of this *testimonio* is to share our experiences growing up along the Texas-Mexico border and reflecting on how we came to understand that language is fluid. This allowed us to view language as additive and not subtractive to enhance learning.

Our lived experiences influence our current language ideologies. We utilized a *testimonio* methodology to reflect on our personal experiences coming of age, attending school, and becoming teachers impacted how we view language. "*Testimonio* differs from oral history or autobiography in that it involves the participant in a critical reflection of their personal experience within particular sociopolitical realities" (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 364). We will present our *testimonios* as the methodology to analyze and discuss the effects of the

colonization of language. The difficulty of using *testimonio* lies when trying to create a space for Latinas in a predominantly white space (Flores & Garcia, 2009.) *Testimonios* allow us to break through the fact that our narratives as women, scholars, and Latinas have been controlled, historically by a single perspective and a single group of people to excuse their wrongdoing upon our culture.

### ***Testimonio as a Methodology***

“One’s *testimonio* reveals an epistemology of truths and how one has come to understand them” (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 364). We decided to use the methodology of a *testimonio* to tell our stories how learning both English and Spanish impacted our bilingualism as children, educators, and doctoral students. Through the writings of our *testimonios*, our stories become a valid document with powerful information. Anzaldúa, 1987 believes we relive our stories as we re-read them when we document them “Our “stories” are acts encapsulated in time, “enacted” every time they are spoken aloud or read silently” (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 89). Our lived experiences become a form of data to share our reality with others who may also share a similar experience.

“*Testimonio*, is pragmatic in that it engages the reader to understand and establish a sense of solidarity as a first step toward social change” (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 364). *Testimonio* allows us to tell our narratives that may not otherwise or too often become known. “*Testimonialistas* narrate their own stories and also challenge dominant notions of who can construct knowledge” (Delgado et al., 2012, p. 366). Our thoughts, experiences, and lived curriculum become knowledge. Writing and sharing our *testimonio* allowed our experiences to be seen as valid form of data. “Constructing knowledge from personal experience is in the DNA of Latina writing and scholarship and is one of the key contributions that Latinas have made to the larger field of Latin@ Studies” (Benmayor, 2012, p. 509). Sharing our *testimonios* is empowering by allowing us to take ownership over our experiences and discovering their purpose.

### ***Nuestra Lengua Natal***

#### **Author 1- Como Aprendí Español... Twice**

Spanish is my native language. Both my parents were born in Mexico then relocated to the United States with their respective parents in search of the legendary American dream. *Crecieron* (They grew up) working in *las labores* (the fields) and attended school in South Texas where they began to learn English. After graduating high school both my parents joined the work force and started their family. My parents spoke English but maintained Spanish as their primary language at home. It was natural for Spanish to become my first and only language. It was the favored language of my family.

*Mis tíos, mis tías, mis abuelos*, (My uncles, my aunts, my grandparents,) everyone I grew up with, surrounded me with the Spanish language. I remember watching *telenovelas* (soap operas) and singing along to *Bidi Bidi Bom Bom* by Selena. I dreamt of marrying *El Sol de México*, *Luis Miguel* (Mexico’s Pop Superstar) and could not wait for our weekly crossing over the border *para comprar mandado* (to go shopping). I remember having to *ir al dentista* (go to the dentist) and to *authors a la familia* (visit the family). I did not speak any English until I entered school in kindergarten at my local elementary school located across the street from my childhood home.

However, once I entered school, my Spanish began to diminish. I began to code-switch between Spanish and English. As I became more fluent in English, I could feel *mi español*

*acabándose* (my Spanish diminishing). My parents would correct me when I would say a word incorrectly in either language. As I began to speak English more frequently, my confidence in using my new language grew, but my Spanish was unknowingly being diminished. Reflecting on my education, I realized I have no recollections of speaking Spanish at school. All of my memories are in English. My teachers only spoke English as well as my friends and classmates. As my English became fluent, my Spanish began to decrease. My parents began to gradually speak more English at home as well. The code-switching disappeared and English lifted its arms as the winner in the battle of the home language. The more I used English at home, so did my parents, to the point where we all stopped speaking Spanish.

