“I would like to speak more Spanish”: language attitudes and behaviors amongst Hispanics

Laura Guglani
The University of Southern Mississippi

Abstract

This article reports the findings of a recent study which examined Spanish language maintenance attitudes and behaviors in a Hispanic church community in Western New York. The participants were 48 church members, aged 13 to 80 years. Data come from participant observation and ethnographic interviews.

The investigation compared participants’ attitudes toward the Spanish language with their behaviors—their opinions and beliefs about the importance of maintaining Spanish as compared to what they actually did to maintain the language. It then explored participants’ awareness of and feelings around the issue.

Findings indicate that older, foreign born Hispanics held positive attitudes toward Spanish language maintenance and engaged in behaviors that were supportive of language maintenance. Younger US-born Hispanics and those who immigrated at a younger age held positive attitudes toward Spanish language maintenance but tended to engage in behaviors that were detrimental to language maintenance.

Introduction

In the US intergenerational language shift is a well-documented trend. Immigrant families typically lose their native language within two to three generations of arrival, adopting English as the dominant language (Alba et al.; Appel and Muysken; Fishman; Veltman).

The study of immigrants’ language maintenance attitudes and behaviors is fundamental to helping us understand this shift. Immigrants who hold positive attitudes toward the native language and routinely engage in specific behaviors that support language maintenance will be more likely to maintain it, while those who hold less positive attitudes or engage in less supportive behaviors are likely to lose it.

This article explores the topic of language maintenance attitudes and behaviors in the context of one particular Hispanic community. It looks at the findings of a recent study which examined participants’ attitudes toward the Spanish language and their behaviors and compared the two—participants’ opinions and beliefs about the importance
of Spanish as compared to what they actually did to maintain the language, for instance speaking Spanish at home, teaching Spanish to their children, using Spanish language resources (print, media, etc.). It then probed participants’ awareness of and feelings surrounding the issue.

Investigating Hispanic immigrants’ language maintenance attitudes and behaviors is vital to not only understanding the underlying causes of language shift but also to helping improve future language maintenance outcomes. It is essential in informing the ways that we, as researchers and educators, can best support Hispanic families in raising bilingual children, thus linguistically enriching our society.

Overview of literature

Research suggests that attitudes amongst Hispanics toward the Spanish language are overwhelmingly positive (García et al.; García and Otheguy; Hidalgo; Mejías and Anderson; Mejías, Anderson and Carlson; Mejías, Anderson-Mejías and Carlson; Otheguy and García; Ramírez; Silva-Corvalán; Velázquez; Zentella). Yet, although Hispanics express positive attitudes toward Spanish and a desire to maintain the language and pass it on to their children, these attitudes do not always translate into actual language maintenance efforts (Otheguy, García and Roca; Silva-Corvalán; Velázquez; Zentella).

What accounts for this mismatch between attitudes and behaviors? It is clear that generation of immigration plays an important role. While first generation Hispanic immigrants may speak Spanish at home as a result of linguistic necessity or convenience, progressive generations of immigrants typically acquire strong proficiency in English, often at the expense of Spanish (Veltman).

Given this circumstance, it is not surprising that the language maintenance attitudes and behaviors of first generation immigrants tend to differ from those of second and subsequent generation immigrants. Research suggests that language maintenance attitudes vary somewhat between immigrants of different generations while language maintenance behaviors vary significantly. In a seminal investigation in this area, Silva-Corvalán observed differences between her Group 1 subjects, who came to the US after age 12, and her Group 2 and 3 subjects, who were US born or came to the US before age 12. In the latter groups (2 and 3), she found somewhat less positive attitudes toward Spanish, a “sharp reduction of Spanish language use” (222), and a lack of commitment to work to maintain the Spanish culture and language.

Rumbaut, in his analysis of US immigrants of various nationality backgrounds, describes key differences in attitudes toward ethnic identity and native language use according to generation of immigration. When asked to self-identify ethnically, nearly 50 percent of 1.5 generation immigrants identified as their country of origin (i.e. Mexican, Filipino, etc.), as compared to 40 percent of 1.75 generation immigrants, 25 percent of 2.0 generation immigrants, and less than 9 percent of 2.5 generation immigrants. A similar pattern emerged with regard to minority language use: about half of 1.5ers said
they spoke the minority language very well, as compared to one third of 1.75ers, about one fourth of 2.0ers and nearly one tenth of 2.5ers.

