

## **Language Ideologies for Educational Success: Deconstructing the Notion of the Ideal Parent and Student in One Mexican-Immigrant Family**

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### **1. Introduction**

As children and adults draw upon linguistic, paralinguistic, and other symbolic resources to express and interpret meaning, they socialize one another to use language in certain ways (Ochs, 1993; Ochs & Schieffelin 1986, 2001; Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2002; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2008). The ways in which they socialize each other to use language reflect their language ideologies, either explicitly in discussions of their beliefs regarding competent language use, or implicitly through the sociolinguistic behavior they exhibit (Woolard, 1998). As defined by Garrett & Baquedano-López (2002), language ideologies represent beliefs of "what counts as a language, of who counts as a speaker, and of what can (and cannot) be done with (and done to)" language (p. 354).

In schools and classrooms, teachers and students produce localized language ideologies that equate specific sociolinguistic and linguistic behavior with academic competence (Heath, 1983; Rymes, 2009; Gee, 2012; Suoto-Manning, 2013). Research suggests that, for speakers of non-standard dialects, or those who speak a language other than English in the home, the language ideologies constructed in schools and classrooms can be particularly problematic. In her seminal work on language socialization practices in two lower class mill communities, Heath (1983) deconstructs school ideologies that represent answers to "What" questions (i.e. What is this?) and questions that solicit text comparisons as foundational and prerequisite skills for further learning. She finds that, while school and teacher assessments positioned children as linguistically deficient, families of Roadville and Trackton socialize their children to use language in ways intended to support their children's education while maintaining community-derived language ideologies. In white mill communities of Roadville, families socialized their young children to tell only true factual stories. In Trackton, black mill families socialized young children to create and share fictional stories that would captivate the attention of others. Yet, neither of these skills factored in to school criteria for evaluating young children's language competency.

The aim of this paper is to extend the discussion on language ideologies for educational success- representations of linguistic or sociolinguistic behavior with academic success- through an examination of homework completion events. I focus on homework completion events because they have been identified as routine learning events in which

families invoke multiple discourses and/or ideologies to support and monitor children's school progress (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; White, 2002; Mangual Figueroa, 2011).

## 2. Methodology

This study focuses on one Mexican-Immigrant family living in a Northeastern Latino Diaspora in which 42.9% of residents identified as being Hispanic or Latino, and 32% identified as foreign born. The family consists of four family members, a mother, father, and older daughter who were born in Oaxaca, Mexico, and a younger daughter who was born in the United States. At the time that the study was conducted, from March through April 2014, the youngest daughter attended 1st grade at one of the community's elementary schools, and the eldest daughter attended 7th grade at the middle school. The family primarily communicated to each other in Spanish at home. However, on account of their level of English proficiency, the children did not qualify for the district's English as a Second Language (ESL) program or Bilingual Program. Thus, the children attended mainstream classes in which they were instructed to use English to develop and display knowledge in academic content areas.

The data was collected on four occasions, two Wednesday afternoons during homework completion events and two Saturday mornings during which the family members and I discussed homework and schooling experiences. The data includes audio-recordings of interactions, field notes, and photographs taken of letters, homework assignments, book covers and book pages collected during the four occasions during which I acted as participant observer. I analyze how family members negotiate and produce the language ideologies, as they socialize one another to use written and oral language in ways they equate with academic competence. Furthermore, I look at how family member's frame the language ideologies they represent through *production format units* (Goffman, 1981). I examine the four participant roles that Goffman (1981) identifies as influential in the production of utterances- the *animator* or speaker, the *author* or creator, the *figure* or subject portrayed, and *principal* or actor whose belief gets established. While a different actor may occupy each role, the same actor may also occupy multiple or all of the roles. Table 1 provides definitions and examples of each

**Table (1)**

Participation Role	Definition	Example of Production Format Unit for the following utterance: <i>Mary: Joey, says that cats are boring</i>
Animator	Speaker	Mary
Author	Creator	Joey
Figure	Person/Thing portrayed	Cats
Principal	Person whose belief is conveyed	Joey

