

## **“Como que era Mexicano”: Cross-Dialectal Passing in Transnational Migration**

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Globalization has significantly undermined the political and economic effects of national borders, while simultaneously reinscribing them with powerful new social meanings. Language is a crucial resource for creating and maintaining, but also for contesting, such new meanings (Blommaert, 2003, 2010; Coupland, 2003). As communities become ever more transnational in scope, linguistic variation takes on increased importance for authenticating claims of national belonging, reinforcing what I call *ideologies of ethnonational linguistic distinctiveness* (cf. Irvine & Gal, 2000). Such ideologies assume a straightforward correspondence between geographic and linguistic borders, and as a consequence, both are conceptualized as equally impermeable.

This paper elucidates the interplay of territorial and linguistic boundaries, examining an account of cross-dialectal passing in which an undocumented Salvadoran migrant, Iván, describes how he utilized a particular ethnonational style to pass as Mexican during his unauthorized journey to the United States. Linguistic passing, understood as a fleeting act of self-presentation, involves the momentary use of semiotic resources not thought to “belong” to the speaker (Bucholtz, 1995; Piller, 2002; Rahman, 2009). In the passing performance, the speaker creates a persona that conceals facets of their “true” identity, making strategic use of deception in order to gain access to resources that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Cross-dialectal passing mobilizes more subtle linguistic differentiation than codeswitching or other practices that take up distinct languages. In analyzing cross-dialectal passing, therefore, it becomes crucial to examine which linguistic features speakers attend to as different, and to this end, Silverstein’s (1981) theorization of metalinguistic awareness serves as a useful analytical tool. Within this framework, Silverstein argues that speakers will be aware, and able to produce accounts, of those linguistic features that satisfy three criteria. Firstly, these items are characterized by “unavoidable referentiality”, being semantically complete (rather than bleached) with a full referential meaning (Silverstein, 1981; 5). Furthermore, the features must be “continuously segmentable” in that their referential meaning is contained within a single,

morphologically-simple element (Silverstein, 1981; 6). Finally, these items are “relatively presupposing” rather than “relatively creative”; in other words, their use depends on some independent contextual factor for a successful interpretation (Silverstein, 1981; 7).

Building on this theorization, I demonstrate that these three characteristics play a role in Iván’s metalinguistic account of cross-dialectal passing. However, my analysis further illustrates that such metalinguistic awareness is a more gradient phenomenon: while some features are explicitly identified, others are simply used contrastively with no overt commentary, while still others are not manipulated in the performance of different ethnonational styles. Crucially, metalinguistic awareness is shown to be situated in and emergent from speakers’ lived experience of linguistic variation. Therefore, while cross-dialectal passing transgresses linguistic borders, such performances simultaneously reveal the resiliency of linguistic habitus, thus both destabilizing and reinforcing ideologies of ethnonational linguistic distinctiveness.

The data for this paper comes from an ethnographic interview with Iván, which I conducted as part of my long-term research on communicative practices in transnational Salvadoran communities. Although he now resides in the U.S., Iván is originally from a small rural village in the coastal area of Eastern El Salvador, and I first met him during the four years I spent living there as a community worker and social justice activist. Although local gender norms have placed constraints of formality and distance on our relationship, my longstanding presence in the village has laid a foundation of trust that facilitates my research on this sensitive topic. In this interview, Iván described to me how he crossed Mexico with four other undocumented migrants in a semi-trailer truck. During this journey, their guide assigned Iván the role of pretending to be an assistant truck-driver, which involved performing a Mexican persona. In this first example, Iván spontaneously elaborated on the linguistic aspects of this experience, explaining the crucial importance of what he calls a “Mexican accent” in performing his role.

(1)

