

**Language, Race, and Negotiation
of Identity**

A Study of Dominican Americans

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immigrant, urban environment shapes the language and options for identities of the second generation.

Although the Dominican second generation in South Providence do not think of themselves in terms of Black or White, they learn to think of themselves as expressly *non-White*, regardless of phenotype, and they experience significant solidarity with other non-Whites, particularly Hispanics and African Americans, who are their neighbors and peers at school. This non-White identity is expressed in part through African American style English, which has positive in-group connotations for many low-income, non-White youth in Providence. This urban, non-White language style can even serve as a unifying language for Hispanics who speak identical, urban forms of English, but who speak different regional varieties of Spanish, e.g. Guatemalan, Colombian, or Dominican Spanish, based on their families' origins.

Purism has dominated Western thought about language for hundreds of years, and perceived interlanguage influences have frequently been considered akin to mongrelization and degeneration (Hill and Hill 1986:55). Dominican American language displays a hybridity--through code- and variety-switching and convergent forms--that is disparaged by dominant classes of both Spanish and English speakers. As an in-group form it proposes and embodies an understanding of the world that includes Dominican ethnolinguistic heritage and socialization in a low-income, urban environment in a racially, ethnically, and economically hierarchical society. This urban youth form of language can contribute to reproduction of the very marginalization that led to it. Individuals make detailed social evaluations of each other based on language usage (e.g. Lambert et al. 1960), and the forms characteristic of Dominican American youth speech are frequently disparaged by the dominant society. Use of such disparaged forms can lead to negative evaluations by many of the gatekeepers, e.g. White school teachers, that Dominican American students encounter, particularly since the stigmatized forms are used by non-White individuals about whom gatekeepers may already entertain negative stereotypes.

Dominican American enactment of identity highlights the sociohistorical, processual nature of racial formation. Language is central to Dominican American resistance to American racialization practices, and successful Dominican American enactment of non-Black identities suggests incipient transformation of the Black/White

dichotomy in America, particularly as the non-White immigrant population grows. Dominican American ethnolinguistic self-definition, which is activated both intra- and inter-ethnically, challenges deeply naturalized American notions of race and even some modern, constructionist social science analyses. At the same time that they successfully resist many American Black/White racial meanings, Dominican American language, lives, and identities are shaped by hierarchical American racial structure.

1.3 Acculturation among Children of the New Immigration

The negotiation of identities by the Dominican second generation can tell us much about the theoretical trajectories of acculturation available to contemporary non-White immigrants to America, who are primarily from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. Many popular and academic assumptions about immigrant acculturation and assimilation are based on the experiences of European immigrants from 1880-1920, but their patterns of acculturation were very different from the ones documented here among Dominican Americans. In the "straight-line" theory of assimilation derived from the 1880-1920 immigration (Warner and Srole 1945), immigrants become assimilated to an unmarked, White American identity as they become temporally and generationally removed from immigrant origins. Dominican second-generation acculturation in Providence, Rhode Island, however, is to a distinctive urban, low-income, non-White, Dominican American identity, rather than toward a White, middle class identity. Dominican American trajectories of acculturation thus directly refute the straight-line theory of assimilation. Their patterns highlight the fact that "acculturation" and "assimilation" in straight-line theory assume idealized cultural processes that are disconnected from structural constraints such as racial hierarchy and segregation and correlated economic inequality.

At the same time that Dominican American acculturation refutes straight-line theory, it also refutes the opposite of straight-line theory, the speedy assimilation of non-White immigrants to impoverished native non-White groups (Gans 1992, Portes 1995, Portes and Zhou 1993, Portes and Rumbaut 1996). Such a theoretical trajectory of acculturation fails to take into full account the Dominican cultural meanings and organization that the Dominican second generation

preserve despite discrimination and economic obstacles in America. Members of the second generation situationally use their Dominican Spanish language to highlight boundaries between themselves and longer established non-White American groups, even as their shared structural position contributes to solidarity in many contexts.

The multiple and hybrid trajectories of second-generation Dominican acculturation are nowhere more evident than in everyday Dominican American language, which includes elements associated with diverse class and racial groups. Syncretic second-generation linguistic practices reflect and reconstitute a distinctive identity that is both urban American and Dominican immigrant. "Acculturation" implies a cultural change in a direction *toward* ("ac-" meaning "toward") a specific group or end, but while Dominican American language and identities are influenced by multiple other groups, they remain distinct from any other one group.

