

# Latinos' Attitudes Towards Spanish and Their Language Maintenance and Shift in South Texas

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**Abstract:** This study conducted among Latinos in South Texas in 2020. The definitions of attitudes, language maintenance and shift have been adopted as the theoretical framework of the research. It investigates Latinos' attitudes towards Spanish and its influence on their language maintenance and shift to English. Quantitative data from 30 questionnaires about attitudes towards Spanish in South Texas and qualitative data from survey questions of 10 respondents were collected. The surveys have been conducted among Latinos of different age, gender and education backgrounds. The results show that Latino's positive attitudes towards their own language help to maintain their language. They believe that Spanish is a very important language and have confidence in the development of the language. However, they have conservative attitude towards the use of Spanish, which shows the language shifting in the community.

## 1. Introduction

South Texas is the region located in the south of San Antonio, Texas. It is the border area adjacent to Mexico and the east is the Gulf of Mexico. There are about 4.67 million people living in this region (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016) [11]. It is estimated that the Hispanic in South Texas accounted for 69% of the whole population in this region while only 32% was the Hispanic in the rest of Texas. A unique example is the Lower Rio Grande Valley, in which both Spanish and English are used by the majority of people in their different aspects of daily communication (Mejías, Anderson-Mejías, & Carson, 2003) [6]. However, the dominant language in this area is still English, as the language used for legislation, regulations, executive orders, treaties, education, federal court rulings, and all other official pronouncements are still English. Latinos still face the problem of language maintenance in this area especially for the second-generation and the third-generation.

Language attitudes can affect the language shift and maintenance among immigrants in the United States (Mejías, A.-Mejías & Carlson, 2003) [6]. It is reported that there are only three places in the U.S. with unbroken Spanish-speaking tradition and one of them is South Texas. However, the United States is still a monolingual dominant society (Barnwell, 2008) [3]. It is of great importance to investigate the attitudes of the residents in South Texas towards Spanish as well as English so as to help understand the language shift and maintenance in this area.

## 2. Literature Review

There are 50.6 million Latinos in the United States, accounting for 16% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016) [11]. The United States is the fifth-largest Spanish speaking country in the world. However, Garcia (2014) [7] concluded that the Latinos are imposed with English by making the Latinos inferior in the society. Spanish is insistently separated from English to preserve the U.S. a monolingual society. Similarly, Mejías, A.-Mejías and Carlson (2003) [6] found out that in spite of the gradual shift from Spanish to English after two generations, the coming immigrants from Spanish speaking countries would slow down the language shift.

### 2.1 Attitudes and Language Shift and Maintenance

According to Baker (1992) [1], a survey of attitudes can reflect the thoughts and beliefs,

preferences and desires in the language community. He proposed that attitudes play the role of measurement which most often and most easily shows the status, value and importance of the minority language. Attitude has repeatedly proven to be a valuable construct in theory and research (Baker, 1992) [1]. Some recognized that attitudes exert influence on language shift and maintenance (Gardner, 1985 [9]; Holmes & Harlow, 1991[7]). However, there are few researches directly focus on the attitudes of the Latinos towards Spanish and English. Language attitude played an important role in language use (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009) [5]. Positive attitudes toward one language often lead to increased efforts to learn the language and higher proficiency in the language (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009) [5].

Ferguson (1996) [2] stated that people's attitudes towards the language use played more decisive role in the language policies than the demographic language distribution and language use. The language attitude is one of the variables used to measure the language maintenance. According to Bradley and M. Bradley (2013) [4], "The crucial factor in language maintenance is the attitudes of the speech community concerning their language." (p.1). Several researchers, Mejias, A.-Mejías, and Carlson (2003) [6] compared the attitudes of the people in the South Texas border toward Spanish and English in 1988 and 2000, and found out that people have continued maintenance of Spanish.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Participants

The 30 participants are all Hispanics in South Texas, consisting of 14 males and 16 females. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 60 ( $M = 22.57$ ,  $SD = 7.8$ ), and the mean age was 22.57. There were 24 participants aging from 18 to 22 accounting for 80% of all the participants while there were only 6 were over 22 years old (See Table 1). The surveys were mainly conducted among the young people in South Texas to know their attitudes toward Spanish.

Table 1 Demographics of The Participants

Variables		Frequency	Percentage
gender	Male	14	46.7%
	Female	16	53.3%
Educational level	High school degree of equivalent	4	13.3%
	Some college but not degree	16	53.3%
	Associate's degree	3	10%
	Bachelor's degree	2	6.7%
	Graduates' degree	4	13.3%
	Missing	1	3.3%
First language	English	14	46.7%
	Spanish	15	50%
	Missing	1	3.3%

#### 3.2 Instrument and Data Collection

The questionnaire for this survey was adapted from Baker (1996) [1], containing 22 items about people's attitudes towards Spanish. The questionnaire includes three groups of questions to measure people's attitudes towards Spanish, the status of Spanish, the Spanish learning and Spanish use. Besides, there are five additional survey questions to help have further understanding of their attitudes towards Spanish. Participants would rate each statement by their level of agreement: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree. The participants' personal background information is also included. Apart from the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire, ten participants volunteered to answer the five additional questions in the survey which provided qualitative data.

#### 3.3 Method of Analysis

The data of surveys were imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 27 (SPSS).