- |     |                                   |  |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1.  | LINET; Entonces,                  | <i>So,</i>                                     |
| 2.  | y a ustedes,                      | <i>and all of you,</i>                         |
| 3.  | les tocaba quedarse allí atrás:s? | <i>did you have to stay there in the back?</i> |
| 4.  | IVÁN; A::llí,                     | <i>There,</i>                                  |
| 5.  | allí estábamos- --                | <i>We were there --</i>                        |
| 6.  | No!                               | <i>No!</i>                                     |
| 7.  | Yo me salía.                      | <i>I would go out.</i>                         |
| 8.  | LINET; A::h.                      | <i>Oh.</i>                                     |
| 9.  | IVÁN; Yo me salía con el:,        | <i>I would go out with him {the coyote},</i>   |
| 10. | como [que],                       | <i>as if,</i>                                  |
| 11. | LINET; [Ah pues].                 | <i>Oh then.</i>                                |
| 12. | IVÁN; como era el- --             | <i>as if - --</i>                              |
| 13. | como que era Mexicano (verdad).   | <i>as if I were Mexican (right).</i>           |
| 14. | También la hago un poco de Me-,   | <i>I can also do a little bit the Me-,</i>     |
| 15. | del:,                             | <i>the,</i>                                    |
| 16. | (1.1)                             |  |
| 17. | IVÁN; el:,                        | <i>the,</i>                                    |
| 18. | el acento Mexica[no?              | <i>the Mexican accent?</i>                     |
| 19. | LINET; [Ah,                       | <i>Oh,</i>                                     |
| 20. | IVÁN; Ya].                        | <i>Yeah.</i>                                   |

21.	LINET; lo] podes.	<i>You can do it?</i>
22.	IVÁN; Ah-hah.	<i>Uh-huh.</i>
23.	mas o menos.	<i>more or less.</i>
24.	(0.5)	
25.	IVÁN; (Ibamos_a _traer) comida,	<i>(We would go to get) food,</i>
26.	"Ey ven,	<i>"Hey come,</i>
27.	para acá."	<i>over here."</i>
28.	Que "ayúdame."	<i>And "help me out"</i>

Iván's classification of this style as involving a specifically Mexican accent suggests that ideologies of ethnonational linguistic distinctiveness significantly undergird the framing and interpretation of experiences of cross-dialectal passing. Fundamentally, this account represents ethnonational identity as something which can be actively performed, thus problematizing fixed notions of national belonging. Such performativity allows passing by outsiders, as when Iván states that he acted "como que era Mexicano" ('as if I were Mexican'). Furthermore, language, and linguistic variation in particular, is explicitly identified as the semiotic resource that facilitates passing. Later on in his account of cross-dialectal passing, for example, Iván claims "ya no hablaba así como salvadoreño" ('I no longer spoke like a Salvadoran'). However, this identification conceptualizes Mexican and Salvadoran varieties as discrete, internally-homogeneous entities that are entirely distinct from one another, thus shoring up ideologies of ethnonational linguistic distinctiveness. Therefore, variation here serves as a resource that can be mobilized to challenge linguistic borders, but whose use paradoxically reinforces these very boundaries.

Furthermore, in performing cross-dialectal passing, Iván claims that "uno agarra el sistema" ('one catches on to the system'), emphasizing the structured nature of linguistic variation. This statement echoes theorizations of semiotic style that stress the importance of co-occurring linguistic features (Ervin-Tripp, 1972; Mendoza-Denton, 2000; 2011). Enregistered styles become identifiable in a given speech community precisely through the regular combination of specific features from different levels of the linguistic system. I turn now to an examination of the linguistic features that co-occur here, as Iván both describes and reenacts his cross-dialectal passing.

In recounting his passing performance, Iván explicitly identified several features of Mexican and Salvadoran Spanish. Table 1 includes a partial list of the first six items in the order in which they were produced. As shown here, the dialectal features explicitly identified by Iván all consist of symmetrical pairings of lexical items, where each variety has a distinct way of expressing a given referential meaning. The first two items on the list consist of differences in pronouns and expletives, and draw on features that have become enregistered as indexes of particular styles. The remaining words are all drawn from a single semantic domain, revealing the salience of speakers' lived experience in metalinguistic accounts of variation.

Turning first to the enregistered items, the first feature identified is the pronominal use of the *voseo* in Salvadoran Spanish, which is contrasted with the pronominal Mexican-variety equivalent, the *tuteo*. The pronoun 'vos' has been found to be a powerful marker of Salvadoran identity (Rivera-Mills, 2002; 2011), serving as an enregistered emblem of this ethnonational style. The second item on the list, "hijo de la chingada" ('son of a bitch'), and especially the word "chingada", plays a similar role in marking Mexican styles.