I never reflected upon my language experience in school nor in my childhood until I entered the university to become a bilingually certified elementary school teacher. I was sitting in one of my first bilingual education course, when my professor said something that activated my goosebumps and sent chills down my spine! He stated research showed parents would place their Spanish speaking children in all English classes in schools in order for their children to learn English faster. I was sitting in my college classroom, and it was as if the flood gates of my deepest memories burst open. This is exactly what happened to me! Class seemed eternal. I was counting down the seconds to race home and confront my mother. As soon as class ended, I could not drive home fast enough. I got home and asked my mother if that was my situation. Did that situation apply to me when I was in school, even though I clearly already knew the answer to my own question? I wanted verification on my hypothesis. Did my mother place me in all English classes even though I only spoke Spanish? I questioned my mother about this and she, in her very tranquil composure, simply replied yes. My mother had in fact placed me in all English classrooms as soon as I entered school. “How could you have done that to me?” I demanded. The irony of me asking her that question in English and not Spanish, is not lost on me. I felt unsettled by this revelation. *Pues, pensé que ibas a tener más éxito en la escuela si aprendieras el inglés más rápido*, (Well, I thought you would be more successful in school if you learned English faster.)

She informed me. *Yo te iba enseñar español aquí en la casa* (I was going to show you how to speak Spanish here at home), she continued. “But you did not teach me Spanish at home!” I expressed, still in shock at this admission. I explained to her how my first language had diminished and replaced with English. I disclosed how difficult I found it to speak Spanish around my family. English had become my only language. I found myself, in college, having to take beginner Spanish courses to relearn a language I was born to speak. It felt unfair, like an injustice, to lose my native language. To this day, my brain works in English before it works in Spanish.

## **Author 2: Personal Bilingual Development**

I was born and raised in Rio Bravo, Tamaulipas to a family of business owners that sold goods to Winter Texans. My sisters and I were expected to work in the family business. My grandmother instilled in us ethics and values that placed emphasis on hard work and discipline. She understood the benefit my sisters and I would give to the business if we learned English, so she asked my mother to enroll us in American schools. We would cross the border daily between Mexico and the US. The expectation was to bring the new language to the store to help increase commerce.

I learned English quickly. I was immersed into the language. Every time I would speak Spanish, I would be corrected in English, and would often be answered with, “English, child, English.” My teachers would only acknowledge my requests if I spoke in English. At work in the store in Mexico, I honed my Spanish with the native employees. My grandmother and mother often corrected our Spanish, as my teachers in school refined my English. So, my

strength in both languages grew simultaneously. I grew up immersed in two languages that had defined borders, sounds and rhythms to each. I understood early on that education, and a high performance in school, would give me approval among the elders in my life I so desperately sought. However, I understood too, that each one of these languages had a special place. I could not freely speak to them as I wish I could, as my surrounding society dictated that I should not.

One vibrant example that comes to mind is when I was in second grade. I was asked to bring cupcakes to school to celebrate Christmas. I was thrilled to bring to class these delicious cupcakes I knew my classmates would love. It was an easy decision on my mother's behalf to purchase the cupcakes at our local bakery. We purchased Mexican cupcakes and I could not wait to get to school the next morning! My cupcakes were going to be the hit of the celebration! These special cupcakes were not topped with boring buttercream with a plain wrapper. These cupcakes were made with scrumptious Mexican vanilla and wrapped in a vibrant, red tissue paper that shined proudly as I walked into my class. However, my teacher saw my cupcakes she sternly informed me, "It is not a Mexican celebration or a *posada*. This is America and it is Christmas. These cupcakes are the wrong cupcakes. Make sure you tell your mom to buy them at H-E-B grocery store next time." My heart was shattered into a million broken pieces. That entire Christmas break, I hated my Mexican nationality. I hated everything about myself and what my language represented. That would be the first and only time I would ever let my peers or teachers into my culture. I continue to struggle with this battle still today.

