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Forging an Anonymous Voice in the Spanish-Language Mass Media of the United States

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

FORGING AN ANONYMOUS VOICE IN SPANISH LANGUAGE MASS MEDIA OF
THE UNITED STATES

By

Hannah Artman

A THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
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FORGING AN ANONYMOUS VOICE IN SPANISH LANGUAGE MASS MEDIA OF
THE UNITED STATES

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Most "standardized" languages have a corresponding geo-political center, where the language of society offers a location to the linguistic norms and standards of the language in question. The purpose of this study is to identify the linguistic center for Spanish used in Spanish-language media in the United States. Some have dubbed this neutral accent, "Walter Cronkite Spanish" and argue that it is the discrete "Mexicanization" of the Spanish language (Ahrens 2004). The first is a reference to the legendary anchorman who was one of the first in broadcast media to attempt to eliminate all traces of an identifiable regional accent. The second nickname addresses Mexico's heavy hand in Spanish-language media, as well as its large diaspora living in the U.S. These popular notions have raised the questions, is it possible for Walter Cronkite Spanish to have a geo-political center outside its country of use, in this case, Mexico? Or does a particular region in the United States make claim to a unique dialectal variety of Spanish? Or can we locate it somewhere else entirely?

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The quest for a representative variety of Spanish in the U.S. media has pressured on-air talent to change their habitual speech patterns in order to appeal to a wider, pan-Latin@ audience. Some call it Walter Cronkite Spanish, others refer to it as Mexican, and for others it goes unperceived. Some mass media professionals are obligated to use it, while others refuse. In this project, I attempt to trace and analyze audience reception and perception of a so-called ‘neutral Spanish,’ while locating the geo-political center of this allegedly representative variety. Standard languages have a corresponding geo-political center, where the *lingua franca* of society offers a physical location for the linguistic norms and standards of the language in question. For English in the United Kingdom, one might look to London for a representation of what is considered ‘standard.’ The same could be said about Paris for French in France or Montreal for French in Canada, etc. In the predominantly monolingual Anglophone U.S., where is the geo-political center for Spanish? Is it possibly outside the U.S., in this case, Mexico? By addressing the reception and location of neutral Spanish, I add to the larger discussion of pan-Latin@ identity in the U.S. as produced and received through mainstream mass media.

The notion of neutral Spanish is relatively new; not only in the media, but in academia as well. The present research endeavor addresses this topic through three qualitative methods that focus on the perceptions of Spanish in the mass media: in-depth interviews, street interviews, and focus groups. All of the research was audio and video recorded for a fifteen-minute documentary. Complete versions of the interviews and focus groups have been made available on a public YouTube page so that people may

learn more and engage in discussion. The short documentary combines the visually appealing narratives with the research focus. I chose to use a multi-media format because I believed that this topic would interest many people outside of academia. I found that many of the participants engaged with the subject because I was recording them. Knowing that other people would see these videos made them answer more eloquently, and I exchanged contact information with many of them who wanted to see the completed product. Anyone who is interested in issues of Latin@ identity, media studies, Spanish language usage, dialect contact, or Spanish in the U.S. is likely to find some interest in this topic. A short documentary is a way of visualizing the academic material in an easily accessible and aesthetically pleasing format that enhances the traditional, written format. Since debates about 'neutral' Spanish oscillate between a unifying or homogenizing force of the diverse Latin@ population of the U.S., the video format allows the audience to see the diversity of the participants of this research. They are characters in a lively discussion about Spanish-language media in the United States.

Chapter 2. The Study

A study analyzing Spanish in the U.S. media is necessary for a variety of reasons. Hispanic/Latinos make up about 17% of the U.S. population (US Census Bureau). The population continues to grow with second and third generation Latino families (Pew Hispanic Center). Hispanics are the largest minority in the United States and are often targeted by politicians through mass media in order to ensure votes from Hispanic communities nationwide. Some even speculate that the Latino vote was a key player in the 2012 election, with Obama bringing in 75% of all Latino votes (Foley, 2014). There are popular campaign ads that feature George Bush, Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, or other presidential candidates speaking Spanish and discussing their stances on particular issues that are relevant to Hispanics, such as immigration. The narration of these campaign ads reflects a voice that is intended to be 'neutral', i.e. it is intended to be as inclusive as possible because there is pressure for media talent and public figures to be as prudent and considerate as possible when addressing a particular community or when expressing their own opinion. The integration of Spanish and English language media in the United States makes this even more difficult, because they are attempting to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Regulating and standardizing Spanish-language content in the United States is not an attempt to homogenize or conflate diverse Latin cultures into a manageable demographic, but rather to establish an unspoken code of conduct for media professionals whose ultimate goal is to create a pan-Hispanic product.

From a strictly linguistic perspective, which takes language as an empirical object, standard or non-accented language does not exist, i.e. it is a matter of sociopolitical consensus and individual perception. In *English with an Accent*, Lippi-Green asserts that standard and non-accented languages are a myth. She conducts a study that addresses the popular attitudes toward the idea of a standard language and reveals the popular opinions of a non-accented language belonging to those who are well educated, easily understood by all, and/or control the written or broadcast media (Lippi-Green, 59). Although she defines a standard language as a myth, if the masses understand it to be controlled by the media, then they would willingly accept its use and imagined existence. In terms of its location, she concludes that "It seems that we want language to be geographically neutral, because we believe that this neutrality will bring with it a greater range of communication" (Lippi-Green, 60). Her study focuses on Standard American English but argues that these phenomena are applicable to all languages.

Davila and Rivero argue, "Latina/os' place within the nation is often thought to be not only imagined by the media, but also secured by the media" (Davila and Rivero, 281). In this project, I argue that this true in the use of a linguistic code. How do people perceive this linguistic code? And for purposes of exploring this code that is a phenomenon of global mass media, I randomly surveyed people on the street, organized focus groups, and interviewed professionals who work in the Miami global media industry who are involved in forging this linguistic code. There is considerable disjuncture between what the Spanish-language media is disseminating and what audiences are receiving, what the media defines as neutral and what audiences perceive as neutral. By focusing attention on the Mexican population of the United States rather

than including all diverse Latin@ nationalities and cultures, the audience's first reaction to a generic form of Spanish is that it must be Mexican. I hypothesize that if the U.S. media conflates *Latinidad* with something identifiably Mexican, they do so by language also. I am not arguing that more regionally identifiable voices are not used in U.S. based Spanish-language mass media, those voices do remain in more local markets. Secondly, it depends on the genre. National and international news, documentaries, and TV series are made with idea in mind that they will be disseminated in the global market; therefore, the language used must appeal to the pan-Hispanic target market.