Mejías, Anderson and Carlson observed a difference in language maintenance attitudes according to generation of immigration, as well. Overall, the desire for Spanish language maintenance was found to decline for later generations; that is, first generation immigrants held the most positive attitudes toward maintenance, while each progressive generation held less and less positive attitudes. In addition, a pattern of divergence with respect to particular attitude domains emerged between first and second generation immigrants as compared to subsequent generation immigrants (third, fourth, fifth). For instance, in their 2000 study, the first and second generation subjects valued Spanish more for emotion and for use with family and friends, while the fourth and fifth generation subjects were likely to view the language less sentimentally and more instrumentally (Mejías, Anderson-Mejías and Carlson). Likewise, in her two-generation study of Spanish language attitudes and use, Hidalgo reports that parents expressed slightly more positive attitudes toward Spanish and used the language more often than their children.

Of central importance to Spanish language maintenance are the decisions made by the family regarding the use of Spanish and English in the home. These decisions are sometimes referred to as family language policy: “explicit and overt planning in relation to language use within the home among family members” (King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry 907). The three dimensions addressed in family language policy are language beliefs or ideologies (language attitudes), language practices and language management (language behaviors, any intentional interventions made to influence language practices) (Spolsky). As the heads of household, parents typically have the greatest influence in shaping family language policy, although some research suggests that children’s attitudes and practices are influential as well (Fogle and King; Spolsky; Tuominen). Spolsky points out that, in immigrant families, children may take advantage of their parents’ weaker social status as first generation immigrants in order to dictate the language of the home.

Two important factors that influence the degree of success of the family language policy are parental ‘impact beliefs’ (De Houwer) and consistency. ‘Impact beliefs’ are parents’ beliefs about their ability to impact their children’s language use—the extent to which they feel capable of and responsible for doing so. Parents who feel empowered and feel a strong sense of responsibility in shaping their children’s language behaviors are more likely to experience success than those who feel less capable or responsible. Also essential to the success of the family language policy is the consistency with which it is implemented. Research suggests that parents’ consistency in their own language use and responses to their children’s language use is a major factor in achieving favorable language outcomes (i.e., King, Fogle, and Logan-Terry; Pan; Lanza; Takeuchi). Parents who stick to their language policy on a daily basis are most successful, while those who are less consistent or tend to modify the policy in response to their children’s preferences are less successful.
The present study extends the current body of research by providing data on the language maintenance attitudes and behaviors of one particular Hispanic community located in Western New York State, which is comprised primarily of Puerto Rican and Dominican immigrants of different generations of immigration. In addition, it offers deeper insight into the topic by investigating participants’ level of awareness of and feelings related to their attitudes and behaviors. Understanding participants’ feelings around the issue is of particular importance to Spanish language maintenance, as these feelings set the tone for the creation and implementation of family language policy. Parents who feel capable and responsible for passing on the Spanish language to their children will be more likely to establish and consistently carry out an effective family language policy, resulting in favorable Spanish language maintenance outcomes for their children and the broader Hispanic community.

Methodology

The community

The data presented here come from a larger study, which examined Spanish language maintenance in a Hispanic church community (see Guglani). The study was conducted over the course of two years in Iglesia hispana de Cristo, a Spanish-speaking immigrant church community in Elizabeth, New York. Elizabeth has a population of nearly 220,000 (U.S. Census Bureau) and is located in Western New York State. Hispanics make up 13 percent of the total population and are the third largest group after Whites (48 percent) and Blacks or African Americans (39 percent).

*Familia del Cristo* is a protestant church (denomination Disciples of Christ) located in an inner-city, working-class neighborhood with a high concentration of Hispanics. The congregation is made up of approximately 100 adults and their children; most are first- or second-generation immigrants of Caribbean descent.

The Iglesia is led by Colombian pastor Pablo Mendoza, a monolingual Spanish speaker, and church services are given entirely in Spanish. The church is a tightly networked community—church members have multiple connections to one another through family relations, intermarriage and friendship. Thus, the Iglesia is a natural linguistic community, providing a context in which the members’ native language, Spanish, has a high status and clear purpose as the language of the religious domain. It is, thus, a favorable environment for the study of Spanish language maintenance attitudes and behaviors.

Data collection

A family friend, who is a prominent member of *Iglesia hispana de Cristo*, introduced me to the congregation. The study took an ethnographic approach, seeking to faithfully describe the way of life of this particular group (Lévi-Strauss), particularly with respect to its language maintenance attitudes and behaviors. The data collection methods included participant observation, the gathering of fieldnotes and ethnographic interview.
The study began with six months of participant observation. The purpose of this time period was to allow participants and I to naturally get to know one another and develop relationships before engaging in any sort of formal interview. Through participant observation, the researcher acts as a member of a community in order to get to know that community, participating in its activities to learn about its culture (DeWalt and DeWalt). As a part of the church congregation, I participated in many of the ways a new member would participate. I regularly attended Sunday worship services and a home bible study group. I served as a teacher in the Bible School, attended church meetings, dinners, prayer groups, evangelistic events, special ceremonies, birthday parties, picnics, a fast, a talent show, a wedding reception and a funeral, offered translation, car rides home, assisted in kitchen clean-up, and met for coffee or dinner with church members in their homes or nearby restaurants. When I began approaching the participants to schedule interviews, many looked slightly confused and took a moment to recall that I had to do that “project thing.” These reactions reaffirmed that I had, in fact, developed a comfort level with the members of the Iglesia, who saw me as a fellow church member and friend.