Socialization in a thriving Dominican community in South Providence contributes to the constitution and reproduction of a distinctive Dominican American identity. Portes (Portes and Zhou 1993, Portes 1995) has suggested the positive socioeconomic effects that acculturation in, and to, such an enclave can have, especially for individuals who face obstacles based on race or ethnicity in the White mainstream. The current study shows that socialization in such an enclave also has powerful effects on language use and the interrelated sense of identity in the second generation. This community level of socialization and language maintenance in America is central to resisting pressure from other American groups to acculturate to phenotype-based identities.

1.3.1 Approaches to Immigrant Identity and Acculturation in the United States: Assimilation

Until the 1980's, studies of immigrant ethnicity in America focused largely on the experiences of the waves of European immigrants who arrived in America between 1880 and 1920 and successive generations of their descendants. The large number of these immigrants and their trajectories of socioeconomic success across generations have informed both popular and social scientific assumptions about immigration, acculturation, and ethnicity. The most central assumption from this specific history is that ethnic assimilation and socioeconomic mobility

occur linearly as individuals become further temporally and generationally removed from their immigrant-origins (Srole and Warner's (1945) straight-line theory). Causation of assimilation is implicitly attributed to the passage of time and generations, and the historical and social specificity of the conditions in which this assimilation occurs are backgrounded.

During the heightened immigration associated with the 1880-1920 period, many doubted that the largely Southern and Eastern European newcomers would ever assimilate to the culture of the dominant groups, who were of predominantly Northwestern European origin. Such groups as Italians, Slavs, and Jews were described as being of a different race than Northwestern European-Americans, or of an inferior species (Waters 1990:2). Social differences between these immigrants and European Americans who were already in America were perceived as insurmountable. Immigrant ethnics lived in segregated neighborhoods, and a constant influx of compatriots kept immigrant languages, cultural practices, and identities flourishing until the 1920's when immigration was cut off by the federal government.

As generations of academics and writers have since chronicled, the descendants of these European immigrants did adapt, assimilate, and overwhelmingly gain full acceptance into American life. Today they hold positions of power throughout society, in government, business, and professions. The ethnicity that was once so salient has become nearly invisible in the third-, fourth-, etc. generations. Discrimination and residential segregation waned at the same time that linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of immigrant enclaves faded as immigration restrictions prevented new co-ethnics from arriving. Individuals began to live, go to school, make friendships, and marry outside of the ethnic group, i.e. they assimilated (Gordon 1964).

This immigrant assimilation and success was not simply the result of the passage of time, however, but rather the result of specific social, economic, and historical forces. The fact that these immigrants were European, for example, was central to the assimilation of their descendants, who count as White. As European-descent Americans, successive generations did not face the discrimination or segregation that non-European have historically faced in this country. As linguistic and cultural practices associated with European immigrants waned across generations, there were few markers to distinguish descendants of these immigrants from other European-descent Americans.

Specific historical social policies and economic conditions also help explain the socioeconomic successes of the 1880-1920 immigrants and their descendants. The abrupt restriction on immigration in the 1920's, for example, decreased low-wage competition for immigrants and their offspring who were already in this country, granting them a measure of economic power. The growing industrial economy of the early 1900's afforded secure blue-collar jobs that could be obtained by immigrants who didn't speak English and hadn't been educated in American schools. This thriving industrial economy also provided well-paying blue-collar jobs that allowed incremental upward mobility from generation to generation even without education (Portes and Zhou 1993). When later generations did achieve higher levels of education, often in the third- and fourth-generations (Gans 1992), the unprecedented economic growth after World War II afforded new opportunities for economic success and comfort.

The model of assimilation based on 1880-1920 European immigration fails to explain the historical experiences of many non-Europeans in America. African Americans, Native Americans, and Chicanos, for example, have been in this country for centuries, allowing more than enough generations for cultural assimilation and socioeconomic success to occur based on straight-line theory of assimilation. Many members of such groups, however, have retained distinctive social identities and have not enjoyed the socioeconomic successes enjoyed by Americans of solely European descent.

Failure to attend to the specific social histories of various groups, e.g. forms of incorporation into the United States and American racial structuring, leads to invidious and invalid comparisons. Group deficiencies among non-Whites, rather than structural disadvantages and differences, become popular and sometimes academic explanations for ongoing segregation, maintenance of distinctive identity, and relative poverty, for example. Deficiencies in the theory of assimilation and the American ideology of socioeconomic opportunity are thus presented as deficiencies in the groups whose realities do not match the theory.