Chapter 3. Methodology

As mentioned, I employed three different qualitative methods for this project: 1) short informal interviews with twenty-five people of diverse Spanish-speaking origins in the streets of Miami on the concept of ‘neutral Spanish’ in the United States (see Figure 2.1); 2) in-depth interviews with professionals who work in the Spanish-language media in South Florida, all of whom were primed on the topic and agreed to schedule an interview; and 3) focus groups with University students and a group of professionals from an architecture company (see Figure 2.2). All of the interviews and focus group sessions were video recorded, with the goal of producing a short documentary. The purpose of creating a documentary was not only to allow my research to extend beyond the academic sphere by making it accessible on YouTube and on the website of the Miami Observatory of Communication and Creative Industries, but also to make it possible to see and hear the participants mimic popular Spanish accents, including the supposed neutral variety in question. In this regard, linguistic performativity was key to the aim of the research, and recordings were the only way to make this possible.

| | |
|--------------|----|
| Cuban | 10 |
| Mexican | 4 |
| Venezuelan | 4 |
| Puerto Rican | 2 |
| Dominican | 1 |
| Ecuadorian | 1 |
| Argentinian | 1 |
| Colombian | 1 |
| Spanish | 1 |
| Brazilian | 1 |

Figure 2.1 Street interviewees by nation of origin.

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Cuban | 3 |
| Second generation Cuban | 2 |
| Ecuadorian | 2 |
| Spanish | 1 |
| Colombian | 1 |
| Venezuelan | 1 |
| Salvadorian | 1 |
| Dominican | 1 |

Figure 2.2 Focus group participants by nation of origin.

There are numerous videos about '*el acento neutro*' on YouTube posted by individuals from Latin America and Spain. These are generally montages of someone approaching random people in the street and recording their initial reaction to the term '*el espanol neutro*'. I chose to replicate these methods within the U.S. context, specifically in Miami, because many of the videos from other countries do not go beyond the social media sphere. Rosina Lippi-Green argues that defining the term "accent" for any language is not important because "in the serious study of accent, the object is not what comes out of one person's mouth, but what the listeners hear and understand" (Lippi-Green, 45). I asked strangers throughout Miami to share their thoughts on the notion of a 'neutral Spanish,' how to describe it, and where it originated. The Spanish-language media industries may be involved in forging a 'neutral' language, but what do their efforts matter if general audiences remain unaware of the phenomenon?

The street interviews suggested that audience members may or may not be consciously aware of a neutral accent, so focus groups attempted to address the unconscious recognition of accents in the media. David Morgan claims that focus groups have an "ability to 'give a voice' to marginalized groups" (Morgan, 133). Hispanics are marginalized in English-language media, but this fragmentation continues along lines of national origin in Spanish-language media because not only do different countries have different accents, but there are highly regionalized accents within each country. Furthermore, media researchers are increasingly using focus groups because they are used "not to identify the dimension of complex stimuli that may have causal power in diffusion, but to examine the everyday ways in which audiences make sense of television" (Lunt, 1996). The first focus group was conducted with four University of

Miami graduate students: one female from Spain, another from Ecuador, a Salvadorian male, and a second-generation Cuban male from Miami. Three were between the ages of 18 and 34 and one was 50. Only one had lived in Miami his whole life; the other three had immigrated during their young adult years. Two came from the Latin American Studies Department and two from the School of Communication. The second group was conducted in an office with six females and one second-generation Cuban male from Miami. The women were from Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba. Four of the individuals were between the ages of 18 and 34 and were interior designers and architects. Three were between the ages of 35 and 49 and held administrative positions at the office. Only one was born in the United States, one female immigrated as a child, and the others immigrated during their young adult years. While the sample size is very small, it is representative of Latino demographics in the United States, especially Miami. Cubans make up only .6 percent of the total Hispanic population in the United States, but they comprise 34% of the total population of Miami-Dade County. Hispanics as a whole comprise 65.1% of the population of Miami-Dade County. The majority of participants in the street interviews and focus groups were of Cuban descent. There were no Mexicans in the focus groups, but two of the in-depth interviews were with Mexicans and there were many participants in the street interviews who were Mexican also. The focus groups provided a unique perspective, but my ability to conduct the discussion in my second language and the sample size are limitations to this research.

I selected a series of six news clips from local and national channels in the United States: three Mexican anchors, two Cuban anchors, and one Venezuelan anchor. The

participants were shown the clips and asked to fill out a table that asked where they thought the news anchor was from and what evidence supported their thinking, focusing on their speech rather than the visual presentation (see Appendix). Clip 1 was a Mexican woman reporting from a local news station in California; clip 2 was a Cuban woman reporting from a local news station in Miami; clip 3 was an Argentinian male reporting from CNN en Español; clip 4 was a Venezuelan woman reporting from a local station in metropolitan Miami; clip 5 was a Cuban male reporting from CNN en Español; and clip 6 was a Mexican male reporting from a national Univision network. After I showed all six clips, participants discussed their opinions. When the conversation started to move towards '*el acento neutro*,' I asked the participants to locate on a map where they believed it came from. We then discussed their answers before concluding the hour-long session.

Finally, I conducted in-depth interviews with Davi Vega (an actress originally from Spain), Liz Evora (a journalist originally from Cuba whom I also used in a clip shown to the focus groups), Adriana Barraza (an actress and acting coach from Mexico), and Elias Campos (an actor from Mexico). The participants from this section were all personal connections and were aware of the topic prior to the interview. Davi has been living in the United States for less than two years and works in restaurants and nightclubs when she is not acting or singing. She was rather successful in Spain, and came to the United States to further her success in a more globally integrated industry. Liz Evora came to the United States from Cuba during her young adult life and attended the University of Miami. She has worked in Miami, Amarillo, and is currently a local news anchor in Tampa. Adriana Barraza is an actress from Mexico who was in the film *Amores*

Perros, and was nominated for an Oscar for her role in *Babel*. She now has an acting studio in West Miami that is dedicated to teaching students how to use a neutral accent. Elias Campos came to the United States as a child, but often goes back and forth between Mexico and Miami for different acting, music, and performance opportunities. These interviews were designed to gather insight from professionals who experience the pressure to use a standard language in their professional lives. Before turning to analysis and discussion, I offer some critical, theoretical perspective on the problem from the field of sociolinguistics.

Chapter 4. A Sociolinguistic Perspective

Classical linguistic theory offers some insight into the location of a language within a societal group. The renowned early 20th-century philologist Karl Vossler argued that: "A language is defended more obstinately the more alive the feeling and the clearer the consciousness that it is a matter of preserving one's own tribal, racial, and national characteristics" (Vossler, 257). Given the large Hispanic population of the United States, Spanish has become an important heritage language in the United States. However, Vossler also argued within the context of the early 20th century that for the French, for example, "through their speech, whatever and however it be, their national character is embodied and realized in what we call the French language" (Vossler, 256). Vossler proposed that the French mind and the French language were one, but clearly this proposal becomes problematic for people around the world who speak French yet do not identify as French (rather, as Quebecois, Algerian, Haitian etc.) The same principle applies to the Spanish-speaking population in the U.S., who largely identify as "Hispanics" and not "Spanish." What is perhaps different, however, is that in the case of French, each of the regions where French is spoken recognizes French as an official language, and therefore offers a geo-political center to French in Quebec, French in Algeria, or French in Haiti. Spanish in the United States has emerged from a history of immigration rather than colonialism; therefore, the dialects of Spanish spoken in the United States have origins throughout Latin America; there is no single, unitary geo-political location for Spanish language norms and standards within the context of the U.S. So where do we look for the center of a standard Spanish as spoken in this country? Is the

center potentially in Spain? Mexico? Or is the United States proffering its own standard variety of Spanish?