I used *t-test* and one-way ANOVA to analyze the questionnaire. The survey questions were analyzed to explain the questionnaire.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Questionnaire Results

The analysis results showed that generally most of the participants held positive attitudes toward the status of Spanish. For example, 90% participants regardless of their age, gender or educational level, disagreed that Spanish has no place in the modern world. To support this, 90% of participants didn't think it was a waste of time to keep the Spanish language alive in this region. Similarly, 90% agreed on the necessity to preserve the Spanish language. The respondents were confident of the status of Spanish in South Texas as 77% reported to like to see Spanish to be as strong as English in this area and 77% reported that they do not think Spanish will disappear in this region/area. As the participants held positive attitudes towards the status of Spanish, the percentage was comparatively lower concerning Spanish use. When mixing languages, over half of them disagreed on the fact that others would regard me as less intelligent. Although 67% disagreed that you are considered a lower class person if you speak Spanish, we cannot neglect that 20% agreed.

### 4.2 Spanish Learning and Use

Participants held positive attitude towards the status of Spanish. Their attitudes towards Spanish learning were also positive. For example, 90% participants supported that Spanish is a language worth learning. In addition, most of them reported that Spanish should be taught to most students. About 40% of participants held positive attitudes towards the mixing of English and Spanish and believed it was helpful to the maintaining of Spanish in this area. Over half of them held positive attitude toward the use of Spanish and reported that Spanish is essential to take part fully in community life.

As to the mixing use of Spanish and English, nearly half of them agreed that it sounds pretty when speakers mix Spanish and English in conversation. Similarly, most of them were positive about talking in Spanish and English at the same time. However, when asking them whether they prefer to watch TV in English or Spanish, most of them agreed to watch in English. The similar results can be found in the following two statements. For example, nearly 90% reported that they like speaking Spanish. However, only 17% reported they would be taught in Spanish.

### 4.3 Gender, Educational Level, First Language and Attitudes

*T-test* results show that the mean for female group is similar to the male group at the .05 level in the 22 questions, which indicates that there are no significant differences between the female participants and male participants on all the 22 items. The participants with different first languages all held positive attitudes towards Spanish on most of the questions (See Table 2). However, they differ on several questions.

Table 2 the First Language and Their Attitude Towards Spanish

	mean (sd)	Sig.	df	t	Sig(2-tailed)
7					
English	2.71 (1.06)				
Spanish	1.79 (.80)	.21	26	2.60	.015*
11					
English	3.64 (.74)				
		.084	27	2.09	.046*
Spanish	2.87 (1.19)				
21					
English	3.93 (.61)				
		.406	27	-2.87	.008*
Spanish	4.53 (.52)				

Note. \* There is significant difference at the 0.05 level.

The statistical findings of the one-way ANOVA were employed to identify the difference among participants of different educational level and their attitudes towards Spanish. There were no significant differences among the different educational level on the 22 statement, except Statement 16, "It would be hard to study science in Spanish". For the graduate group the mean was 1.50 (*sd* =1.00). The mean for the bachelor degree, the associate degree, some college no degree, high school degree of equivalent were 4.00 (*sd* =1.41), 3.67 (*sd* =1.52), 2.93 (*sd* =.77), and 3.50 (*sd* =.58) respectively. The differences among the means are statistically significant at the .05 level ( $F [4, 24] = 4.09$ ).

## 5. Results of Survey Questions

There are five survey questions in this research which could help to explain and extend the quantitative results. Ten students including 5 females and 5 males volunteered to answer the survey questions. All of them agreed that Spanish is very important. The reason is that there are still a lot of people speaking Spanish in the community. The following Surveyees gave their reasons to the importance of the language. Surveyee 3: "Very important, because we live in a community where there are a lot of people who only speak Spanish". Surveyee 5: "They are very important so as to be able to communicate with others and people of other cultures". Surveyee 8: "Both languages are really important because we are a diversity community".

Although they have consistent view on the importance of the language, their ideas differ when asked how they feel about the mixing of English and Spanish (code-switching) in their community, (home, work and school environment). Only one surveyee was positive about mixing languages in the community. Four participants were against language mixing and thought "It is wrong" and "I don't like when people mix them together." Their reasons are as follows. "I don't think languages should mix, this leads to poor grammar". "I already got used to it but if mix words, but it doesn't sound proper". Even though half of them held neutral positions in the mixing of English and Spanish, half of them thought the language mixing exert positive influence on the community. Surveyee 3: "It is Ok to use both languages as long as people interacting understand and communicate". Surveyee 9: "I don't mind the code-switching of the two languages because I can understand both".

## 6. Conclusions

According to Beaudrie and Fairclough (2012) [10], the proportion of Spanish speakers within an ethnic group influences the language maintenance or loss. The high proportion of Hispanics in South Texas enables it to be one of the three areas in America to maintain Spanish. Bradley and M. Bradley (2013) [4] stated the attitudes of the speech community concerning their language are the crucial factor in language maintenance. These statements were supported in this study that almost all of them in this survey liked hearing Spanish spoken and most of them held positive attitudes towards the status of Spanish. They do not think Spanish will disappear in this region/area. Second, more than one third of the participants held that Spanish is not a difficult language to learn. The positive attitudes towards the Spanish contribute to the maintenance of Spanish in South Texas. However, we cannot neglect that there is to some extent language shift happening.

This study showed there were no significant differences between the female participants and male participants on their attitudes towards Spanish. Through the analysis of the questionnaire and the survey questions, the study revealed that Latinos have positive attitude towards Spanish, especially on the status of Spanish and language learning. They believe that Spanish is a very important language and have confidence in the development of the language. Second, as the schools don't provide Spanish language teaching for them, they have conservative attitude towards the use of Spanish although they think that the children should learn Spanish at schools. Third, their educational backgrounds and their different first languages could affect their attitudes towards Spanish.

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