The core method of the investigation was ethnographic interview. Spradley describes two fundamental elements of the ethnographic interview: developing rapport, so that the informants (participants) feel comfortable talking about their culture, and eliciting information, through which “both questions and answers must be discovered from informants” (84). Ethnographic interview was selected as the core methodology, because it allowed participants to openly discuss their language maintenance attitudes and behaviors in their own words, providing a richer, more authentic data set than that of traditional sociolinguistic survey. Interviews were arranged by inviting participants to take part in the study during the social hour following the weekly Sunday church service. Interviews took place in cafes, public parks, and participants’ homes and were recorded on audiotape with the permission of the participant. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. The most common format was the single family interview, including husband, wife, and any children aged 13 or older; some single-participant and larger group interviews were also conducted. Interviews were conducted in English and/or Spanish, according to participant preference.

A questionnaire was used as a roadmap. However, interviews were participant-centered and open-ended, encouraging participants to speak freely with minimal interruption.

The sample

The sample was made up of 48 participants who were 13 to 80 years old. All were members of Iglesia hispana de Cristo. In terms of nationality, 54% were Puerto Rican, 25% Dominican, 2% Puerto Rican and Dominican, 15% Colombian, and 4% US American. With respect to socioeconomic status, two-thirds of participants were working-class, one-quarter was middle-class and 6% were upper-middle class.

Participant age was classified according to age group. The age range for each group was determined based on church age categories and the objectives of the study.
Four age groups were delineated. However, the present discussion will focus primarily on two age groups, Adults I (age 26-36; N=17; also referred to as younger parents) and Adults II (age 37-55; N=18; also referred to as older parents), because all parents in the sample are part of these two groups. Parents play perhaps the most important role in language maintenance, because they are essential to the generational continuity of the minority language (Wölck), passing it along from their parents to their children.

Data analysis: Qualitative and quantitative

The analysis procedure took a mixed methods approach. Qualitative data were used to generate hypotheses. These hypotheses were then tested through quantitative statistical analysis.

First, interview transcripts were coded and analyzed via thematic content analysis. Holsti explains that content analysis involves the coding of data according to categories for the purposes of hypothesis testing. In this study, the categories were recurring themes discussed in the interviews. Data were coded according to theme and subsequently according to sub-theme. Themes included ‘societal status of Spanish in the United States’, ‘role of Spanish in the church’, ‘maintaining Spanish in the home and educación (proper parenting)’, ‘motivations for speaking Spanish’, ‘language use at home’, ‘language maintenance efforts’, ‘resources in the home (Spanish/English language)’, ‘awareness of language maintenance attitudes and behaviors’ and ‘feelings related to language maintenance attitudes and behaviors’. Based on the themes and sub-themes that emerged, hypotheses were generated related to the following research questions:

1. Will participants express positive attitudes toward Spanish in US society, in the church and/or at home? Will their attitudes vary according to age or generation of immigration?
2. Which particular motivations will participants have for Spanish language maintenance?
3. Will participants engage in behaviors that support Spanish language maintenance? Will this vary according to age or generation of immigration?
4. Will participants’ behaviors be consistent with their attitudes?
5. Will participants be aware of their language maintenance attitudes and behaviors? How will participants feel about their language maintenance attitudes and behaviors?

The hypotheses were then tested through statistical analysis. First, the range of possible options or responses for each hypothesis was determined and each option/response was assigned a numerical value. For instance, for research question 1, the following hypothesis was generated: ‘older participants will express more positive attitudes toward the status of Spanish in the United States than younger participants’. For this hypothesis, the variable ‘societal status of Spanish in the United States’ was coded on a 0 to 2 scale, where 0 indicates ‘Spanish should be valued less in US society’, 1 indicates ‘Spanish should be valued somewhat more in US society’ and 2 indicates ‘Spanish should be highly valued in US society. It should be valued as much as English’. Then, the variable ‘age’ was coded on a 1-2 scale as follows: 1 for ages 26-36 and 2 for ages 37-55.
The numerically coded data were analyzed through cross-tabulation in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Cross-tabulation establishes the extent to which one variable is associated with another. For the abovementioned example (hypothesis for research question 1), the association between attitudes toward the societal status of Spanish in the United States and age group was tested.