Because language is not a static phenomenon, it is certainly plausible that the United States is developing its own form of Spanish, i.e. the Hispanic population is the intrinsic force that defines the space in which the Spanish language is used. As Andrew Lynch asserts, “[I]as demandas de una economía global y la cultura popular, en especial la música y los medios de comunicación, jugarán un papel fundamental en la evolución del español en la vida y el imaginario estadounidenses en el siglo XXI” (Lynch, 78)(the demands of a global economy and popular culture, especially music and the media, will play a fundamental role in the evolution of Spanish in the United States life and imaginary in the 21st century). We are in an unprecedented age in which a minority population is oftentimes a concentrated majority and where migration flows and advanced technologies allow for rapid dissemination of forms, products and ideas (Appadurai 1996, Blommaert 2010). This creates an unforeseen phenomenon of a linguistic minority in the mainstream media that must attempt to unify—in a linguistically homogenizing sense—the diverse Hispanic communities in the production, dissemination, and reception of their product.

The idea of homogenizing languages recalls similar ethnocentric attitudes of colonialism. Irvine and Gal discuss the manipulation of linguistic form in 20th century colonial discourses. These authors claim that the language differentiation mapped out by colonizers was purely ideological and socially constructed because “Western European elites had come to think of language as the least socially malleable and therefore the most

authentic indicator of a speaker's socio-political identity" (Irvine and Gal, 63). These studies are relevant to contemporary issues of language because, according to Woolard and Schieffelin, nationalist ideologies that originated through colonialism have become the dominant model in the world today (Woolard and Schieffelin, 60). They argue that this ideology of language "structures state politics, challenges multilingual states, and underpins ethnic struggle to such an extent that the absence of a distinct language can cast doubt on the legitimacy of claims to nationhood" (Woolard and Schieffelin, 60). While the absence of a distinct variety of Spanish in the United States may not threaten the nation's legitimacy, it problematizes the multilingual and multiethnic situation of Latin@s in the United States, and therefore their place in both English-language and Spanish-language media. Woolard and Schieffelin go on to argue that in the particular case of Spanish in the Peruvian Andes, many Quechua speakers who learn Spanish as a second-language hypercorrect their speech due to stereotypes associated with particular dialectal varieties (Woolard and Schieffelin, 61). Several respondents in my study claimed that a neutral accent was sometimes "forced" because there are speakers of particular Spanish dialects who naturally weaken syllable-final /s/ (e.g. *las costas* pronounced as [lah kohtah]) or who do not pronounce other consonants, thus it was obvious when someone hyper-corrected those elements of speech. These beliefs and perceptions serve to construct social hierarchies, which "qualify or disqualify speech varieties from certain institutional uses and their speakers from access to domains of privilege" (Woolard and Schieffelin, 63). As we will see, this is particularly true for the process of standardization of Spanish in the United States because, according to the participants of my study, some accents are privileged or underprivileged in the media.

How do speakers know what is considered ‘standard’ in terms of rules and restrictions in a language? Furthermore, how is a standard form conceptualized at the societal and political levels? Peter Trudgill describes two processes: dialect levelling and dialect mixture. Dialect levelling is “the leveling out of differences between one dialect and another”, whereas dialect mixture is when elements of particular dialects integrate in situations of language contact (Trudgill, 155-157). Many of the respondents in my study described neutral Spanish as a “mixing” process of all the Spanish varieties that have come together in the United States. Dialect leveling would resemble more what the media conceptualizes as neutral, which is an accent devoid of regionalisms.

James Milroy explains that languages “are believed by their speakers to exist in standardized forms, and this kind of belief affects the way in which speakers think about their own language and about ‘language’ in general. We may say that speakers of these languages live in standard language cultures” (Milroy, 530). Milroy’s greatest concern is the common misconception by speakers of these cultures that ‘standard’ is equated to prestige rather than uniformity (Milroy, 531). This means that speakers of the non-standard variety are often stereotyped as coming from lower socio-economic classes or marginalized ethnic groups. He argues that “[i]t is also important to note that in the history of standardization, uniformity of usage has been *institutionally* imposed on a pre-existing convergent state of language” (Milroy, 533-534). This is crucial to the role of language in media studies because the mass media has the power to reach across cultural, linguistic, and geographical boundaries. If the Mexican accent is being institutionally imposed as the standard variety, it is also being imposed as the most prestige variety, rather than the most uniform.

Milroy does not specifically discuss the media, but instead offers a more interesting framework for studying the power of language in the media. He compares the standardization of language to the standardization of any other object, for example, factory-made soup cans or currency systems. A standardized object has greater economic value because “[s]tandardization leads to greater efficiency in exchanges of any kind” (Milroy, 544). According to Milroy, standardization has no end result, and is a process that must always be maintained (Milroy, 542). Perhaps the reason we have such difficulty defining and locating neutral accents may be because languages and language varieties are always changing. In terms of the present research, the generic variety of Spanish would have the purpose of making products more accessible and appealing to Spanish-speaking immigrants from every nation, and throughout Latin America and Spain through the reach of global media.

Latin America is an extremely diverse region, in terms of cultural and linguistic differences. Therefore, languages are often culturally and politically charged when spoken outside of their geographical boundaries, which is often the case in our globalized and digitized modern world. Kathryn Woolard frames this idea in her discussion of authenticity and anonymity:

Con frecuencia, el habla se interpreta no solamente como un índice asociado a un grupo particular, sino como una representación icónica, como una imagen natural representativa de la esencia de un tipo de persona. Para beneficiarse del valor de la autenticidad, uno debe “sonar” como el tipo de persona valorado; uno debe reproducir los tonos y los matices del hablante auténtico (Woolard, 132). (Frequently, speech is interpreted not only as an index associated with a particular group, but also as an iconic representation, as a natural image representative of the essence of a type of person. To benefit from the value of authenticity, one must “sound” like a type of valued person, one must reproduce the tones and nuances of the authentic speaker).

Otherwise referred to as a ‘voice from somewhere’, the authentic voice must come from a concrete location in the mind of the speakers, whereas the anonymous voice comes ‘from nowhere’ (Woolard, 131-133). These two categories are not mutually exclusive, as she explains that hegemonic languages base their authority in anonymity:

Cualquier visión dominante en la esfera pública moderna se representa por lo tanto como una verdad natural y objetiva, como un saber socialmente neutral y universalmente disponible y no como un discurso propio de algún individuo o grupo concreto” (Woolard, 133)(Any dominant vision in the modern public sphere is represented therefore as a natural and objective truth, as a socially neutral knowledge, universally available, and not as a discourse belonging to an individual or a particular group).

From this perspective, it is reasonable to assume that for a mass media company to establish its authenticity in a global market, it would attempt to use an anonymous voice. Media producers are trying to sell their product to as many people as possible, so a voice must be ‘neutral’ enough to attract a diverse audience, but not so homogenized that it compromises credibility. The question is whether the voice is truly anonymous, or if the audience still associates certain stereotypes with its speakers, as Paredes and de Silva Mendes argue.