### *Nuestras Experiencias Como Maestras Bilingües*

#### **Author 1: State Testing vs. Language Instruction**

I graduated as a certified bilingual elementary teacher. I had taken my Spanish language courses as well as my bilingual education courses. I practiced my Spanish daily. My Spanish was back *como mi lenguaje (as my language)*. Like every new teacher, I wanted to change the world! I went into my first teaching job ready to educate my bilingual students. We were going to learn Spanish and English in our classroom. Using my experience from when I was an elementary school student, I did not want my own students in my very own classroom to have their native language taken away like I did when I was their age. I wanted my students to speak both their Spanish and their English languages. However, as I too soon found out, that was not going to be the case.

Upon attending professional development trainings, meetings with my campus administrators, and planning the year with my fellow teachers, I received shocking news. I was directed to teach all of our students in English with minimal Spanish language instruction. I felt the wind knocked out of me. I could not believe this was the directive given to me as to how I should instruct my bilingual students. The administrations language ideologies were to use English as much as possible in order for students to succeed on the state exam. Zúñiga (2016) stated, "the underlying message that Spanish posed a problem when it came to preparing for the state test, and English was the language that ultimately mattered" (p. xx). It quickly became obvious, the state exam rules as the king in education not language instruction. These campus language ideologies are evident in the directives given by the campus administration. Students were not allowed to code-switch. Teachers were to remind students the language of instruction is English. Valdés (2018) writes teachers enact their ideologies in their language instruction which impact their learning.

I am all too familiar with the consequences of this mentality. All English, all the time ideology robs students of their native language. A language that is a part of their culture and identity. I continue to reap the consequences of this mentality. Though I improved upon my Spanish, I continue to lack confidence speaking it naturally. Living in the Texas Borderlands,

most of the people here speak Spanish. As Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) wrote, “even our own people, other Spanish speakers *nos quieren poner candados en la boca*” (p. 76). It was unfair to expect our bilingual students to only speak English at school. “As bilingual educators, we believe that we need to nurture and grow the resources that students come with from their homes and communities” (Valdés, 2018, p. 407). There is no better community to nurture bilingual education than that of the Texas Borderlands where both English and Spanish are predominant.

## **Author 2: Reflections of Teaching Experiences in the PK-12 Classroom**

As an educator, I have reflected that I have been harsh on my language learners. I have also limited their achievement with my preconceived notions of their abilities due to the colonization theories so deeply embedded in my belief system. Many times, I could be heard saying, “English only, please.” I would explain to others how it was necessary for them to immerse themselves in the new English language and drown out the Spanish, as this would help them to learn the language faster. In my studies these actions that lead to linguistic genocide were exposed. Zúñiga (2016) states, “teachers often experience ideological tensions and multiplicity in their teaching; their classrooms are ideological and implementational spaces constantly influenced by layers of language policy-making agents” (p. 341).

I feel embarrassed and hope those students will forgive me for all the implicit and hidden racism I mistakenly presented to them. My words and actions told them that their language and their culture was not worthy and better left alone. I placed so much preference and emphasis on English as the only language in which they could be accepted. This is because as found in Nunez and Palmer (2016), that power in Spanish is limited because there are limited opportunities for language minority students to use their native language. So, I thought by stopping the use of Spanish, this would enable bilingualism to flow in my students. The biggest irony is that Cummins, was not a proponent on stopping the mother tongue. I was fed and believed this inaccuracy of information from professional development that sought to move students to pass standardized tests in English. Zuniga (2016) argued that “the acquisition of the English language remains the priority of schools and classrooms as the monolingual testing policies eradicate a language”. If we continue to standardize test students, this practice of silencing languages, and promoting English only ideologies will continue in education.