In exploring these questions, it is critical to note that language maintenance attitudes and behaviors do not exist within a vacuum in the home or even community context. Undeniably, the larger sociopolitical climate exerts a powerful force in shaping these attitudes and behaviors and in influencing the choices parents and children make with respect to language usage in the home.

In the US context, intense assimilatory pressures have motivated immigrants to surrender their native languages in hopes of becoming fully American or attaining the “American dream.” Historically, even groups with favorable demographic characteristics and strong institutional support, such as Germans, Jews, Poles, Italians and French immigrants, have lost their native languages within two to three generations (Veltman). Today this trend continues (Veltman), shaped by both historical forces and the current sociopolitical climate, in which anti-immigrant rhetoric and legislation threaten immigrant communities’ civil and linguistic rights and freedoms.

English-only groups, such as English First, ProEnglish, and US English, inc., have advocated legislation to make English the official language of the US and prohibit the use of languages other than English in public affairs and bilingual education has been undermined as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act and anti-bilingual education legislation in states such as California, Arizona and Massachusetts. These policies are generally fueled by “ethnic paranoia” (Crawford), in particular the belief that “…Spanish is taking over in the U.S.A.” (62).

In Looking Like a Language, Sounding Like a Race, Rosa explores the intimate relationship between race and language in the US, pointing out that decisions regarding language use are far from neutral, and are often influenced by racially-constituted perceptions of language use. Linguistic choices and practices, he argues, are fundamentally shaped by hegemonic colonial ideologies rooted in the European vs. Other distinction (3), leaving little space for shades of race or language use as an authentic part of the American cultural tapestry. Because prevalent narratives regarding Hispanics “often frame language shift from Spanish to English as a sign of progress” (2), it is no wonder that many Hispanics feel compelled to shift away from the Spanish language; adopting English becomes one means of eliminating difference and improving chances for advancement in US society.

Findings

Overview

In the Iglesia hispana de Cristo community attitudes toward Spanish are highly positive in all domains, although the attitudes of younger parents are somewhat less
positive than those of older parents. There is a clear divergence within the community with respect to language maintenance behaviors. While older parents engage in behaviors that are supportive of Spanish language maintenance, younger parents often do not. Both older and younger parents are aware of their language maintenance attitudes and behaviors. For many younger parents, the inconsistency between their positive attitudes toward Spanish and their failure to engage in behaviors that support language maintenance is a source of guilt. Other younger parents believe that teaching Spanish is desirable, but not an essential parenting responsibility.

In order to explain these differences and contextualize the findings, it is important to consider some fundamental differences between older and younger parents with respect to generation of immigration and language dominance. Most younger parents are 1.5 or subsequent generation immigrants, having been born in the US or arrived before age 13. Older parents, in contrast, are first or 1.25 generation immigrants, having come to the US at age 13 or older. The majority of younger parents (71%) are English dominant or monolingual. On the other hand, all older parents (100%) are Spanish dominant, monolingual, or balanced bilingual. These differences undoubtedly influence the language maintenance attitudes and behaviors of the two groups.

**Attitudes**

On the whole, participants’ attitudes toward Spanish are overwhelmingly positive. They believe that the Spanish language should be highly valued, maintained, and promoted in all contexts: in society, the church, and the home. In addition, participants often expressed that there are specific motivations that promote maintaining or relearning Spanish within their household. Younger parents’ attitudes are somewhat less positive than older parents’ attitudes.

**Status of Spanish in the United States**

Attitudes toward the rightful status of Spanish in US society and opinions regarding bilingualism are by and large highly positive. The majority of participants feel that the Spanish language should have a high status in the United States. Over three-quarters believe that Spanish should be considered as valuable as English. In addition, the majority of participants say that bilingualism should be an essential skill—that all Americans should be bilingual.

Younger parents’ attitudes about the status of Spanish in the US are somewhat less positive than are older parents’ attitudes. Eighty-nine percent of Adults II participants feel that Spanish should have a high status and be considered as valuable as English, as compared to 59% of Adults I participants. Some younger parents commented that, while they feel that Spanish should have a high status, they believe English should have a more prominent role in the US. Several also mentioned that the availability of Spanish-language services should be considered a benefit, but not a mandatory policy or expectation.

**Role of Spanish in the church**
Attitudes toward Spanish language maintenance in the church domain are positive overall. When asked which should be the language(s) of the *Iglesia hispana de Cristo*, 98% of participants said that Spanish should be used in all formal contexts, including ceremonies and official business. In all other informal church contexts and in the children’s Bible school, the congregation is divided: slightly less than half of participants prefer Spanish-only usage in these settings, while slightly more than half prefer bilingual (Spanish/English) usage.

The majority of participants say that they favor the precedence of Spanish and Hispanic culture over English and American culture in the church. In addition, 98% say they would support the introduction of Spanish language classes given by the church, which would provide Spanish language instruction.