## 3. Findings

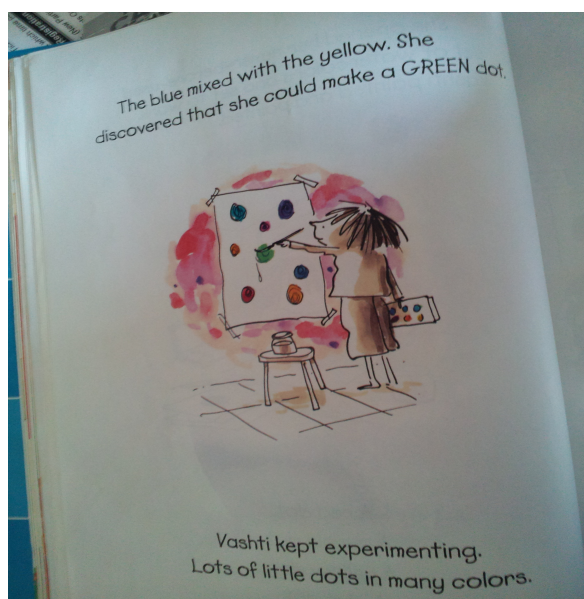
The data reveals that, as family members socialized one another to complete homework, they consistently represented a language ideology that prioritized the ability to decode and pronounce words in English based on orthographic knowledge, as *animators* of school texts. In discussions, family members produced models of students and parents who

demonstrated competency using this skill to complete or assist with homework assignments. Consequently, the mother and 1st daughter drew upon this language ideology to assign institutional identities to themselves or one another as inadequate students and parents. Analysis of production format units reveals that the school consistently played a *principal* role in the production of language ideologies in the home. In the following sections, I provide evidence of these findings.

### *Constructing Language Ideologies*

The first excerpt was taken from a transcribed recording of the 1st grade daughter, Sara, the mother Maria, and myself during the reading of a book that was assigned to Sara for homework. The book is called, *The Dot* by Pete Reynolds. Figure 1 shows the page of the book we read during the transcribed recording presented in Excerpt 1. Figure 2 displays the transcription symbols used in the transcribed excerpts presented throughout this paper.

**Figure (1)**



**Figure (2)**

### **Transcription Symbols Key**

(.) = pause

↑ = rising tone

: = extension of sound

### **Excerpt (1)**

- |   |        |   |
|---|--------|---|
| 1 | Sara:  | Vishy splashed  |
| 2 | Maria: | Splashed↑   |
| 3 | Sara:  | No (.) painted (.) a red dot a yellow dot (.) a blue dot (.) the blue mixed |

- 4 with the yellow (.) she discovered that she couldn't  
 5 Maria: Discovered↑  
 6 Mer: Discovered is descubrir (**discover**)  
 7 Maria: Hmm (.) pero como se pronuncia en ingles (**but how do you pronounce in English**)  
 8 Mer: Discovered  
 9 Sara: Discovered that she can't make a green dot (.) Vishy kipt (.)  
 10 ex- in  
 11 Maria: ((laughs)) no se como se pronuncia esta palabra (.) esta muy:: (**I don't know how to pronounce this word (.) it's very::**)  
 12 Mer: Oh ((laughs)) experimenting  
 13 Sara: Experimenting

Excerpt 1 reveals an ideological emphasis on knowledge display of English orthography and pronunciation of orthographic representation. After Sara read the word "splashed" instead of "painted" (this text is from the book page prior to the one shown in figure 1), her mother, Maria repeated the word, "splashed" with a rising intonation on line 2. Sara then recognized her mother's utterance as a prompt to correct by saying "no (.) painted" at the beginning of line 3. It is important to note here that, while Sara's initial reading of "painted," suggests an oversight of the orthographic components of the words "splashed" and "painted," the error also reveals her semantic and grammatical knowledge. By choosing a word that makes sense semantically and syntactically in the context, Sara shows her ability to rely on other forms of linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge to decode words.