## **Author 1: *Cambiando Mis Language Ideologies***

Beginning my doctoral classes, I was able to evaluate bilingual education more than ever before. In my second year of study, I learned more about bilingualism and second language acquisition. One main topic of interest we studied was 11uthors11guaging. Being so familiar with code-switching, 11uthors11guaging was a difficult concept to grasp at first. How are all languages seen as one linguistic repertoire, I kept asking myself.

Under the concept of 11uthors11guaging, languages are seen as one combined entity. Garcia and Wei (2014) stated, a 11uthors11guaging lens posits that bilinguals have one linguistic repertoire from which they select features strategically to communicate effectively (p.22). It is the idea that language is fluid and has no boundaries. Under 11uthors11guaging, code-switching is no more since all languages are seen as one. At first, this concept was difficult for me to comprehend but now I am learning daily what it means to utilize both my languages and cultures.

When it comes to schools, 11uthors11guaging creates an open space to play with language and open language borders. The teacher is not the only ‘expert’ in the room and considerable control is handed over to the students (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Teachers are no

longer the only initiator of learning, but students take over as facilitators along with their teacher. Students are able to incorporate their language and experiences into the classroom. They become experts along with the teacher. Translanguaging is one way in which students are able to experiment with language.

Translanguaging created a new lens for me and innovative ideas on how we use and learn language. Thinking about my experience becoming bilingual, I see translanguaging as a valid linguistic resource because it allows students to use their entire language as a whole and does not compartmentalize their languages.

### **Author 2: *Viendo la Luz***

One of the most consequential articles I have read was that of Nunez and Palmer (2016) found that English is a majorized language while Spanish is a minoritized language because everyone uses English: dominant English and Spanish speakers as well as bilingual speakers use English. This is why English tends to dominate most, if not all, spaces in my life. This realization allowed me to understand that my bilingualism is an endangered species. The second concept that changed my view on bilingualism was the colonization of our Spanish language by the university elite introduced by Michael Guerrero and Maria Consuelo Guerrero (2020). In their decolonized article, which was written in Spanish in its entirety, the researchers bring to light the failing design of bilingual courses in American universities.

In school, I was taught by my teachers that speaking Spanish would hinder my growth. English was the only form in which they would acknowledge my existence. At home, at work, my grandmother would chastise us if we spoke English because it was, “*una falta de respeto hablar en un idioma que no se entiende. Aquí solo hablen español. El inglés es solo para la escuela y el trabajo del otro lado, aquí solo español.* (disrespectful to speak a language no one here understands. Here, we only speak Spanish. English is only for school and work in the US, at home, we only speak Spanish)” This dichotomy of ideas made it extremely clear to me that languages were a form of acceptance into both cultures. But it was also clear, as Darder (2014) wrote, that “bilingual students can begin to internalize negative projections and, thus, strive to disassociate from their primary language and culture” (p. 5). I knew early on that I too had to disassociate myself of my culture while in school. Teachers were cold and dismissive to us when our tongues slipped back to the native language. Their cold stares quickly put us back in our place.

Yet, my love for languages led me to choose English as a major and Spanish as a minor for my bachelor’s degree. I continue to hold a deep respect and regard for both languages, it is an innate passion that I have for both of them, as they both hold parts of my upbringing.

Guerrero and Guerrero (2020), then go on to question teachers’ critical consciousness and commitment to bilingual education. Their claim that bilingual departments in universities have failed to design programs for future bilingual teachers brings about an awareness of how we continue to colonize our students. The first claim the authors make is the fact that, “*los profesores nunca han exigido que los futuros profesores de la disciplina demuestren sus habilidades para escribir y leer en español sobre el campo, como lo recomendaron Garder (1977) y Acosta y Blanco (1978)*” (Guerrero & Guerrero, 2020, p. 9). Until this point in my career as an educator, I had never seen the hegemony of the English language in bilingual education. If teachers cannot connect to a student’s language and culture, then how are they to make the emotional connections needed for the child to learn?