Chapter 5. Anonymous and Authentic Voices in the Mass Media

Davila and Rivero warn that a commodified and homogenized perception of Latin@s can disempower and mask the marginalized realities of their communities (Davila and Rivero, 274). Davila and Rivero support this idea and claims that the term “Latino” is a catchall term that leads to misperceptions of US Latin@s and Latin Americans (Davila and Rivero, 334). He also argues that the reason the mass media has failed to attract Latin@ audiences is due to “an inability to understand basic aspects of the core of Latin@ identity- that is, the multiplicity of perspectives and identities that Latin@s have, and the practical activity that is used to resolve these perspectives into a coherent worldview” (Davila and Rivero, 329). He defines Latin@ media as a form of alternative journalism. Alternative journalism “has essentially become a journalism for an elite, highly educated class whose politics are left of center but who are most often not part of a minority or marginalized group” (Davila and Rivero, 325). Not only are Latin@s marginalized in the larger conception of the United States national identity, but by using a homogenized variety of Spanish that may privilege particular Latin@ nationalities over others, Spanish-language media further fragments the social hierarchy of U.S. Latin@s within their own linguistic community. For Spanish-speakers who do not speak the dialectal variety preferred by the mass media, it is implied that their Spanish may not be ‘good enough’ for broadcast television because the ‘standard’ variety is oftentimes perceived as the ‘prestige’ variety.

The fragmentation of Latino cultures is more palpable in Miami than in other cities because there are so many different nationalities that come together. Aranda and

colleagues argue that “[a] general sense of cultural inclusion for Latinos can be found, but because it coexists with other forms of immigrant differentiation, cultural inclusion does not lead to pan-immigrant or even pan-Latino political solidarity” (Aranda et. al, 296). The United States’ immigration policies and contexts of reception have influenced the cultural exclusion of Latino communities. “Wet Foot, Dry Foot” was implemented in favor of immigrants from Cuba, and while this policy and others offer Cubans less support in the 2000s than what the original waves of pre-Mariel Cuban immigrants received, their immediate legal status still stands in stark contrast to anti-immigrant policies like SB1070 in Arizona targeting Mexicans and (through racial profiling) other Latin Americans with particular phenotypes who may merely ‘look’ illegal. While immigration may not be a top-button issue for second- and third-generation Hispanics, it is still present in the collective identities of the diverse Latino communities. Further in their study Aranda and colleagues claim that:

“immigrants in our study perceived the content of Spanish-language television news as based upon the national cultures and concerns of Cubans in local media and Mexicans for national television, Spanish-speaking immigrants who were not from Cuba or Mexico experienced displacement when watching because of the differences between the dominant culture codes and news topics embedded in US Spanish-language television and their informal interests and homeland cultural norms” (Aranda et. al, 301).

Frequently, participants in my study who work in Spanish-language media mentioned the concept of the diversified Spanish-language market. Many mentioned the ease in which Mexican accents worked in the national media market, while local programming would make more sense if catered toward a particular community, whether it be Cubans in Miami or Puerto Ricans in New York. However, they did not indicate any displacement when watching. They oftentimes stereotyped individuals or the neutral accent itself

without any hard evidence, but did not appear to be disconcerted or distracted by language usage. The focus groups were comprised of mixed nationalities so it is likely that this affected their responses. If the groups had been composed of people from same national or dialect origins, it could have created a more comfortable environment where participants shared a common linguistic and cultural background and felt they could voice their opinions about other nationalities. All of the participants in my study were of legal status as well, so differences between communities that stem from immigration policies would be of little importance.

Moran argues “The condition under which authenticity is created does not necessarily guarantee how it is read by audiences. From the production, authenticity is defined as elements that stereotypically appeal to Latina/o viewers, but it is this version of mediated Latinidad that is under scrutiny and negotiated at the point of reception” (Moran, 10). The purpose of this study is to deconstruct this mediated version of Latinidad. When discussing the authenticity of a pan-Latin@ voice, it is important to distinguish the genres and medium (radio or TV) because of how market considerations, audience proximities and media logics differ.

Laguna studied Cuban radio in Miami and argues that it was a tradition brought from the island that remains strong today. He analyzes the distinct forms of humor and references to Cuban national identity on local radio in Miami. However, globalization has created a space for “glocalized products that expand on cultural traditions in a transnational setting (La Pastina and Straubhaar, 275). Therefore, radio stations that once catered to one Hispanic community are part of a transnationalizing process, like *La Kalle*

which is now 98.3 the Mix: “The station’s pronounced aim to ‘reflect’ Miami’s diversity has meant rallying programming around a pan-Latino/a marketing strategy that acknowledges ethnic difference in a manner that celebrates the varied aspects of an imagined, singular, Latina/o culture” (Laguna, 15). The study of radio is outside the scope of this study, but is important to understand its role in establishing a voice within the Latino community, that the market for a medium shifts and this can affect the language aspects utilized. In the case of genres, it is that audiences have multiple proximities and expectations, among them expectation for news and entertainment genres such as telenovelas.

In Casillas’ study of Immigration Patrol Alerts on the radio, she claims that “Spanish-language radio, with its anonymous and veiled presence, serves a critical and mass role other media do not. Television and film do not have the same intimate capability as sound to broadcast live, impulsive notices with little to no trace of existence” (Casillas, 820). Casillas argues that radio is often heard in construction zones, kitchens, streets, or neighborhoods. Many of the listeners do not have control over programming because the radio is permeating through the sound waves of their everyday activities. Listeners may receive the messages without knowing who, or what was disseminating the content. Casillas describes this as broadcastings’ “ability to link and synchronize a biographical moment or experience across great geographical distances” (Casillas, 46). All media outlets have the potential to do so, but the disembodied voice of radio is an important distinction from broadcast television, for example.

According to participant Adriana Barraza, a neutral accent is founded in the need to dissociate viewers from sensitive images that they are seeing, in the case of documentaries. The news often covers morbid and tragic stories, so an anonymous voice would avoid injecting any bias to an already sensitive subject. Liz Evora agrees with this idea when she discusses establishing credibility with the viewers and not distracting them from the message. Schudson claims that in news production, “Journalists are avowedly and often passionately committed to their ideology of dispassion, their sense of professionalism, their allegiance to fairness or objectivity as it has been professionally defined” (Schudson 274). However, if accents carry culturally, socially, and politically charged identifiers, it is impossible to remain objective in an industry comprised of such fragmented communities.