Younger parents are generally less supportive of a Spanish-only church than are older parents. Half (50%) of older parents prefer a Spanish-only church, as compared to just 18% of younger parents. A large majority (82%) of younger parents prefer a bilingual (Spanish/English) church. Participants express similar opinions regarding the children’s Bible School program. Half (50%) of older parents prefer a Spanish-only Bible School program, while the majority of younger parents (71%) prefer a bilingual Bible School program.

Both groups’ attitudes are similar with respect to the role of Spanish and Hispanic culture and the introduction of Spanish language classes. Both younger and older parents favor the precedence of Spanish and Hispanic culture over English and American culture in the church. Likewise, both say they would overwhelmingly support the introduction of Spanish-language classes.

*Maintaining Spanish in the home and educación*

On the whole, the church community believes that maintaining Spanish in the home is extremely important. Ninety-eight percent of participants commented that maintaining Spanish at home is an important or desirable goal.

Furthermore, the majority of participants feel that teaching Spanish is part of *educación*, proper parenting. *Educación* differs from the English concept ‘education’ in that it includes not only intellectual education, but also moral, social and cultural education. It encompasses parental responsibilities in child-rearing, especially teaching moral values, discipline, politeness, basic life skills, and cultural norms. Nearly three-quarters of participants said that teaching Spanish is an essential part of *educación*, rather than an optional parenting decision. When asked if teaching Spanish should be a shared responsibility with the community or the responsibility of parents alone, a majority (nearly 70%) believe the latter—that it should be the parents’ responsibility exclusively.

Participants’ attitudes toward intergenerational cultural and language transmission are positive. All feel that transmitting Hispanic culture to the next generation is important, and most (75%) that transmitting the Spanish language is equally important.
When these variables are examined according to age, younger parents’ attitudes are slightly less positive. Older parents are much more likely to view teaching Spanish as an essential part of educación than are younger parents. While an overwhelming majority (89%) of Adults II participants thought that teaching Spanish in the home was a fundamental part of educación, only half of Adults I participants agreed. All Adults II participants believe that teaching the Spanish language is the responsibility of parents exclusively, as compared to just under half of Adults I participants. Many younger parents believe that the responsibility should be a cooperative, communal one: 41% of younger parents felt that the responsibility should be shared by parents and the church and/or school.

Likewise, younger parents are somewhat less concerned with Spanish language transmission vis a vis cultural transmission than are older parents. All (100%) of Adults II participants believe that transmission of the minority language and culture are of equal importance, as compared to just 50% of Adults I participants. The remaining 50% of Adults I participants say that transmission of Hispanic culture is more important than transmission of the Spanish language to the next generation.

Motivations for speaking Spanish

Participants’ attitudes related to their motivations for speaking Spanish are supportive of language maintenance. Each participant who discussed specific personal motivations for maintaining or relearning Spanish offered two or more reasons. The following integrative and instrumental motivations were mentioned: membership in a Spanish-speaking church, Spanish-speaking family members, cultural identity, Spanish language maintenance of their children, educational/professional goals, missionary work abroad, and general travel abroad.

Younger parents often cited specific motivations for maintaining or relearning Spanish. All Adults I participants who discussed the topic reported that family was a major motivator and nearly all (all but 2) also cited the church.

When giving their testimony (personal story of how they came to be a Christian), many of these younger parents underscored the influence of the church in helping them to learn or relearn Spanish. Their comments reflect the important role the church has played in providing both an incentive for developing their language proficiency and a model of Standard Spanish. In the Iglesia community, the oldest members are Spanish monolinguals, such that younger parishioners must speak Spanish if they wish to communicate with them. Christian, 28, explains it this way, “You know everyone there speaks Spanish, so you’ve got no choice but to speak Spanish. It helped me a lot...When they [Spanish-speaking church members] start speaking, it clicks into you and [it’s] like “Oh, I remember,” and you just remember how to speak.”

Marelys and her sister, Janisa, both US mainland-born Puerto Ricans, were raised in a home in which English was the dominant language. Both recount that they were initially apprehensive of attending a Spanish-speaking church. However, with time, they say that they have come to feel accepted and comfortable and that their Spanish has
improved dramatically. Janisa now increasingly speaks Spanish with her mother and Marelys has had the opportunity to practice her language skills at work with her Spanish-speaking customers. Little by little Marelys has been able to overcome her nervousness and speak with greater fluency. She says, “I breathe, I calm down, and I start speaking and it just comes...The more practice I get, the better I do.”

Being part of Iglesia hispana de Cristo has also helped Alice López and her husband, Guillermo, strengthen their Spanish language proficiency. Alice says that, while she had developed basic literacy in the language, it was only after becoming a member of the church that her spoken Spanish began to improve. Guillermo, who grew up speaking primarily English, struggled to a greater extent with learning the language. However, his Spanish has improved remarkably—so much so that he decided to run for church office. Guillermo was elected to the Church Administrative Board where he serves as President.