Table 1. Explicitly mentioned features by ethnonational variety

<i>Mexican</i>	<i>Salvadoran</i>	<i>Gloss</i>
tu	vos	2.SG informal pronoun
hijo de la chingada	hijo de la gran puta	'son of a bitch'
kilos	libras	'kilos' vs. 'pounds'
popote	pajilla	'drinking straw'
agua	refresco	'fruit juice'
agua pura	agua	'water'

Iván's representation, however, is more complex, and involves the explicit identification of several other features that are not as emblematic of particular ethnonational styles. These remaining lexical items all belong to the single semantic domain of food and beverages; the measurement systems of kilo and pound were referenced by Iván specifically in regard to purchasing items such as cheese and tortillas. This pattern reflects the fact that Iván's cross-dialectal passing occurred in a specific type of interaction – namely food-purchasing service encounters – illustrating that speakers' metalinguistic awareness is firmly situated in their lived experience of linguistic variation. Iván's account here reveals that his explicit awareness of the differences between these ethnonational styles is largely based on contrastive lexical sets. This finding clearly follows Silverstein's (1981) theorization, as these lexical items share the three features which he identifies as necessary for metalinguistic awareness.

However, Iván's account of cross-dialectal passing extends beyond such explicit metalinguistic commentary. In addition to explicitly identified items, Iván makes use of several other features as he performatively enacts the two styles, deploying these without overt comment in representing Mexican and Salvadoran styles. Most prominently, the verbs used in these utterances draw on the *voseo* and *tuteo verbal*, in which the morphology of the conjugated verb varies for each paradigm. For example, Iván produces two parallel initiations of a service encounter, one in each ethnonational style, which involve different conjugations of the verb "vender" ('to sell'). In Example 2, in which he performs a Mexican style, the stress is on the first syllable. In Example 3, performed in a Salvadoran style, the stress is on the penultimate syllable.

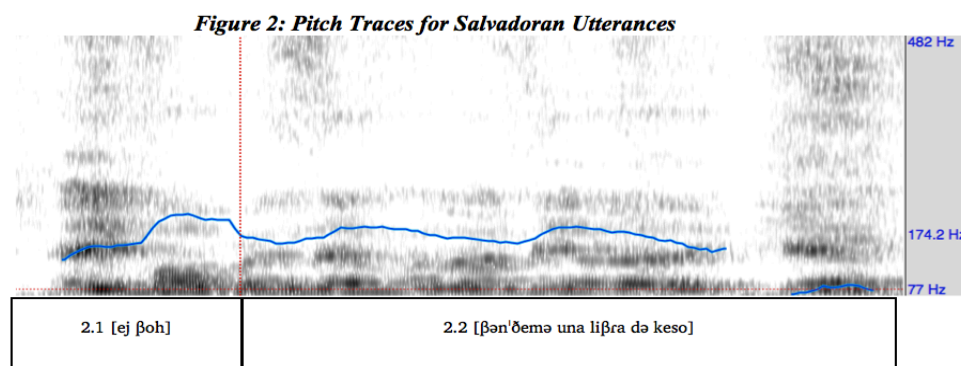
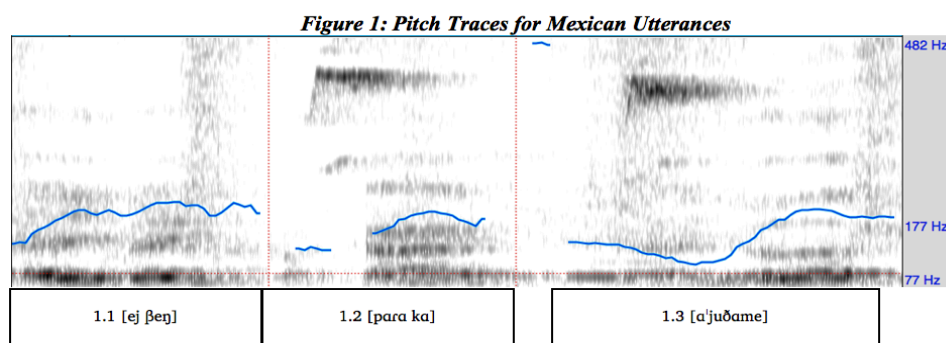
- (2)
- |                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| para que le vendan una tortillita, | <i>so that they will sell you some tortillas,</i> |
| "Véndeme un kilo de;               | <i>"Sell<sub>T</sub> me a kilo of,</i>            |
| de tortillas".                     | <i>of tortillas".</i>                             |

- (3)
- |   |   |
|---|---|
| aquí decimos "Hey vendéme una libra de; | <i>here we say "Hey sell<sub>V</sub> me a pound of",</i>            |
| "Hey vos vendéme una libra de [queso],  | <i>"Hey you<sub>V</sub> sell<sub>V</sub> me a pound of cheese",</i> |

In reenacting his cross-dialectal passing, *vender* ('to sell') is the most frequent verb Iván uses, and he produces only the imperative forms of verbs, as directed towards him, or as used by him towards others. The sole use of the imperative form suggests that Iván's encounter with Mexican Spanish was significantly shaped by his personal experience; the overwhelming use of *vender*, taken with the salience of the semantic domain of food items, discussed above, indicates that service encounters were the primary interactional domain in which Iván was expected to produce Mexican Spanish (c.f. Piller, 2002). Thus, both the explicit metalinguistic account and the metapragmatic knowledge that allows the

contrastive use of particular features, is situated in and emergent from the speaker's specific experience of linguistic variation.