Although my study did not reveal the tension between representations of Hispanic communities, Aranda and colleagues argue that, “consumption of US commercial media in Spanish was thus a jarring experience that reminded them of their distance from home and subordinate status in Miami’s Latino hierarchy... Entertainment formats that communications research suggests are more culturally compatible, such as telenovelas, seemed more accepted” (Aranda et. al, 302). This falls in line with theories of cultural proximity, in that viewers prefer content most closely associated with their own culture (Barrera and Bielby, Pastina and Straubhaar). The melodramatic format of telenovelas makes it easy to traverse and blur cultural boundaries to make a more globally appealing product, to make a product more culturally proximate to as many cultures as possible. Pastina and Straubhaar identify the elements of this format as the shareability of “common values, images, archetypes and themes across cultures that permit programs to

flow across cultural boundaries” (Pastina and Straubhaar, 278). The actors in my study revealed that a neutral accent was necessary and understood for creating a believable storyline, so that actors from different nationalities could come together to construct a pan-Latin product. Believability in the entertainment industry is relevant to our discussion of anonymity and authenticity. Moran notes that: “Professionals hope that their products are perceived as authentic because it is assumed that creating an authentic product or experience will lead to consumers choosing the authentic product over one that is perceived as less so” (8). Although viewers know that “family” from a telenovela isn’t real, that doesn’t mean producers shirk any attempts to make them seem as real as possible. As soon as one product becomes more believable and authentic than the others, the production standard has been raised for all other producers in the industry.

There is little literature specifically focused on the concept of neutral Spanish, but there is a great deal that discusses various aspects of a pan-Latin@ identity. The construction of a pan-Latin@ identity is associated with the transnationalization of media products in the United States, whether they are newscasts or telenovelas. Perhaps the most popularly cited work is that of Arlene Davila, who specifically discusses the phenomenon of ‘Walter Cronkite Spanish.’ She defines it as an “unaccented, generic, or universal Spanish, supposedly devoid of regionalism or of traceable accent, which is generally believed to be the most effective medium for campaigns reaching the entire market” (Davila, 114). According to this definition, we can reasonably infer that this accent is a result of dialect leveling rather than dialect mixture. She discusses that in her ethnographic research, many individuals claimed that the neutralization of Spanish in the media is synonymous with a “Mexicanization” of the language. Given the higher

proportion of Mexicans in the U.S., this would accurately reflect the national-origin identity of the majority of their viewers. She explains that Caribbean Spanish "is hardly heard in generic advertisements and is highly edited in the Hispanic networks' programming" (Davila, 115). Her research focuses on news, and she discusses the cases of Cristina Saralegui and Ray Arrieta from Univision, who struggled with their Caribbean accents in the U.S. Spanish media. In an interview, Cristina Saralegui recounted the struggle to maintain her identity when she apparently told Univision: "I do the show with a Cuban accent or I don't do the show. I'm too old to change my accent, *chico*. I'm a feminist and a Cuban. Take me as I am." (Balmaseda) However, for individuals like Michel Brown and Ray Arrieta, actors in national Spanish-language media, their linguistic identities were challenged. Brown remembers, "I had to learn to shorten my vowels and keep my voice from going up and down. They want a universal, completely plain Spanish" (Melia).

In 2010, Mexicans accounted for 63% of the Hispanic population of the United States. After Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans were the largest Hispanic demographics accounting for 9.2% and 3.5% respectively (Hugo Lopez and Dockterman). Why is Caribbean Spanish less accepted if they, too, comprise a large portion of the Hispanic population? What is it about Mexican Spanish that makes it allegedly more identifiable? In an article in *The Washington Post*, Ahrens reported that Telemundo argues that Mexican Spanish "hits a middle ground between Colombian Spanish, which the network considers too fast and terse, and some Caribbean accents that are too slow and imprecise" (Ahrens). This is a highly subjective comparison of regional accents, but nonetheless it is being encouraged or enforced by the Spanish broadcast

superpowers, Univision and Telemundo. Davi and Liz were content and understanding about the fact that they needed to change their accents. Davi said that Mexican Spanish would be the most neutral, and Liz said the Colombians had the most neutral Spanish. However, the Mexicans I interviewed were much more dismissive about a neutral Spanish being 'Mexican.' Both Adriana and Elias have been discriminated against in the industry because they are from the country with the most 'neutral' accent. They made it clear that the Mexican accent and the neutral accent are "completely different," and that a neutral accent does not come from any particular country. According to them, there exists a neutral accent separate from *accepted* accents like Colombian or Mexican.

Davila and Rivero argues that a collective 'Latinidad' is a powerful transnational marketing tool "being Latina/o frequently means being Mexican, a point that speaks to the particular location of Latin(o) Americans within the US national imaginary" (Davila and Rivero, 312). In addition to capitalizing on a neutral language, the telenovela industry in particular has become transnational in its settings and themes. Mato challenges the idea that globalization is deterritorializing and homogenizing, while others, like Mayer claim that it has negative effects on Latin@ identity. While Mato discusses Miami's role in the transnationalization of telenovelas and says that Miami "offers products that are not identified with a specific culture or country, which is related to the importance of these industries in the production and circulation of a transnational "Hispanic" or "Latin" identity" (Mato, 432). Miami has become an important city for telenovela production not just because it offers a transnational setting, but also because of its diverse population. With the most diverse Latino population in the United States, it is understandable why Miami would use a neutral accent more than California, for example, whose Latin@

population is predominantly Mexican and Central American, or New York which is primarily Caribbean.

Similar to Mato, Mayer explains that "the global exportation of telenovelas deterritorialized them by forcing producers to make locations less identifiable and to develop themes that would resonate with audiences regardless of geography" (Mayer, 481). Her studies also show that Latin Americans prefer telenovelas from their country of origin, which would lead us to believe that a neutral Spanish is not effective in the mainstream media. Vivian Barrera claims that, "when local or national culture is not available on certain types of television, audiences tend to prefer cultural products which are as close to their own culture as possible" (Barrera and Bielby, 8). She also claims that the respondents in her study were able to identify regional accents and slang. Although Barrera and Mayer acknowledge the transnationalization of Spanish-language media, their studies ultimately imply that a neutral form of Spanish would have little or no effect on the viewers. Elias honestly stated that he did not think the viewers noticed the accents and that only cinema fans or people who really focus on "little things" would notice. Many of the participants also said that it does not affect their viewing preferences. One woman noted that some people might be offended by "obvious" accents from particular countries, but that it was "stupid." The only time that accent seemed to become a problem for viewers was when it was so "forced" as to distract the viewer potentially.

The focus groups in the present study targeted the reception of a neutral accent only in television news broadcasts. Therefore, many participants were unable to eliminate visual cues from their language appraisals. Pastina and Straubhaar explain that: "Cultural

proximity is based to large degree in language. However, besides language, there are other levels of similarity or proximity, based in cultural elements per se: dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humor, ideas about story pacing, music traditions, religious elements, etc.” (Pastina and Straubhaar, 274). Although the focus group participants were instructed to focus exclusively on language, many cited appearances and mannerisms that attributed to where they believed that person was from. Pastin and Straubhaar continue that “people make sense of media first through a set of identities based on space and place: local, regional, national, and global. Very related are identities based on culture and language, which tend to be linked to space and place” (Pastina and Straubhaar, 276). If audiences prefer content relevant to their own national identity, then cultural proximity is an indicator of successful transnational products. Instead of offering transnationalism as a metaphorical and borderless concept, Casillas encourages us to think of media as “site” for transnationalism (Casillas, 58). She claims that “Latinos ‘locate’ themselves in the United States through listening to Spanish-language broadcasts; listening, in this sense, reconfigures the audience as part of larger, multiple communities” (Casillas, 55). Media as a location for transnational processes will also be discussed further in the paper.

