



Ethnolinguistic Chicago: Language and Literacy in the City's Neighborhoods.

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From Chicago comes an interesting collection of sociolinguistic studies exploring language use across a diversity of language communities. The particular focuses of individual chapters are consistently related to a central question: How do language use and language choices serve to establish, maintain, and contest ethnic, class, and gender identities? The collection starts with a historical overview of Illinois language policies by Elliot Judd, who concludes that language policy in Illinois reflects the same contradictions and ambivalences that have shaped attitudes and legislation throughout the United States. The use of English as a “badge” of an American identity has become enshrined by legislature declaring it the official language of the state (p. 47), yet when it comes to such practical matters as official publications and educating language-minority children, Illinois officials have veered away from the kind of “English-only” policies adopted in the Southwest. Judd’s historical framing is followed by several chapters detailing home-language use and a final section devoted to language use in “Community Spaces” in various neighborhoods.

Most of the studies adopt an ethnographic approach, attending to the local meanings negotiated by participants and how these specific language performances establish or maintain local identities in all their hybrid complexity. The methods range from participant observation with relatively little analysis of recorded or print language data to detailed discourse analyses. What emerges is a series of sociolinguistic snapshots of a number of vibrant communities with surprisingly little contact between them. Many chapters keep an emic perspective, particularly the ones examining spoken discourse, describing such insider symbolic action as “signifying laughter” and “loud-talking” among African American women (Morgan), prayers of invocation as a way to bring about a more Nigerian time-space during Nigerian immigrant get-togethers (Reynolds), and the strategic use of home languages and code switching among Greek Americans (Koliussi) and Italian Americans (Nardini). Only when the chapters examine more than one or two key interactions do they broaden their perspectives. Cho and Miller’s analysis of “story enactment” during sociolinguistic interviews among middle and working-class European American mothers, Radloff’s examination of ongoing language mediation in an Arab American accounting firm, and Isaacson’s historical analysis of the factors leading



to language maintenance or language death among Swedish Americans, all offer a more comparative framework, and in so doing, manage to become more accessible to nonspecialists.

The studies could form the basis of a more theoretical exploration of how language functions as a key resource for the construction and maintenance of local and community identities in the midst of a vast urban landscape that would tend to mitigate local, and particularly ethnic identities, but that work remains to be done. In a manner typical of many sociolinguistic studies in the United States, the collection does not broach more theoretical questions, sticking instead to empirically grounded description with occasional excursions into comparative findings. This results in a lack of connections between chapters. In addition, the collection remains relatively inaccessible for readers outside the discipline, despite assertions to the contrary. Although the subject matter is of great interest to “anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, historians, educators and educational researchers,” (Farr, p. X) they will need some very specialized sociolinguistic training before they can really appreciate many of the chapters.

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