Many younger parents also mention that their children are a primary motivation for maintaining Spanish at home. Thirty-one-year-old Jerrely, mother of five, says she believes it is her responsibility to be a linguistic model for her children so that they grow up speaking Spanish. She is anticipating a family visit to Puerto Rico this summer and says that she needs to speak more Spanish at home in order to prepare her children to communicate with their relatives on the island: “That’s why I gotta start speaking Spanish now, so at least they understand [the] basic[s].”

These comments reflect a high value for the Spanish language and convey sincere appreciation for the positive influence the church has had in helping these younger parents to develop their Spanish language proficiency. By improving their Spanish, these younger parents can also serve as models for others in the congregation.

Behaviors

Older and younger parents differ markedly in their language maintenance behaviors. Older parents tend to engage in behaviors that are supportive of Spanish language maintenance, while younger parents do not routinely engage in these behaviors. Younger parents demonstrate a greater degree of English language use and less Spanish language use at home, have made fewer language maintenance efforts and have fewer Spanish language resources in their households than older parents.

Language use at home

Language usage in the home is one of the most important factors in minority language transmission—the more the language is used, the more likely it will be transmitted to the children. The home language use of older parents differs dramatically from that of younger parents. Spanish is spoken in all Adults II homes. Eighty-three percent of older parents say that mostly or only Spanish is spoken at home and no older parents report speaking mostly or only English. Conversely, in the homes of younger parents, English is the dominant language. Fifty-six percent of Adults I participants
report that mostly or only English is spoken at home and 44% report that only English is spoken at home.

Recall that the majority of parents believe that teaching Spanish is an essential part of educación, proper parenting. However, not all of the parents who expressed this belief actually speak Spanish in their own homes. It is clear that older parents tend to be more consistent than younger parents. Nearly all Adults II participants (94%) who said that teaching Spanish is an essential part of educación speak mostly or only Spanish at home. On the other hand, less than two-thirds of Adults I participants who said that teaching Spanish is an essential part of educación do the same.

Language maintenance efforts

Language maintenance efforts are defined here as intentional efforts made by parents or heads of household to support the maintenance of Spanish, i.e., speaking Spanish at home, reading to children in Spanish, providing Spanish language resources, regularly interacting with monolingual Spanish-speaking relatives, etc. Participants were asked if they made any such efforts that they felt were successful in maintaining Spanish at home.

Older parents say that they have made such efforts to maintain Spanish in their homes, while the majority of younger parents say that they have not. All (100%) of Adults II participants reported that they have made efforts that they feel are successful in maintaining Spanish at home. Over half (53%) of Adults I participants said that they have not made efforts that they feel are successful in maintaining Spanish at home.

Resources in the home

Resources in the home include print, web, multi-media or other resources that can be found in the home in Spanish or English, for instance, the Bible, devotional guides and other books, newspapers, magazines, TV, movies, DVDs, music, radio, CDs, internet, computer programs, videogames, family notes and lists, and voicemail/answering machine messages.

Older parents have significantly more Spanish language resources in the home than do younger parents. All (100%) of Adults II homes have Spanish language resources. Just over one-fifth of older parents’ homes have mostly Spanish resources and the majority (78%) have both Spanish and English resources. Younger parents, on the other hand, have more English language resources. Fifty-six percent of Adults I homes contain mostly English resources.

Consistency between attitudes and behaviors

These findings reveal that older parents’ language maintenance attitudes are generally consistent with their behaviors—they hold positive attitudes toward Spanish language maintenance and engage in behaviors that support it. Younger parents’ attitudes, however, are often inconsistent with their behaviors. Younger parents express
positive attitudes toward Spanish language maintenance, yet do not routinely engage in behaviors that support it.

**Parent reactions: Awareness of and feelings related to language maintenance attitudes and behaviors**

Participants are clearly aware of the inconsistency between language maintenance attitudes and behaviors that exists amongst younger parents. A large majority (88%) said that they have personally observed this inconsistency between attitudes and behaviors in their church community.

Both younger and older parents discussed the issue and offered a common explanation: *vagancia* ‘laziness; a lack of effort or attention to an endeavor’. They say that the reason why parents do not engage in language maintenance behaviors is that they are simply being lazy or not making the effort they should to teach their children Spanish.

In fact, older parents, including the pastor, sometimes criticized the parenting of younger parents, commenting that younger parents are not providing their children proper *educación*, failing to teach them important values and skills, including Spanish. For instance, Eliseo, 40, remarks:

> [Es] el trabajo de los padres solos—ellos tienen que enseñar a sus hijos que la lengua es importante, que la iglesia es importante, que Dios es importante, que respetar a los otros seres humanos es importante. Ésas son las cosas que no están haciendo.