Chapter 6. Analysis and Discussion

The professionals I interviewed offered a consistent description of neutral Spanish. However, the street interviews revealed that not very many people know what neutral Spanish is, and the focus groups' reactions suggested that even though audiences may be able to detect the phenomenon of neutral accent, they do not refer to it explicitly as such. The varied responses about where a neutral accent comes from combined with the experiences of professionals in the field lead us to believe that the authentic and anonymous voices of Latinos in the United States cannot be easily located on a map.

During the street interviews, many individuals did not recognize the term 'neutral Spanish' out of context. They had never heard of this concept and I could not explain it to them without biasing their response. I soon found out that people may not have known "neutral Spanish" by its name but that they knew it when they heard it or it was described to them. One respondent laughed and shook his head at my questions until he finally realized, "Oh! Entonces el español neutro quiere decir cuando alguien habla español y no se puede saber de donde viene esa persona" (Oh! Then neutral Spanish is when someone speaks Spanish and you don't know where the person is from). Focus groups were a way of adding context in order to get a valid perspective after being shown an example as well as getting an elicited reaction to different accents in the media. The focus groups provided a unique perspective to my research because they were not directly being asked about the term, but rather being *shown*. In both focus groups, I did not have to ask about a neutral Spanish because the participants themselves brought the phenomenon up. I first showed the clips and, afterwards, each participant reacted to them. I asked what they had

written and then I told them where the person was actually from. The participants became much more engaged when I incentivized the discussion by turning it into a sort of guessing game. Some of them graded their own papers, and marked “X’s” on the ones they had guessed incorrectly, without my instruction to do so. In the first focus group, there was a stronger trend in their responses. For each response, at least three of the four participants guessed the person’s nationality correctly. Even though it was difficult for them to point out particular phonological aspects of the person’s speech, they stated that they “just knew.” The other focus group was more difficult to analyze, because there were more people and greater diversity in responses.

After we began discussing the neutral accent in particular, the participants expressed similar opinions on which clips they would identify as “neutral.” In the first focus group, the accents that they identified as neutral corresponded to the responses that most of them had guessed incorrectly, which were clips number two and number five. Clip number two was a clip of Liz Evora reporting from a local news station in Miami, and clip number five was of CNN en Español anchor Ismael Cala. There were some individuals in the second group who also claimed that clips two and five were the most neutral, even though most of them guessed those reporters’ national dialect origins correctly. They described those accents as “forced” and “not natural.” Although some of the individuals from the second group identified the Mexican-background reporters as the most neutral (clips one and six), when looking at both focus groups collectively, clips two and five conveyed the most neutrality to participants because of the overall difficulty of identifying the speaker’s dialect origin.

Interestingly, the clips that were described by the participants as “neutral” were both of Cuban individuals. Cubans dominated the make-up of the two focus groups, and Cubans are the largest Hispanic demographic in Miami, so we should assume that the participants would be very familiar with the Cuban accent. In the second group, with at least five of the seven participants guessing the speaker’s origin correctly, there was still the affirmation that the accents were “neutral” and that clip number five in particular was the hardest to identify. One of the females from the second group mimicked the neutral accent by sitting up in her chair and talking in a way they she described as “serious” and professional.” For clip number two, of a young Liz Evora when she was a journalist in Miami, both focus groups described her accent as “forced” and one participant indicated that she would even change the channel if it were on TV because “no estaba prestando mucho atención a lo que estaba diciendo” (I wasn’t paying much attention to what she was saying). A second-generation Cuban woman from the second focus group asserted that “si ella es cubana, tiene un acento forzado. El cubano no habla así” (If she is Cuban, she has a forced accent. Cubans don’t talk like that).

If the respondents from the street interviews did not define neutral Spanish as an accent devoid of all regionalisms, the most common perception was that it was a “mix of everything.” While this response was not exactly what the media defines as neutral Spanish, it was closer than the participants who thought I was talking about the phenomenon popularly called ‘Spanglish’. They oftentimes said the United States, specifically Miami, was the birthplace of neutral Spanish, whether they described it as ‘Spanglish’ or not. However, the most commonly volunteered answer for a geographic location of neutral Spanish was Mexico. Many people were very confident of their

answers and ability to detect languages, as one woman told me: “Si es de Univision, yo sé que es mexicano” (If it’s from Univision, I know that it is Mexican). Participants who claimed that there was no such thing as an unidentifiable accent also tended to say that neutral Spanish existed more in the streets. Those who stated that it existed in the media did not admit to accents affecting their programming preferences; as one man remarked, “la idea es igual, el mensaje igual, pero el idioma es diferente” (the idea is the same, the message is the same, just the language is different).

One downside to any study that engages the participant directly, especially one that adds the pressure of the camera, is that some participants may tend to answer how they assume the interviewer wants them to answer. Sometimes, they may have provided a more articulate response because they were being filmed. On one occasion, since I am an Anglo-background American, a participant referred to neutral Spanish as “el español suyo” (your Spanish), despite my repeated attempts to reformulate the question. Another participant said “Para mí, el español neutro no es la izquierda ni la derecha, no es el masculino ni el femenino” (For me, neutral Spanish is not on the left nor the right, it’s not masculine nor feminine), while many others simply described it as “a badly spoken Spanish.” Most of the participants who offered a definition closer to that of the media professionals interviewed for this study described it as a “basic” Spanish. These outliers give us an idea of how important a neutral accent is to the consumer because it allows us to see the disjuncture between what the media defines as “neutral” and what audiences are actually receiving.

The content of in-depth interviews conducted with media professionals reflects the interdependence of an anonymous and an authentic voice, as explained by Woolard. I argue that the neutral accent is a mediation between an authentic and anonymous voice and that in order to attract the widest possible audience, one must successfully capture the perfect balance of these two, depending on the market and genre. This balance between a ‘voice from somewhere’ and a ‘voice from nowhere’ also introduces other issues, such as belonging. Davi explained to me that in order to learn how to speak neutral, “La única manera que había es desde que me despertaba hasta el momento que me acostaba- hablar neutro. Es como hace un ‘clip’ y nunca, nunca volver a hablar mi acento que a veces me resulta extraño”(The only way there is, is that the moment I wake up until the moment I go to bed, speak neutral. It’s like making a ‘clip’ and never, never return to my accent which sometimes is weird to me). Three of the professionals whom I interviewed claimed that they had changed their way of speaking so much that family and friends noticed the difference. Adriana, the most experienced participant, warned that: “Cuando aprendemos el acento neutro, tenemos que tener cuidado de no parecer que no pertenecemos” (When we learn the neutral accent, we must be careful to not seem like we don’t belong). Neutralizing one’s speech in Spanish-language media involves a certain degree of desired anonymity, but if one’s speech becomes *too* anonymous, their place within the Hispanic community is contested.

