

Language in Immigrant America

Exploring the complex relationship between language and immigration in the United States, this timely book challenges mainstream, historically established assumptions about American citizenship and identity. Set within both a historical and current political context, this book covers hotly debated topics such as language and ethnicity, the relationship between non-native English and American identity, perceptions and stereotypes related to foreign accents, code-switching, hybrid language forms such as Spanglish, language and the family, and the future of language in America. Work from linguistics, education policy, history, sociology, and politics is brought together to provide an accessible overview of the key issues. Through specific examples and case studies, immigrant America is presented as a diverse, multilingual, and multi-dimensional space in which identities are often hybridized and always multifaceted.

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To my daughter, Salomé

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Preface

As I completed this book in August 2016, the presidential election campaign in the United States was in full swing, and the derogatory comments about minorities, women, immigrants, and Muslims made by then-candidate Donald Trump were regularly making headlines. The discursive strategy of Trump's campaign was the familiar one of appealing to white voters by depicting all "others" as a threat. He described Mexicans as "criminals" and "rapists," asserted that "Islam hates us," called for establishing a Muslim registry, and frequently invoked an old racist stereotype that equates African American communities with crime-ridden inner cities. This rhetoric drew supporters as well as many outspoken critics. But then, on November 8, Trump was elected president. Soon afterwards, a white supremacist – so-called "alt-right" – conference got under way in a federal building in Washington, DC, focusing on celebrating the election results and on developing strategies for "expanding white privilege," in the words of leading alt-right activist Richard Spencer. And, as I write this preface in February 2017, two major events have taken place. On January 20, Donald Trump was sworn in as the country's forty-fifth president. The very next day, millions took to the streets in the historic Women's March on Washington, both in the US capital and in countless cities across America and the world, to protest the discriminatory attitudes that permeate the new administration's promised agenda, which targets numerous groups, including immigrants, refugees, people of color, Native Americans, Muslims, women, the LGBTQ community, and people with disabilities. This context contrasts profoundly with that invoked by Smedley and Smedley (2011) in the preface to their book *Race in North America*: "Finally, an extraordinary event has happened in American lives. In 2008 Americans elected as president Barack Obama, an African American, which has caused many to query what this means for 'race relations' ... This election has opened up a wide range of opportunities for reflection on the meaning of race and the future of our racial ideology" (xiii). Today, in 2017, many worry that instead of thinking about the future, we will be fighting against going back to a troubled past.

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One of this book's important themes is an examination of discourses surrounding immigration throughout American history, in which new immigrant groups are time and again portrayed as inferior to earlier, now assimilated ones. The language used to denigrate Latinos today is not much different from that used by early-twentieth-century nativists to disparage Southern and Eastern Europeans, or by late-nineteenth-century white Californians who fought to limit contact between their own children and those of Chinese immigrants for fear of physical and moral contamination. Furthermore, the language and policies that today discriminate against or disadvantage groups (such as women, Muslims, or the LGBTQ community) and that undermine public education or equitable access to healthcare have profound implications for immigrants as well, since immigrant issues intersect with those of gender, religion, sexuality, and many others. The fact that a candidate whose campaign was built on the rhetoric of fear of the Other succeeded in winning the presidency illustrates that the xenophobic sentiments and discourses that have historically fed the tensions between "immigrants" and "Americans" continue to be influential today. Just days after taking office, Trump issued executive orders to begin the construction of a border wall with Mexico and to suspend the entry of refugees from Muslim countries hit the hardest by ongoing humanitarian crises, thus revealing the very real consequences of the politics of fear. At the same time, however, the scale of the protests witnessed on January 21, 2017 demonstrates widespread opposition to these xenophobic discourses. In public discussion of current events one also often hears the explicit mention of Trump's racism, xenophobia, and sexism. This moment, perhaps, is another opportunity to confront our mainstream ideologies of discrimination and to meaningfully challenge our institutional prejudices.