> [It’s] the job of the parents alone—they have to teach their children that the [Spanish] language is important, that the church is important, that God is important, that respecting other human beings is important. Those are the things [younger parents] aren’t doing.  

Younger parents are acutely aware of the inconsistency between their attitudes and behaviors. While the majority feel an obligation to establish a family language policy that includes the regular use of Spanish at home, most acknowledge that they have not been successful in doing so. Many parents expressed strong feelings of guilt around the issue and blamed themselves for not teaching their children Spanish. Jerrely, 30, says, “I speak English all the time in [Elizabeth, NY], and that bothers me because I would like to speak more Spanish cause of my kids. But I’m not doing it.” María Cristina similarly comments that her children are “losing their Spanish” as a result of being raised in an English-speaking home. When asked how she feels about this, she replies with regret, “It doesn’t make me feel that great, no. I don’t know—I can say that maybe I kind of like gave up in a sense, in a way.”

These feelings of guilt are undoubtedly intensified by the pressure younger parents feel from the pastor and older members of the congregation to teach their children Spanish. Yet, given that the majority (71%) of younger parents are themselves English dominant or monolingual, it is logical that they would feel most comfortable speaking English at home. Thus, as younger parents explain, speaking Spanish requires a deliberate and prolonged effort that seems completely overwhelming and almost impossible. Younger parents have taken different approaches to establishing a family
language policy that includes the regular use of Spanish at home, but have generally experienced limited success. María Cristina says that she sincerely wants to speak Spanish with her children and has attempted to do so, but the outcome has been disappointing:

We’ve tried. I’ve tried sometimes. I’ve said, “Okay, today we’re only going to speak Spanish.” I tell the kids, [but] it’s really, really hard. It’s hard for me because I have to keep repeating myself and repeating myself and repeating. And then the kids get frustrated sometimes. Cause like when I’ve told them that [we’re going to speak only Spanish] they say, “No, I don’t want to do it.” And then I kind of like make it fun, but it would only last a couple of hours.

Disheartened by these results, María Cristina has abandoned her language maintenance efforts, at least for the moment. It is clear that, in this case, the parent’s impact beliefs are not fully supportive of Spanish language maintenance. While María Cristina feels a strong responsibility to teach her children Spanish, she does not feel capable of doing so. She缺乏 the confidence and persistence necessary to carry out her desired language policy.

Even when parents are more persistent in establishing Spanish as the language of the home, it can be a struggle and source of great frustration. Ana, a single mother, has also experienced limited success despite a strong dedication to establishing a language policy that includes the regular use of Spanish at home. Ana has made a variety of concerted language maintenance efforts. First, she established a rule that both she and her son, Robert, will speak only Spanish at home. In addition, she enrolled Robert in a bilingual education program, where he has studied for the past five years, and has purchased Spanish-language movies and books to reinforce his Spanish language skills. However, Ana has faced considerable resistance from her son, who prefers to speak English. She is frustrated that, despite her determination, Robert seems to be more strongly influenced by the English-speaking world in which he is growing up. She remarks, “I’m the only one who’s [promoting Spanish]. It’s like it’s me against the whole world that surrounds him all day.” In this case, the parent’s impact beliefs and the consistency with which she has implemented the family language policy are strongly supportive of Spanish language maintenance. Nonetheless, the son has resisted speaking Spanish. It is evident that, in this particular household, the child has exercised a strong influence in shaping family language policy. This may be due, in part, to the structure of the household. With a parent-child ratio of one to one, perhaps Robert feels more empowered as a family decision maker than he would otherwise in a different type of household structure, for instance a two parent home in which both parents enforced the regular use of Spanish or a home in which older siblings spoke Spanish regularly.

Other younger parents explain that their busy lives, especially long hours at work and church obligations, make it difficult to find the time to teach Spanish at home. For instance, Gino, 36, who works 50-60 hours per week, says that he would sincerely like to improve his Spanish and speak the language at home with his five children. However, he explains that, given his busy schedule, he feels it is more important to spend his free time relaxing and having fun with his family than language learning.
On the other hand, some younger parents do not feel guilty about their lack of Spanish language maintenance at home. They believe that, while teaching Spanish is a beneficial enrichment activity, it is simply not an essential parenting responsibility. Guillermo, 28, says that, although he and his wife would be happy if their children learned Spanish, teaching the language is not their parental obligation. He maintains that the concept of proper parenting and parental responsibilities is often different for US-born Hispanics than it is for first-generation immigrants: “When you talk about the second and third generation, a lot of them are born and raised here. And I think that in itself plays a huge role in what’s accepted and what’s not.”