Liz and Adriana shared the importance of authenticity in speaking with a neutral accent. When discussing the nuances of being a journalist, Liz said: “Si dices algo mal, queda en ti. Nadie se pregunta si fue un productor que lo decía... No. Todo el mundo dice la presentadora Liz Evora dijo... Entonces tú tienes mucho cuidado con las cosas

que dices o no dices y la forma en lo que dices porque quieres que todo el mundo te entienda” (If you say something bad, it stays with you. Nobody asks what the producer said... No. Everyone says the presenter Liz Evora said... So you have to be very careful with the things that you say and don't say and the form in which you say them because you want everyone to understand you). She also explained that a neutral accent is not necessary, but that extremely marked accents interfere with a journalist's credibility. Adriana theatrically confirmed this when she gave an example of a documentary narration about animals in the wild. She said the line “the lions appear on the savannah” over and over using different intonations that conveyed different tones. She explained a neutral voice is necessary here because it is not easy for the viewer to receive the images appearing before them without detecting any sort of bias associated with the speaker's national dialect origin. Liz noted that for younger generations of newscasters, a neutral accent is necessary if they do not have established credibility or knowledge. If someone already has established credibility and knowledge, a neutral accent is not necessary. This would explain Cristina Saralegui's situation because she was already established in the industry before her accent became an issue. Moreover, she is a talk show host so there is no need to establish anonymity as a news reporter would. It is evident that Spanish-language media in the U.S. grounds its legitimacy in the anonymity of its speakers because a certain degree of anonymity is desired in order to be credible, but if the voice becomes too distant, the audience cannot connect with the speaker because they are not authentic enough.

Each product differs in its balance of authenticity and anonymity (see Figure 5.1). For products targeted toward a global market, the maximum amount of authenticity and

anonymity is desired. Telenovelas may require less anonymity than the national news or documentaries, because the characters are expected to have a personality contextualized in a particular time and place, whereas news and objectivity standards carry the need for greater anonymity. Perceivably “forced” accents, like those described by the focus group participants, are anonymous because the viewer has difficulty identifying the speaker’s origin yet at the same time they lack sufficient authenticity and thus potentially distract viewers from the message. The voices of talk shows and local niche market programming do not require the same degree of anonymity as products targeted toward the national or global market. More authentic voices are accepted and expected in the talk show genre and at local levels.

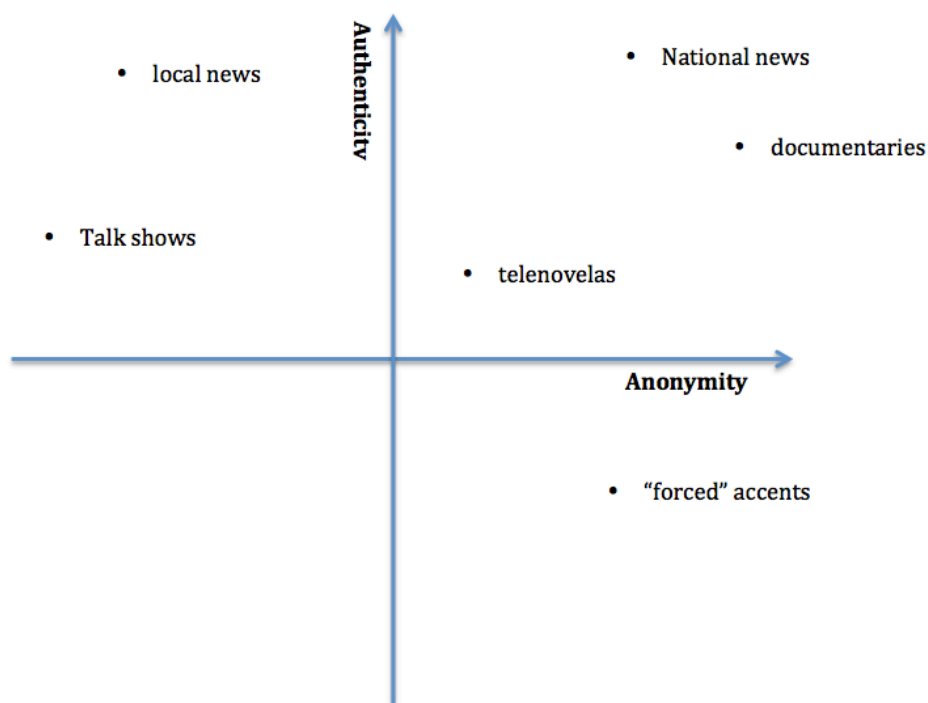


Figure 5.1 Degrees of authenticity and anonymity in media products based on genre and market.

Acceptance is another byproduct of the negotiation between authenticity and anonymity. An ‘unacceptable’ accent could be Mexican, Colombian, or some other depending on the local market. While a Cuban accent might prove successful in Miami, it is reasonable to assume that it would not in the national media. For example, the most commonly cited person in the media who uses a neutral accent was Cuban-origin actor William Levy. Many street participants, as well as Liz and Adriana, mentioned him. Liz remarked that when he appears on telenovelas or Mexican talk shows, “habla muy neutral y muy apropiado y pronuncia todo. Pero cuando le están entrevistando y está afuera de su casa es otra persona totalmente” (He speaks very neutral and very appropriate and pronounces everything. But when he is interviewing and is outside of the house, he’s another person totally). An Internet article discussing Cuban actor William Levy’s allegedly neutral accent explains that: “las telenovelas de Miami abordan temas universales, tienen un elenco variado y actores que hablan con acento neutro” (El comercio) (The telenovelas of Miami take up universal themes; they have a diverse cast and actors who speak with a neutral accent). Levy does not only use the neutral accent when playing certain roles, but he uses it during some interviews as well. The choice to ‘neutralize’ his speech on all media platforms supports the idea that his Cuban accent would not be as widely accepted in the media. Genre proximity and familiarity with Mexican-origin media cultural products may serve to condition expectations for a neutral accent, thus making Mexican accents more acceptable.

When I asked Davi to offer a geographical location for neutral Spanish, she said it could be Mexico because of the large population of Mexicans in the United States. Davi

claims that she always speaks in a neutral accent, so I asked her if that meant she was speaking with a Mexican accent. She then clarified that Mexicans “pueden hablar un poquito más con su acento, que aquí no se ve mal. Su acento está bien para trabajar pero si vienen de otra nacionalidad le piden acento neutro” (they can speak a little more with their accent, because here it’s not seen as a problem. Their accent is fine for work but if they are of another nationality they ask them to use a neutral accent). Adriana offered a similar explanation. She affirmed that:

“es muy bien aceptado el acento de los mexicanos... Eso quiere decir entonces que cuando ven un producto mexicano, no lo van a cambiar. No lo desconocen. Sin embargo a lo mejor, si escuchas un acento que no conoces, por ejemplo cualquier otro acento de Hispanoamérica- a lo mejor si no les gusta, lo cambian”. (The Mexican accent is very well accepted, that’s to say that when they see a Mexican product, they’re not going to change it. It’s not unfamiliar to them. But perhaps if you hear an accent that you don’t know, for example whatever other accent of Latin America, perhaps if they don’t like it, they change it).