1.3.2 The New Immigration

Dominican immigrants to America are part of the *New Immigration*, which is made up primarily of immigrants from Latin America, the

Caribbean, and Asia. The watershed event defining the New Immigration was the enactment of changes in American immigration law in 1965. Highly restrictive immigration quotas that were based on nationality and that favored Northwestern European countries were abandoned in favor of increased quotas based on hemisphere, not country. In addition, quotas were lifted entirely for "family reunification," i.e. immigrants who were already in the United States and who met certain criteria could be joined by close relatives. Those who were given visas as part of such family reunification could then eventually sponsor *their* close relatives, resulting in elaborately linked webs of large numbers of immigrants (Kraly 1987). The result of these changes in immigration law was a new wave of immigration beginning in the late 1960's that represents the largest influx of immigrants to America since the 1880-1920 period.

The new *second* generation, the children of these immigrants, were projected to reach over 28 million before the year 2000, thus outstripping the previous peak of second-generation immigrants, which occurred in the 1940's (Portes 1996:2). This second generation group represents about ten percent of the overall United States population, and a much higher percentage of American youth. By the year 2035, it is estimated (Sanjek 1998:1) that fewer than one-half of children in the United States under age 18 will be White. The trajectories of acculturation of the new second and third generations will thus determine to a large degree the nature of American society.

This post-1965 immigration is "new" not only in that it is more recent than the 1880-1920 immigration, but also in that it is different. Most of the new immigrants do not come from Europe, so most do not count as White, and they arrive to a much different economic context than those earlier migrants arrived to. These differing macro-social factors may not only invalidate linear-temporal models of assimilation, but may reverse the predictions of such models. In one scenario proposed by Gans (1992), non-White, low-income immigrants will assimilate not to middle-class White American status, beliefs, and practices, but to impoverished American non-White groups. During periods of economic stagnation, such assimilation could take place in one generation, thus not only turning straight-line theory on its head, but also accelerating the process of acculturation. In an economy that increasingly requires education for well-remunerated work, for example, poor second-generation immigrants who have acculturated

out of their parents' immigrant jobs face downward mobility if they do not achieve academically:

second-generation decline is likely to produce an early convergence between the present American poor and some second-generation poor, for if immigrant parents are unable or unwilling to enforce strict school...discipline, if language problems cannot be overcome, or if the youngsters...see that their occupational futures are not promising, they may begin to get low grades, reject schooling and eventually drop out or get themselves pushed out of the school system. (Gans 1992:183)

Assimilation to marginalized ethnic and folk-racial groups may be encouraged by the seductive freedoms available to youth in America that are not available in countries of origin (Gans 1992:187). The freedoms to choose friends, date without chaperones, and develop personal interests and activities are frequently more attractive to second-generation adolescents than the delayed gratification associated with work, education, and eventual achievement of social mobility, which is preached by many first-generation parents. These freedoms can work against upward mobility if they contribute to drug use, gang membership, poor school performance, or early pregnancy that hinders further education.

Portes and Zhou (1993) suggest that the direction of assimilation of the second generation has not necessarily been reversed, but rather has become "segmented," i.e. the trajectories of acculturation of members of the second generation will vary and fall into three distinct types. The basic question is *to which* American groups new immigrants acculturate. Portes and Zhou (1993:82) predict three possible trajectories of assimilation: 1) Children of immigrants of higher education and social class will be likely to use education as a means to social and economic mobility, approximating the traditional notion of linear assimilation and upward mobility over time. 2) Others will assimilate to marginalized, impoverished ethnic/racial groups already in the United States. 3) Still others will maintain strong, multiple relationships and solidarity within the immigrant community, maintaining the community's values and experiencing economic stability or some upward mobility.

Although Dominican Americans can follow the first trajectory in terms of achieving socioeconomic mobility, few Dominican Americans can assimilate to White American identities. Over 85% of Dominicans are of African ancestry, and no African-descent group has ever assimilated to an unmarked ethnic/racial status in America. Notions of Black/White race remain a fundamental social organizing principle in America, and individuals who count as Black are regularly subjected to discriminatory treatment, regardless of class status (Feagin 1991). The majority of Dominican Americans will not be able to enjoy the privileges that status as White brings, regardless of how acculturated they become.