The subsequent lines of talk suggest that a greater value placed on proper pronunciation of orthographic representation than on deciphering word meaning. When the mother turned towards me and repeated her daughter's reading of the word, "discovered" in line 5, I interpreted her utterance as a question of word meaning. But after translating the word into Spanish, the mother asked, on line 7, "pero como se pronuncia en ingles?" (*But how do you pronounce it in English?*). Similarly, when her daughter started to identify phonemes in the word "experimenting" -"ex- in" on line 10- the mother again turned towards me and said "no se como se pronuncia esta palabra" (*I don't know how to pronounce this word*) in line 11. The mother's statement functioned to elicit my help in pronouncing the word, "experimenting" that then Sara would repeat.

Throughout Excerpt 1, the mother and Sara constructed models of ideal parent and student roles for reading that depended upon their knowledge of English orthography and pronunciation of orthographic representations. Sara adopted the role of *animator*, focusing solely on speaking the text *authored* by Pete Reynolds, and accepting her mother's prompts to correct herself. By catching her daughter's orthographic errors and soliciting my help in pronouncing words, Maria adopted a role of assistant to her daughter as she read the written words. Through adoption of their respective roles, Sara and Maria implicitly represented an ideology, or belief about the roles they should take. By selecting the English text that Sara should read for homework, the school played a *principal* role in the utterances produced, and subsequently an ideological model of the ideal student and parent reading roles that involves their display of English orthographic knowledge. Sara and her mother, Maria also adopted *principal* roles in the production of their utterances, socialization roles, and belief in English orthographic knowledge and pronunciation as essential criteria for determining educational success.

### *Negotiating Student Identity*

Excerpt 2 provides insight into the relationship that family members constructed between a language ideology that prioritizes English orthographic knowledge and Sara's identity as a student. The interaction represented in Excerpt 2 was taken from a transcribed audio recording of a discussion initiated by Maria after the reading of the book, *The Dot*.

#### **Excerpt (2)**

- 33 Maria: No está muy bien por primero ((laughs)) **(she's not very good for first grade)**  
 34 Mer: Si está bien (.) hay muchas palabras difíciles **(yes, she's good. There are a lot of difficult words)**  
 35 Sara: Este tiene muchas palabras (.) es cuatro cinco seis **(this has a lot of words (.) its four, five, six)**  
 36 Mer: Como palabras como straight and experimenting (.) son de como tercer grado. **(like words like straight and experimenting (.) they're from like third grade)**  
 37 Jess: Pero como dice la maestra (.) algunos los van a empezar ( ) los van a saber **(but like the teacher says (.) some they are going to begin ( ) they are going to know them)**

((Lines 38-44 include talk about eldest daughter receiving help from the church))

- 45 Mer: pero que dice la maestra↑ **(but what does the teacher say↑)**  
 46 Maria: dice que es bajo **(she says she is low)**  
 47 Sara: I don't know a lot so I need help.

Excerpt 2 shows the way in which the mother, Maria, the eldest daughter, Jess, the youngest daughter, Sara and I negotiate Sara's identity as a competent student (presumably based on the ideology previously discussed) by shifting the *figure*, or subject of discussion, and by positioning certain actors as *principals*, or influential sources for our ideologies. In line 33, Maria evaluated her daughter by saying, "No está muy bien por primero" (*she's not very good for first grade*). In this utterance, Maria positioned herself as *animator* and *author* of her words. She represented her daughter, Sara, as the *figure*- the person or figure to be discussed, and herself as the *principal*- the person who believed her daughter not to be good for first grade. I then challenged Maria's assessment by attributing Sara's challenges to the difficult words like straight and experimenting- words I believed to be associated more with third grade reading (on line 34 and 36). To do so, I *animated* and *authored* a statement that shifted the role of *figure* from Sara, whom Maria positioned as the *figure* in the previous utterance, to the book. Sara then expanded upon my assessment of the book's difficulty by counting the words (line 35). Referring to me as "la maestra" (*the teacher*), the eldest daughter, Jess expanded on my assessment as an *animator* and *author* of the phrase, "los van a saber" (*they are going to know them*). With this utterance, Jess re-positioned the sister and presumably her classmates (*they*) as the subjects of the conversation or *figures*, who would learn to read difficult words in future schooling. By not attributing our declarations to alternative actors, each participant in the interactive exchange acted as *principals* of their respective utterances and the beliefs expressed through them. Jess, however, appears to have used an initiating clause, "como