As a teacher in the Texas Borderlands, I can attest to the fact that most bilingual education teachers employed by the various districts do not speak, read nor write fluently in Spanish. They urge us, as bilingual educators, to begin teaching in Spanish, to write in Spanish, and for us to accept Spanish as a legitimate language that is also rich in value. However, we



are hardly allowed to use these practices in the classroom and continue to push English only ideologies.

To each bilingual students, the teacher should connect to that child's linguistic identity. Teachers in bilingual education must be required to be fluent in Spanish.

### **Nuestro Aprendizaje**

Reflecting on our own experiences and seeing how bilingual students are continuing to be treated, language is still seen as an issue to be corrected. Students entering schools speaking a language other than English, are seen as deficient. Language learners are viewed as a problem to be fixed. It is evident that second languages are still seen as a problem in schools due to strong English-based language policies and the stringent monolingual testing policies in effect (Zúñiga, 2016). It is an injustice to subtract someone's native language. This is a concept the researchers of this article are all too familiar with. When students see themselves as having a language deficit, academic success will be harder to obtain (Alvarez, 2013). Other's language ideologies have an impact on one's identity. Identity is a two-way street; it is how we view ourselves but it is also how other's view us.

Ideologies of language have been defined as unexamined ideas and beliefs that shape people's thinking about language itself and about those who use language (Valdés, 2018, p. 396). District and campus administrators, as well as teachers, should take the time to dissect their personal language policies and ideologies and identify how their thinking will impact students' learning. Students should not enter schools as bilinguals only graduate monolingual. Education should leave student with more, not less. It reminds us of our Spanish language being dismissed in our schooling. Not recognizing and valuing the language Latina/o students bring to school is a direct threat to their culture (Alvarez, 2013). There are so many different languages in this world, being so quick to dismiss them seems a unjust.

The biggest lesson learned through these *testimonios* was the realization that our language was ripped from us. We were negated the ability to use it as we saw fit. We were instead colonized to place English as the more superior language in both of our lives. We let others' ideologies decide how we should speak. We let other's perception of us change our identity. "Despite being the fastest growing population in this country and having a historical presence that dates back centuries, Latin@s and their linguistic, cultural., and educational needs continue to be heavily ignored by the higher education system in the United States" (Alvarez, 2013, p. 132). We need to advocate for ourselves and others to maintain our native language. We should not be forced to lose one language in order to gain another.

### **Implications**

Writing our *testimonios* allowed us to reflect on our own language ideologies and experiences with our culture and language growing up. As Flores and Garcia (2009) state, we came face to with memory, pain, silences, and untold stories, and untold taboos but also with wisdom from our families that cannot be learned in academia. Writing our experiences gives a first person look inside how our experiences impact our teaching, language, identity, and ideologies. "We owe each other the conversations that move us from essentialism, from silence, and measures of Latina authenticity to a space where we can recognize our internalized oppression and the psychological damage that this causes to us as a group" (Flores & Garcia, 2009, p.166). Sharing our experiences and having them be accepted as valid forms of data opens conversations and creates a space for change. It allows others with similar experiences to share their stories and create a transformation of sorts.

## Conclusion

These *testimonios* have brought to light our language oppression and the disparities that exist within our communities. This process allowed us the ability to reflect, to heal, and to share these findings. We have been forced to ask ourselves some difficult questions, to have tough discussions with our family, and to look within ourselves to find our true identity.

We think about our individuality and linguistic abilities as well as how we feel they are not appreciated or not valued. The *testimonio* process allowed us to really think how other's language ideologies had an impact on our lives. Though it is not something we think about in that moment, upon reflection we found how someone else sees us can have an impact on how we view ourselves. Our identity not only comes from a mirror but a window as well. How we view ourselves and how others view us create our identity. We must continue to battle against linguistic oppression and having other's ideologies have a negative consequence on us. Our language and identity should come from within ourselves and the pride we have in who we are.

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