In addition to this morphological marking of the two ethnonational styles Iván's reenactment of his cross-dialectal passing involves the repeated performance of a particular prosodic contour. Previous research has demonstrated the salience of prosody in performances of Mexican Spanish by speakers of other varieties (Mendoza-Denton, 1994), suggesting that intonational contours may be enregistered and come to typify particular styles. Iván's performed Mexican utterances are characterized by the brevity of each intonation unit, with a mean length of 2.42 words per utterance, as compared to a mean length of 3.67 words for utterances that explicitly perform the Salvadoran variety. The intonational contour for the Mexican utterances involves an overall rise in pitch over the length of the contour, with level pitch or a very slight fall at the end of the unit. This can be compared with a different pattern in the explicitly Salvadoran utterances, which are characterized by a much more pronounced fall.



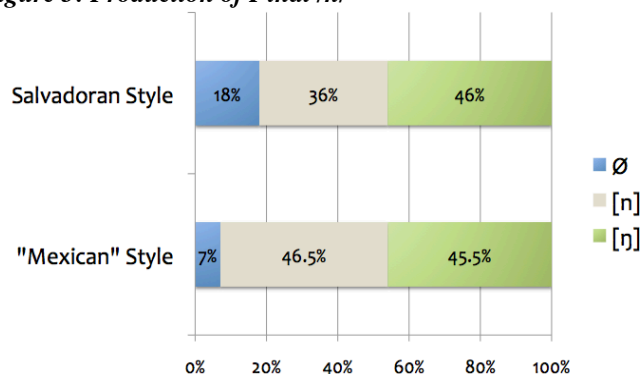
Within Silverstein's framework, Iván's lack of metalinguistic commentary about these morphosyntactic and prosodic features is not surprising, since they lack both referentiality and segmentability. However, these features are consistently deployed in metapragmatically-appropriate ways to depict speech from the two dialects. This finding calls into question Silverstein's (1981) assumption that metalinguistic commentary is the sole indicator of the speaker's metapragmatic awareness. Rather, these findings suggest a

more gradient understanding of such awareness, in that speakers may be able to explicitly articulate the usage of some features, while being able to appropriately manipulate other features despite their inability to overtly describe such usage.

The analysis thus far has illustrated how Iván manipulated lexical, morphological, and prosodic features of his speech in both describing and reenacting his cross-dialectal passing. However, in examining the phonological details of Iván's speech, I found that not all levels of linguistic structure were subject to manipulation. In fact, Iván's performance of a Mexican accent maintained two phonological features commonly associated with Salvadoran, but not Mexican, Spanish: word final nasal velarization ([son] → [soŋ]) (Hernández, 2009, 2011; Lipski, 1986; Quesada Pacheco, 1996) and the lenition of [s], both word and syllable finally, with the fricative being aspirated or deleted altogether ([βos] → [βoh, βo]) (Aaron & Hernández, 2007; Canfield, 1960; Hoffman, 2010; Lipski 1985, 1986). I extracted and coded each token of these two features occurring in Iván's account to examine the rates of velarization and lenition in utterances performed as Mexican. For comparison, these rates are contrasted with Iván's unmarked narration, since there was very little speech explicitly marked as performing a Salvadoran style.

Figure 3 presents the overall production of final alveolar nasals as either velarized, alveolar, or deleted. As can be seen, the overall velarization rates showed practically no variation, with final nasals velarizing about 46% of the time in both styles. The higher rates of alveolar production in the Mexican style – 46.5% as compared to 36% in the unmarked style, is attributable to the much higher rate of final nasal deletion occurring in the narration. However, the rates of velarization of final nasals is remarkably consistent across the utterances explicitly stylized as Mexican and in Iván's unmarked narrating style.