dice la maestra" (*like the teacher says*), to validate her own belief that her sister is doing fine. By doing so she suggested that I, most likely representing an authority figure of teacher, also be acted as a *principal* in the production of her utterance.

Excerpt 2 also reveals that the school played a significant role in the homework discourse produced, the ideologies upon which it is based, and the subsequent student identity participants negotiated for Sara. While not explicitly referencing school actors in the first part of the exchange, Maria and I used language that suggested that the school played a *principal* role in the construction of our own beliefs. By referring to "first grade" and "third grade" as markers of language development- terms that derive from school discourse- we invoked a school- based ideological assumption that language develops along a universal continuum. The second part of this excerpt, starting on line 45, provides another example of the school's role as *principal*. The exchange begins when I inquired about the teacher's belief, to which Maria responded, "dice que es bajo" (*she says she is low*) (line 45 and 46). To produce the oration, "dice que es bajo" (*she says she is low*) Maria adopted the role of *animator* to express the words and belief about Sara, the *figure*, that are held by the teacher- the *author* and *principal*. In line 47, Sara then accepted the role of *figure* that her mother initiated, in line 46, to *animate* and *author* an explanation for her teacher's assessment- "I don't know a lot so I need help." With this statement, Sara also adopted the role of *principal*, and suggested that she believed herself to not know a lot. By making the teacher the *figure* of our utterances and positioning her as *principal*, we suggested that her opinion, and that of the school that validates her authoritative position, are relevant to our assessment of Sara's ability. Furthermore, it is also important to note the teacher's description of Sara as "low" implies the use a hierarchical system for labeling students in comparison to one another. Thus, the use of the word "low" that was animated by the mother, suggests that the school's hierarchical ranking system also played a *principal* role in the process of identity negotiation.

### *Negotiating Parent Identity*

The final excerpt illuminates the relationship between an ideological emphasis on English orthographic knowledge and the mother's identity as a parent. Excerpt 3 presents a discussion between Maria and myself on a Saturday morning about the family's homework completion routine.

#### **Excerpt (3)**

- 1       Mer:    Me di cuenta que Uds. siempre- siempre se sientan juntos para  
2               completar la tarea- leer y todo. cuando:: cuando Jessica era una pequeña  
              hiciste lo mismo↑ (**I realized that you all always- always sit together  
to complete homework read and everything (.) when Jessica was  
young did you do the same↑**)
- 3       Maria: Si pero era más poner atención (.) porque ahora siento más  
4               frustrada cuando le ayudo porque la Jessica iba a ir a la  
5               iglesia y le ayudaban mucho. (**Yes but it was more pay attention  
because now I feel more frustrated when I help because Jessica was  
going to the church and they helped her a lot**)

((Lines 6-11 include talk about the help provided by the church for children))

- 12 Mer: Y crees que en tu comunidad, los padres hacen lo mismo que  
Ud↑ como ayudar↑ (**And do you think that in your community  
parents do the same as you↑ like help↑**)
- 13 Maria: ( )
- 14 Mer: No↑
- 15 Maria: Muchos les interesan (.) pero muchos les da igual (**Many are interested  
(.) but many don't care**)
- 16 Mer: Muchos que↑ (**Many what ↑**)
- 17 Maria: Muchos les da igual (.) se preocupen más por ellos (**Many don't care (.)  
they worry more about themselves**)
- 18 Mer: Por si mismos↑ (**For themselves↑**)
- 19 Maria: Si (**Yes**)