Elias very candidly stated that “sé que piden acento neutro pero sé que está bien si llego hablando mexicano” (I know that they ask for a neutral accent but I know that it’s fine if I show up speaking Mexican). He went on to explain that most people identify Mexico and Colombia as the “location” for neutral Spanish, but affirmed that he did not agree. According to Elias, the reason people think that the ‘neutral’ comes from Mexico or Colombia is because actors from those countries can perform for an audition without using a neutral accent because “they can get away with it.” Liz chose Colombia as a geographical location of Spanish, but her experience in Texas supports the previous ideas put forth by the other professionals. Liz recalled that when she worked for a local Univision affiliate in Texas, they knew she was not Mexican but they told her that: “hablas de una forma que la audiencia no van a sentirse alejados de ti” (you speak in a

way that the audience is not going to feel distant from you). This perhaps implies that for the local market in Texas, although the audience was primarily Mexican, a neutral accent was acceptable. Overall, the observations of the professionals indicated that Mexican and neutral accents are *not* one in the same, and that neither is necessarily preferred, but rather, accepted.

Chapter 7. Conclusions

When trying to locate a ‘neutral’ variety of Spanish in the United States, at least four different geopolitical possibilities emerged from the present research. The most frequent responses were Mexico, followed by Colombia, the United States (Miami in particular), then Spain. However, much of the data lead me to infer that a fifth location exists beyond the confines of geography. The fifth location of a neutral Spanish in the United States is the mass media. Paredes and da Silva Mendes argue that “the very tools of globalization, symbolically embodied on the Internet, make possible the paradox of the preservation and international diffusion of local cultures and language, previously confined to their physical geographical limits” (Paredes and da Silva Mendes, 8). The variation within the responses from the street interviews does little to evidence a geographical origin of neutral Spanish. More interesting are the responses from the professionals whom I interviewed.

I also conclude that neutral Spanish emanates from the mass media for economic reasons as well. Many respondents claimed that the accents they usually hear in the media depend on the market. Adriana Barraza even leaned forward at one point of the interview to point at the camera and affirms that: “Es una cuestión del mercado. Si nosotros trabajamos en la media, conocemos el mercado y podemos saber adonde llevar nuestro producto de la mejor manera” (It’s a question of the market. If we work in the media, we know the market and we can know where to take our product in the best manner). In the introduction to her book, Davila argues that both English- and Spanish-language media “contribute to essentialist associations between Latin@s and language

that are more informed by economic considerations...than by the linguistic practices of contemporary Latin@s” (Davila, 6). This ties in with the earlier idea of a ‘linguistic market,’ in which the standardization of language is driven by its relative economic value. However, when I asked respondents where one could hear neutral Spanish, I was surprised that many said “in the streets” as opposed to the media. Respondents in the street interviews said that it is a phenomenon unique to Miami because of the diverse Latin@ population that needs to understand each other. We cannot use these opinions to put forth the idea that neutral Spanish comes from Miami or the United States, because all the respondents who said this only attributed neutral Spanish to mutually intelligible words and phrases. Liz noted that living in Miami was the best practice for learning neutral Spanish, because she has friends from all over Latin America. Assuming that neutral Spanish is a result of dialect leveling, and based upon what we know from actors and journalists in the field, neutral Spanish also includes pronunciation and intonation, not merely “Spanish words that are universal for every single country”, as one of the street interviewees said. Conversely, respondents who emphasized accents more than words tended to say that a neutral Spanish existed in the media. Respondents who indicated both phonological and lexical or discursive aspects of neutral Spanish tended to say that it existed in the media as well as the streets.

The focus groups indicated Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Spain, Central America, and the United States as possible locations for neutral Spanish. Like the street interviewees, those who chose Spain stated that it is where the language originated, and those who chose the United States said it is a “melting pot.” One participant stated that: “en los medios de comunicación mexicanos se han infiltrado mucho los argentinos. Por

ejemplo en CNN, tienen que ser colombianos o argentinos” (in the Mexican media, the Argentines have infiltrated a lot. For example, on CNN, they have to be Colombian or Argentinian). He described these varieties of Spanish as “clear” and “professional.” There is surely nothing linguistically more or less “professional” in either of these two varieties as opposed to others; the matter is determined by what consumers grow accustomed to hearing and perceiving as ‘acceptable’ or ‘neutral’ (Milroy, 544). Spanish-language media were previously dominated by Mexican-origin content, but are now opening up to a wider audience. Television production is no longer concentrated in one country, with the U.S., Colombia, Argentina, and Chile becoming more involved. Adriana noted that most documentaries are produced in Argentina and Chile, by Argentinians and Chileans. Therefore, it is perhaps no surprise that the participants of the present study tended to choose Mexico, Colombia, and Argentina as locations for neutral Spanish, because majority stakeholders will influence the norms and standards of the industry.

Another important theme that emerged was the importance of neutral Spanish to viewers. None of the participants observed that a particular accent affected their viewing preferences. Only one participant in the focus groups said that she would not want to watch someone speaking with a “forced” accent (the example of Liz Evora). Another participant in the same focus group said she did not understand Cubans when she arrived in Miami. This implies that dialect leveling happens because of the need to communicate with speakers of other varieties, but one’s voice should not become so anonymous as to lack authenticity (i.e. reflect a national dialect origin of some sort). All other participants said that while a neutral accent is sometimes noticeable, it does not really distract them

from the program, although it might distract other people. Elias described the preference for a neutral accent as sometimes a “type of hatred”. He recalled a situation in which a casting director told him to “get rid of” his Mexican accent “porque yo sé que para mucha gente está bien, pero para mí no” (because I know that for many people it’s fine, but not for me). Davi stated that she is completely content with using a neutral accent, because if one casts a family for a telenovela with a variety of actors from different countries, it must be believable. Although I found no instances of explicit disdain for particular accents, the fact that participants said that it exists for “other people” suggests that there are stereotypes circulating within Miami, and most likely across the rest of the U.S. as well. A neutral Spanish attempts to mitigate those stereotypes.

The neutral accent is used by media professionals to place their product in the global market and to appeal to a pan-Latin@ audience. The most successful products employ a voice that strikes a balance between authenticity and anonymity, and is particular to the product’s genre and market. Although the neutral accent attempts to be a ‘voice from nowhere,’ U.S. Latin@s attempt to place it *somewhere*, i.e. Mexico. Although the mass media appears to be moving away from a Mexican-dominated industry, many Latin@s are conscious of the underrepresentation of the true diversity of Hispanics in the United States.

APPENDIX A

Chart filled out by focus group participants. The English translation and country of origin were not given to the participants.

| | <u>¿De dónde es esta persona? (Where is this person from?)</u> | <u>¿Cómo lo sabes? Sea específico. Si habla con algún acento, ¿como lo describiría? (How do you know? Be specific. If they speak with an accent, how would you describe it?)</u> |
|---|---|---|
| <u>Clip #1</u> <u>(Mexico)</u> | | |
| <u>Clip #2</u> <u>(Cuba)</u> | | |
| <u>Clip #3</u> <u>(Argentina)</u> | | |
| <u>Clip # 4</u> <u>(Venezuela)</u> | | |
| <u>Clip #5</u> <u>(Cuba)</u> | | |
| <u>Clip #6</u> <u>(Mexico)</u> | | |

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