Final Report:

Sociolinguistic Analysis of Mexican-American Patterns of Non-Response to Census Questionnaires

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The objective of this study was to explore the reasons for a potential undercount among Mexican-origin individuals due to a failure to answer or understand questions on U.S. Census forms. Sociolinguistic and ethnographic methodology were used to interview and observe 39 people, of which 32 were heads of household[1], while they responded to the census forms. The 39 respondents were from one selected city block in the Pilsen community area of Chicago (one of the two highest concentrations of Mexican-origin people in Chicago; the contiguous neighborhood of Little Village is the other highest concentration).

The study focused on how residents completed the form (whether, for example, they asked many questions or few), which questionnaire items seemed the most problematic, and any other information which either was volunteered by the residents or appeared relevant to census taking. Residents chose to respond to either the Spanish or the English forms; following Census Bureau procedure, 80% of the households used short census forms, and 20% used long census forms. The English forms were used in 15 interviews, the Spanish forms in 24.

An informal ethnographic interview elicited two kinds of information: residents' opinions and attitudes toward the census process and questionnaire, and their attitudes toward and uses of language and literacy, including both Spanish and English. Finally, the study included a sociolinguistic analysis of both the short and the long versions of the census questionnaire (both in English and in Spanish) to ascertain mismatches between the formal varieties of English and Spanish used in the instrument (and the cultural assumptions embedded in them), and the oral Spanish and English spoken by those who were interviewed. This analysis focused particularly on regional and social dialect differences, which are reflected primarily in syntax and vocabulary.

Results of analysis include a demographic profile of the participating residents (based on self-report data), a sociolinguistic assessment of the language usage and the "institutional literacy" format of the questionnaires themselves, and a report of residents' understanding of and attitudes toward entire census process. Highlights of this analysis include:

- o Varying levels of oral bilingualism were reported by residents. Although almost all residents reported Spanish as their first language, very few reported being totally monolingual, either in Spanish or in English.

- o Functional literacy skills, in either Spanish or English, and sometimes in both languages, were reported by virtually all residents. Most of the uses for this literacy, however, were reported to be in home, not work, contexts.

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[1] Head of household is defined in this report as a female or male parent who is the main provider for the household.

o Problems with the English forms were restricted primarily to aspects of the computer-read format; language usage was not a problem for most residents.

o Numerous problems were found with the language usage in the Spanish forms; many vocabulary items (e.g., for household items and technical concepts) were totally unfamiliar to residents, who generally used other words to express these meanings.

o The most problematic item was that regarding "race." Virtually all residents objected to the categories listed as choices. Since "Hispanic" (or a similar category) was not included here, 21 of the respondents (54%), chose "Other race" and then listed a wide range of specifics; ten residents chose "White," four chose "Indian," and none chose "Black or Negro."

o Initially residents reported much distrust of the census process, expecting that the information could be used against them (e.g., by the IRS, the INS, city housing authorities, or other gov't agencies). After the study, however, 25 of respondents (64%) viewed the census more positively and indicated they would respond to the 1990 census questionnaire.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Description of Study

The objective of this study was to explore the reasons for a potential undercount among Mexican-origin individuals due to a failure to answer or understand questions on U.S. Census forms. We conducted an intensive small-scale study using sociolinguistic and ethnographic methodology, interviewing 39 residents from one selected city block in the Pilsen community area of Chicago. Pilsen, widely known as the "port of entry" for Mexican immigrants to the Chicago area, had a population of 34,835 individuals according to the 1980 Census. Of this number, 78% were of Hispanic origin, making Pilsen one of the two highest concentrations of Mexican-origin people in Chicago (the contiguous neighborhood of Little Village is the other highest concentration).

Considering the nature of the undercount problem, the 1980 number was probably low; the Latino Institute (Al Filo, 1986: p. 4) cites one estimate of the undercount of Latinos living in the Chicago area in 1980 as 12 percent (The Hispanic Almanac, 1984: p.12). Moreover, by 1986, Latinos accounted officially for 19 percent of the city's population, up from 14.1 percent in 1980. Since at least 60 percent of the Hispanics in Chicago are of Mexican-origin, it is reasonable to assume that Pilsen, as well as the rest of the Chicago area, has increased its percentage of Mexicans substantially since that time, a projection that is supported by our own observational accounts from our ongoing research in this area. [1]

This study consisted of three primary parts:

(1) We used a recent (1988) census form [2] (see appendix) on 39 households out of approximately 61 total within one selected block, asking residents usually one resident per household, (not always head of household) to complete the form while we observed. During this process we noted how residents completed the form (whether, for example, they asked many questions or few), which questionnaire items seemed the most problematic probing to determine why they were viewed as problematic, and any other information which either was volunteered by the residents or appeared to us as relevant to census taking.

(2) We followed the "try-out" of the census form with an informal ethnographic interview which elicited two kinds of information: their opinions and attitudes toward the census process and the questionnaire, and their attitudes toward and uses of oral and written language, including both Spanish and

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[1] Our other current study in the neighborhood, supported by the National Science Foundation, Linguistics Program, is identifying and analyzing oral and written language patterns and uses--in Spanish and English--among one social network of approximately 75 people. This social network is comprised of one center immigrant family and all the families intimately connected to it through kin and compadre relationships. We are collecting data through participant-observation, ethnographic interviews, and informal audio taping.

[2] The 1988 forms were those used in the "dress rehearsal" census in selected locations around the country.

English. The latter set of questions focused on both home and work contexts and included the acquistion and uses of oral language, reading, and writing.

(3) We completed a sociolinguistic analysis of both the short and the long versions of the census questionnaire (both in English and in Spanish) to ascertain mismatches between the formal varieties of English and Spanish used in the instrument (and the cultural assumptions embedded in them), and the oral Spanish and English spoken by those who were interviewed. In this analysis, we focused particularly on regional and social dialect differences, which are reflected primarily in syntax and vocabulary.