In Excerpt 3, Maria constructed a model of the ideal parent that corresponds with the model she had enacted through her socialization efforts in Excerpt 1- a model she then suggested to be difficult to uphold. I initiated the discussion that ensued by prompting Maria to compare her current role in the completion of Sara's homework with her role in the completion of her eldest daughter Jessica's homework when she was younger (lines 1-2). In response to my question, Maria explained her role with Jessica as "...más poner atención (.) porque ahora siento más frustrada cuando le ayudo porque la Jessica iba a ir a la iglesia y le ayudaban mucho" (*...more to pay attention because now I feel frustrated when I help because Jessica was going to the church and they helped her a lot*). In this utterance, Maria positioned herself as the *animator*, *author*, and *principal* in an evaluation of both herself and the church- *the figures*. By attributing her lack of frustration with Jessica to the church and the church's assistance, Maria implies two ideologically-based assumptions: 1) that a child would undoubtedly require help with the content of homework (rather than with just by monitoring the completion), and 2) that the help that the church provides with homework content is more valuable than the help Maria can provide. Maria, therefore, produced a language ideology that equates out-of-school homework assistance, and more presumably assistance with English orthography, with educational achievement.

In the second part of the excerpt, from lines 12-19, Maria extended the model of parent as homework helper by associating parent homework assistance with parent interest. She described parents that help as those that "les interesan" (*that are interested*) (line 15) and parents who do not help as those who "les da igual" (*don't care*) (line 15 and 17) or se preocupen mas por ellos (*they worry more about themselves*)(line 17). In these utterances, Maria acted as *animator* and *author* to express her belief- thus also acting as *principal*- that other parents in the community, *the figures*, would sit down to help their children with homework if they were interested and cared. In consideration of her own feelings of frustration while helping with homework, which could also explain why some parents do not sit down to help, Maria's model of parent as homework helper is somewhat contradictory to her own experiences. Thus, while Maria does not reference additional principal actors as influential in her claim, the contradiction between the model and her experiences suggests the possibility that an external actor and/or discourse may be influencing the ideology she is constructing.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper examines the production of language ideologies for educational success in the home, and the negotiation of institutional identities that their production facilitates. The data reveals how family members produced a language ideology that associated competent school reading with the pronunciation of English words and English orthographic knowledge. They also simultaneously produced, and then later reaffirmed in discussions, a corresponding model of parent and student during school reading as animators or assistant animators of school-derived texts. Based on the model they constructed of the ideal student, Maria categorized Sara as a "low" reader. Drawing on a model of the ideal parent as homework helper, Maria represented herself as frustrated while reading with Sara, which she attributes to her inability to provide the same assistance (presumably with English decoding and pronunciation), as the church. However, through the teachers' choice of books to practice, the use of school-derived language of "grades" and "low," and the contribution of the teacher's perspective, the school's role in the construction of language ideologies for educational success, and more specifically for school reading competency, is apparent. Nonetheless, this paper also reveals the way in which the process of constructing language ideologies and identities may be contested, as Maria, Jess, and I adopted different approaches to the attribution of Sara's difficulties while reading.

The findings of this study expand upon the conceptualization of the homework completion event as a site of negotiation between discourses and ideologies produced in home, school, and communities (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; White, 2002; Mangual Figueroa, 2011) by identifying the homework completion event, more specifically, as a site for producing and negotiating language ideologies for educational success and institutional identities as students and parents. Furthermore, this study implies that, while family members may draw from multiple sources to construct language ideologies, as they seek to succeed and support one another's success in school, they consistently draw upon school discourse and ideologies to construct their own beliefs. This study, therefore, highlights the significance of the written and oral texts exchanged between schools and homes for structuring participation roles during homework completion, and the subsequently the identities they negotiate and construct as competent and empowered readers, students, and parents.

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