The second possible trajectory of acculturation predicted by Portes and Zhou (1993) for the new second generation--assimilation to marginalized, impoverished ethnic/racial groups already in the United States--is occurring among Dominican Americans in Providence in limited spheres of their lives. The concentration of Dominican immigrant households in the low-income urban center of Providence puts the second generation in close contact with impoverished native-born groups (as well as other immigrants), and the acculturation of the second generation is largely toward these groups, notably African Americans and other Caribbean Hispanic Americans. The Dominican American second generation, for example, extensively adopt dress and musical fashions commonly associated with urban African American youth, and the English of many young Dominican Americans shares linguistic and stylistic features with varieties of AAVE. This acculturation is evident in only limited spheres of the second generations' lives, however. The same teen-agers who use AAVE, listen and dance to hip hop music, and meet with African American friends at Burger King also speak Spanish at home and with extended family, attend Spanish-language Mass, eat fried plantains and rice and beans, and dance to *merengue*, *salsa*, and *bachata* at Caribbean Hispanic clubs. Although the second-generation acculturate in some domains to marginalized native-born groups, they do *not assimilate* to them in the second generation. Distinctive identity is apparent in self-ascriptions, ascriptions by others in local contexts, cultural practices, and language.

Portes and Zhou (1993:83) predict a third potential trajectory of assimilation for new immigrants, one that includes "deliberate preservation of the immigrant community's values and tight solidarity."

Acculturation thus depends not just on characteristics of individuals and the receiving society but also on the nature of the immigrant ethnic community in which it takes place. Flourishing immigrant communities model options for acculturation and identity that are not a reaction to disparagement by the dominant groups in America. Such communities can recreate institutions and attitudes from the home country, inculcating youth with a common cultural memory based on shared language and customs. Portes (1995) calls such ethnicity--based on continuation of cultural practices from the home country--"linear" ethnicity. He contrasts linear ethnicity with "reactive" ethnicity, which is based on experiences of discrimination in the United States and characterized by opposition to an oppressive, White-dominated mainstream:

Linear ethnicity...gives rise to an entirely different outlook based on the partial recreation of institutions brought from the home country. The emergence of immigrant churches, schools, restaurants, shops, and financial institutions patterned in the mold of the old country reinforces the first-generation stance in two ways: first, by creating a social environment that validates its norms and values; second, by creating opportunities within the immigrant community that are absent in the outside. (Portes 1995:257)

Maintaining strong ties within an immigrant/ethnic enclave can thus represent a successful strategy for maximizing material and psychological resources (Portes and Zhou 1993).

This community level of social analysis helps to explain the maintenance of a distinctive identity among Dominican Americans in Providence, including their resistance to American phenotype-racial classification. There are structural pressures that encourage the second generation to identify strongly with other disadvantaged groups: Dominican Americans and many native-born non-White Americans in South Providence share a social reality that includes grossly inadequate schools, neighborhoods with high rates of drug use and crime, ethnic/racial discrimination, and poverty, and many Dominican Americans are viewed by outsiders as undifferentiated from African Americans. In view of these pressures, a vigorous ethnic community that maintains a common cultural memory, reinforcing Dominican

norms and beliefs, is central to maintenance of a distinct identity. It provides a Dominican cultural framework in which to define oneself ethnolinguistically rather than by phenotype, and the size and distinctive language of the community contribute to "Dominican" and "Spanish" being recognized as valid local alternatives to phenotype-based categories.

The Dominican American trajectory of acculturation refutes the linear-temporal model of assimilation, in which assimilation to an unmarked White American identity results from the passage of time and generations. Such a model idealizes cultural processes, disconnecting them from the structural constraints of racial discrimination and correlated economic inequality. Acculturation of the Dominican second generation is directly limited and channeled by structural inequality in America. At the same time, Dominican American acculturation in Providence shows that the preservation of cultural and linguistic practices and understandings can keep the second generation distinct from longer-established groups, despite commonalities in phenotype, neighborhoods, and experiences of discrimination. Specific features of Dominican second-generation acculturation, e.g. resistance to phenotype-based identification through accentuation of ethnolinguistic identity, can thus suggest frameworks for understanding the acculturation of non-White children of the New Immigration more generally.

1.4 Agency vs. Structural Constraint in Identity Enactment

Dominican American negotiation of identity highlights the reciprocal relationships between individuals' linguistic resources and activities and the historical and structural forces that permeate their lives. Dominican Americans claim and successfully enact varying identities through language, demonstrating the social agency of individuals. This agency is particularly striking in resistance to Black/White racial ascription, which is the type of social identity ascription over which individuals have historically had least control. Individual agency is also clearly constrained and channeled by the macro-social structures and meanings that suffuse everyday life. Not all Dominican American claims of identity, e.g. as non-Black, as Dominican, or as American, represent successful enactment of those identities. In everyday talk and