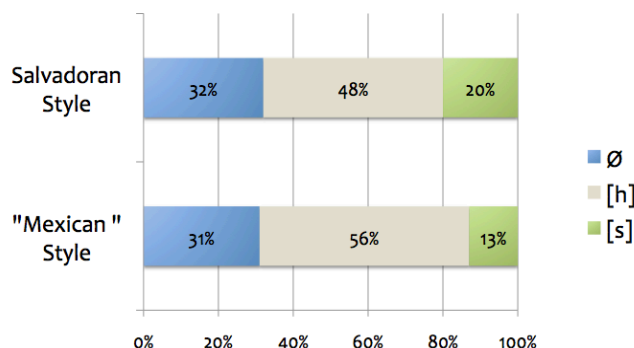
**Figure 3: Production of Final /n/**



Turning now to rates of [s] lenition, the overall production rates for this variable, in both syllable and word-final position, are presented in Figure 4. Here, some difference in lenition rates can be seen between the two speaking styles: counter-intuitively, the Mexican style actually has lower rates of sibilant retention (at 13%) than the unmarked narrating style (at 20%). Deletion rates are about the same for both styles, so the difference is in effect one of aspiration rates: the production of final /s/ in the utterances performed as Mexican was more likely to be aspirated than in the unmarked style. Nevertheless, this distribution shows that, rather than retaining more sibilants, as might be expected in

performing a Mexican style, Iván's performance actually shows slightly greater lenition rates. This brief quantitative analysis suggests that, unlike the prosodic, lexical, and morphosyntactic features Iván employs in producing his account, the phonological features of nasal velarization and /s/ lenition are not subject to consistent manipulation along dialectal lines.

**Figure 4: Production of Final /s/**



In summary, then, this analysis has demonstrated that Iván's description and reenactment of cross-dialectal passing involves manipulation of some linguistic features to distinguish the two ethnonational styles, while other potential resources are not taken up. Some manipulated features were subject to an explicit metalinguistic account, and these included both enregistered items such as the use of *vos* or *chingada*, as well as other lexical items from a prominent semantic domain. Other features, while lacking such explicit commentary, were used in metapragmatically appropriate ways: these included the morphological paradigm of the *tuteo* and *voseo*, as well as prosodic features. Finally, phonological features, specifically nasal velarization and sibilant lenition, were not manipulated along stylistic lines.

These findings are partially explained by theorizations of metalinguistic awareness that posit the characteristics of linguistic features themselves as the necessary conditions for explicit commentary. However, I have argued here for a broader conceptualization of metalinguistic awareness that includes the ability to contrastively deploy particular features in depicting different ethnonational styles. Such metapragmatic knowledge is a crucial component of how speakers understand and mobilize linguistic variation to create social meaning and achieve social actions. Furthermore, my analysis has demonstrated that metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness is situated in and emergent from speakers specific experiences of linguistic variation. In Iván's case, this can be seen in both the description and the reenactment of his cross-dialectal passing which, in addition to employing enregistered features, also takes up semantic domains and morphological paradigms that are specific to his interactions in food-purchasing service encounters. The salience of lived experience in shaping speakers' awareness of linguistic variation can also be seen in the lack of phonological distinction in the differently stylized utterances that Iván produces. Thus despite migrants' physical and linguistic crossing of national borders, traces of their geographic origins travel with them in their linguistic *habitus*.

The connection between language and globalization is therefore neither as unambiguously subversive nor as decidedly pernicious as it is sometimes portrayed to be,

but rather involves messy and at times contradictory efforts to manage and transgress borders. These practices, whether everyday or as exceptional as Iván's cross-dialectal passing, have contradictory effects on ideologies of ethnonational linguistic distinctiveness. Most clearly, passing invokes a performative sense of ethnonational identity, which enables the transgression of boundaries that are often assumed to be fixed. In Iván's case, the uniform phonology used in enacting each style produces an audible merging that blurs linguistic distinctiveness even further. However, ideologies of ethnonational linguistic distinctiveness are paradoxically shored up by the very transgression of borders. As seen in this data, metalinguistic accounts of variation take up and reinforce conceptualizations of styles as distinct linguistic systems tied to discrete geographic areas and groups of speakers. The identification and deployment of particular features to depict these ethnonational styles emphasizes their distinctiveness. Ultimately, this subversive act of crossing succeeds, not because Iván is taken as a Salvadoran performing a Mexican style, but because he is taken to be Mexican. Acts of cross-dialectal passing thus simultaneously transgress and reinforce both the ideological and experiential boundaries of linguistic variation, revealing that just as language is used to transform boundaries, so too do territorial borders impact language.

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