In these last two cases, parental impact beliefs are clearly unsupportive of Spanish language maintenance. Gino feels only somewhat responsible for teaching his children Spanish and feels that he is incapable of devoting the time and effort necessary to accomplish this task. While Guillermo would like for his children to learn Spanish, he does not believe that teaching Spanish at home is an essential parenting responsibility.

Discussion and Conclusions

On the whole, members of Iglesia hispana de Cristo express highly positive attitudes toward the Spanish language. However, younger parents, who tend to be US born or immigrated before the age of 13, express somewhat less positive attitudes than older parents, who came to the US at age 13 or older. Older parents’ positive attitudes are consistent with their behaviors—they tend to engage in behaviors that are supportive of language maintenance. Younger parents’ positive attitudes are often inconsistent with their behaviors. They do not routinely engage in behaviors that are supportive of language maintenance.

These results are consistent with Silva-Corvalán’s finding that her subjects who were US born or came to the US before age 12 held somewhat less positive attitudes toward Spanish, had significantly decreased Spanish language use and had a lack of commitment to Spanish language maintenance, as compared to her subjects who came to the US after age 12. The results are likewise consistent with Mejías, Anderson and Carlson’s finding that attitudes toward Spanish language maintenance declined for each progressive generation of immigrants—they were most positive for the first generation and increasingly declined for the second, third, fourth generation, etc.

Participants in the present study are undoubtedly aware of the inconsistency between the language maintenance attitudes and behaviors of younger parents. Older parents sometimes criticize younger parents for not teaching their children Spanish. Younger parents tend to blame themselves, expressing feelings of guilt, frustration and being overwhelmed. Other younger parents feel that teaching Spanish is an enrichment activity rather than an essential parenting responsibility.

Parents’ feelings around this issue are particularly important because they shape the decisions they make and the actions they take on a daily basis to maintain Spanish at home. While younger parents hold positive attitudes toward Spanish language maintenance, it is evident that their impact beliefs (De Houwer) are, on the whole, not
supportive of language maintenance. Though most younger parents feel some degree of responsibility to teach their children Spanish, not all feel a strong responsibility to do so. Furthermore, younger parents typically lack confidence and feel incapable of successfully carrying out a family language policy that includes the regular use of Spanish at home.

As a society we have the potential to play an important role in supporting Hispanics, like these younger parents, who hold positive attitudes toward Spanish language maintenance, but struggle with how to actually accomplish it. As Velázquez explains, for Hispanic parents “…the question [is] not whether transmission of Spanish…is positive for their children, but rather, a question of how, with what resources, and under which conditions this can be achieved” (244).

As researchers and educators there are several ways in which we can support this effort. First, we must educate members of the Hispanic communities in which these parents live. We must help them understand that failing to teach Spanish at home is not a mere question of *vagancia*, but rather a tremendous challenge for Hispanic parents who are English-dominant and less comfortable with and/or proficient in speaking Spanish. In addition, raising community consciousness of the sociopolitical factors that propel language shift in the US is critical to taking a social justice approach to such work. With this understanding, first-generation Hispanics would be less likely to criticize these parents and more motivated to take an active role in supporting them.

Second, we can create and strengthen existing partnerships between local universities, schools, churches and community organizations to work together toward the common goal of promoting Spanish language maintenance in the community and in the home. Our university teacher preparation programs must partner with local schools to better prepare classroom teachers to meet the needs of Hispanic children by equipping them with a foundational knowledge of bilingual language development and training in the specific ways in which they can foster this development in the classroom and at home.

Through collaborative efforts we can develop effective community-based language maintenance strategies and provide Hispanics access to valuable resources. Such resources could include high-quality bilingual education programs, free community or school-based Spanish language classes, a free library of Spanish-language books, movies, games and other media, classes to educate Hispanic parents on how to integrate more Spanish in their homes, and mentorship programs in which Spanish-dominant Hispanics volunteer to spend time with English-dominant or monolingual Hispanic youth. If, as the saying goes, “It takes a village to raise a child,” then it certainly takes a community to raise Spanish-speaking children and maintain the language intergenerationally.

Notes

1 Rumbaut’s classification, based on nativity and age of arrival in the United States, is as follows:
1<sup>st</sup> generation: foreign-born, age of arrival in the US (AoA)=18+
1.25 generation: foreign-born, AoA=13-17
1.5 generation: foreign-born, AoA=6-12
1.75 generation: foreign-born, AoA=0-5
2nd generation: US-born of foreign-born parents
2.5 generation: US-born of one foreign-born parent and one US-born parent

2 This and all other names of cities, places, organizations, events and people are pseudonyms.
3 Participants were classified according to Rumbaut; see endnote 1.
4 This and all other translations are the author’s.

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