This book presents immigrant America as a diverse, multilingual, and multidimensional space in which identities are often hybridized and always complex. It argues that any attempts to define what makes a "true" American that are rooted in exclusion and divisiveness, and in the reification of categories that are in fact fluid and changing social constructs, work only to exacerbate social injustice. They seek to reduce the complexity of the immigrant American experience to simplistic oppositions of "us" against "them," and they ignore the reality of privilege. They also erase the contributions of those who have been historically excluded from full American citizenship, such as African slaves, Asian railway and mine workers, and in recent years, undocumented Latino farm workers who are vilified as "illegals" yet absolutely essential to the functioning of American economy. Though the focus of this book is language, from a sociolinguistic perspective, language never exists in isolation from its social, cultural, and political context. It is through

language that identities are negotiated and enacted, and it is also through language that inequalities are normalized and made to appear as inevitable. I hope that this book succeeds in helping to debunk some longstanding myths about immigrants, to challenge assumptions about American citizenship and identity, and to reimagine the relationship between the categories of citizen and immigrant.

Acknowledgments

This book could not have come to fruition without the invaluable support and input of numerous people. In the first place, I would like to thank my students who over the past six years have taken my course, *Language in Immigrant America*. This book was inspired by and took shape in response to the discussions we had in class and the ideas that these discussions generated. I would also like to thank the community partners in Durham, North Carolina, with whom my students work in the service component of this service-learning course and who make it possible for us to connect class discussions with real immigrant lives, as well as the Duke Service-Learning Program, in particular Kristin Wright, Bonnie McManus, and Joan Clifford. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the role of library archives in my research process, in particular the Rubenstein Special Collections Library at Duke University and the Jagiellonian Library of the Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland. Special thanks go out to Duke University librarians who assisted with bibliographies and special collections, in particular Linda Daniel, Greta Boers, and Elizabeth Dunn.

As this project moved from a proposal to a finished manuscript, my work on it benefited from extensive discussions with colleagues, mentors, and friends. Julie Tetel Andresen provided support and encouragement, as well as numerous practical tips for how to approach writing one's first monograph. Edna Andrews offered helpful comments on the proposal as well as invaluable moral support throughout this project. Both Julie's and Edna's work was also instrumental in influencing my thinking about the nature of language and multilingualism as it relates to this book. I also want to thank my colleagues Thomas Ferraro, Priscilla Wald, and Luciana Fellin for their support and for conversations that contributed to my analysis of immigration and migrant lives.

The inspiration to write this book came partly from the meetings of the Migration, Languages and Cultures Working Group, supported by the Franklin Humanities Institute at Duke, which I co-convened in 2011–2012 with my Duke colleagues Gareth Price, Luciana Fellin, and Hae-Young Kim. I would like to express my deepest thanks to my co-conveners, who helped organize the seminars and stimulate discussions that directly and indirectly influenced the

ideas that inform this book, as well as to all the participants who came to our meetings and contributed to discussions. In addition, I am indebted to the guest speakers whose work had an impact on this book, both in their presentations at the working group meetings and in both formal and informal discussions afterwards; in particular, I would like to thank Anna De Fina and Adrienne Lo. In addition, big thanks go out to Erin Callahan, at the time a graduate student in Linguistics at Duke/NCSU, who was an integral part of the Working Group, whose research on the emerging Hispanic English in North Carolina inspired parts of this book, and whose intellectual input I benefited from in our discussions.

All shortcomings of this work remain, of course, my own.

A separate heartfelt thank you goes out to my colleague, intellectual partner, friend, and husband, Gareth Price. Our ongoing conversations and the inspiration of Gareth's extensive expertise in political sociology, sociolinguistics, and critical discourse analysis have been invaluable as I developed the theoretical approaches underpinning this book.

I thank my wonderful friends, who have helped me keep a healthy mind and a sense of humor, and my daughter, Salomé, who took to making her own books while still in preschool and thus motivated me to finish mine.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my parents, without whose decision in 1987 to leave their lives behind and take their chances in the United States I would not have become an immigrant American.