We used, then, three sources of data for our final analyses: field notes from observation, audiotape recordings of "try-outs" and interviews, and the information residents entered on the questionnaires themselves.

Staff for the study included the two principal investigators, Lucía Elías-Olivares and Marcia Farr, and two research assistants, one a graduate student, Gilbert Martinez, and one an undergraduate, Susana Bañuelos. Both of the students are of Mexican origin, although they were raised in Chicago. Both are bilingual and biliterate, and Mr. Martinez grew up in Pilsen. All four of us carried out the actual fieldwork, although the R.A.'s spent several months in the community prior to the fieldwork gathering information from local organizations and residents so that we could narrow our focus to one block.

Once the block was selected, the R.A.'s again spent approximately six weeks introducing themselves to residents, discussing the civic significance of the undercount problem and explaining the importance of the study to the census process and to the undercount problem. After this introductory period, the R.A.'s began to make appointments with residents for interviews in Spanish or English, whichever the residents preferred.

Sociodemographic Information on Population and Neighborhood

Chicago, Illinois has the third largest Hispanic population in the United States: 423,357 of the 3,000,078 residents, the majority being of Mexican descent. The city's Hispanic population more than doubled between 1970 and 1980, growing from 248,000 in 1970 to 524,000 in 1980, almost a 53% increase. To this we could add an unofficial estimate of Illinois' undocumented adult (older than 16 years of age) population, the majority of which lives in the Chicago metropolitan area. Some estimates run as high as 300,000, according to the Chicago Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Protection (Juárez-Robles, 1990). Other studies report a more conservative estimate of 135,000 (Warren and Passel, 1987). Whatever the estimate, there is every indication that the Hispanic population in Chicago will continue to grow due to migration and immigration patterns as well as fertility rates (Al Filo, 1986).

The largest Mexican-origin populations in Chicago are in the communities of South Lawndale, known as Little Village, which had 51,218 Mexican Americans in 1980, and the Lower West Side community known as Pilsen, which had 34,835. These are the first neighborhoods to which immigrants move, with more recent immigrants generally settling in Pilsen and moving to Little Village when they improve their economic situation. Pilsen was named for a city in Bohemia, which is now part of Czechoslovakia. Over the years, Pilsen has been a port-of-entry to Bohemians, Czechoslovakians, Lithuanians, Poles, Yugoslavs, and Italians; now it serves as a port-of-entry to a population of Hispanics which is predominantly Mexican.

As indicated, Mexicans make up at least 78 percent of Pilsen, a neighborhood bounded by Damen, 16th Street Canal and the south branch of the Chicago River. Pilsen has for several decades been a port-of-entry for Mexicans and Mexican-Americans (many of whom migrated from Texas). Prior to the 1880's, native Americans and Irish and German immigrants worked in the industries located there. Poles and Czechs began to move into the area in the mid-1880's and by 1900 they became the predominant ethnic groups. This was so until 1950 when the influx of Mexican immigrants began to radically transform the ethnic composition of the area.

Spanish is heard everywhere in Pilsen and Little Village. Mexican music pours out of record stores, restaurants and bars located on 18th Street and 26th Street, the commercial areas.

The presence of Mexican cultural and linguistic symbols and traditions reflects the strong presence of Mexican immigration to the area, the last major influx having occurred during the last twenty years.

The majority of those residing in Pilsen and Little Village concentrate all or most of their daily activities in these neighborhoods, since they have access there to all the stores and services that they need. Consequently, although there are second and third generation residents who speak English, the majority of those belonging to the first generation are Spanish monolinguals or incipient bilinguals.

The Process of Block Selection

In this project, our emphasis was on gathering highly valid data which could not be obtained except through ethnographic methods. To lower the costs we sacrificed representativeness; however, we decided to sample within the Mexican immigrant community in such a way as to ensure, as much as possible, that the people we interviewed and observed reflected the demographic parameters of the larger community as documented by The Chicago Fact Book Consortium, the Chicago Reporter, and the Latino Institute (which does research in this community). Thus we spent considerable time on the selection of the city block to be studied.

Our decision to focus on one block, rather than, for example, to use random sampling procedures throughout Pilsen to interview people, was based on the need we perceived to develop trust with potential interviewees. By working on the same block for months, we came to be recognized and known as "the people from the university" with whom it was safe to talk. Residents had time to "check us out" to determine whether or not they could trust us, and we firmly believe that, had we not proceeded in this way, we never would have obtained the number of cooperative interviews that we ultimately did. If we had been working on many different blocks throughout Pilsen, we could not have accumulated the reputation that we did, a reputation that allowed us a certain degree of acceptance. No doubt the facts that we spoke Spanish, that two of us were Mexican-origin and another Latin American, and that one of us grew up in the neighborhood helped, but even given all of these advantages, a relatively enduring presence on the block was a sine qua non for gathering valid data in this context.

We intended, then, to identify one city block which was as "typical" as possible of the larger Mexican immigrant community. Thus we narrowed our focus to the four census tracts identified by the 1980 Census as the area where forty percent of Pilsen's Mexican-origin residents lived in four tracts. By "typical" we meant a block in which most households had families which could be classified as Mexican in ethnicity, as working class by standards of income and education, and as predominantly immigrant by virtue of the fact that a majority of the adults had been born in Mexico. By "typical" we also meant a block which was physically typical of the Pilsen neighborhood, i.e., rows of houses, each of which were divided into two or three apartments.

We decided to place a major focus on the community of recent arrivals because we assumed this group would have a larger percentage of individuals missed by the Census, or individuals who would have difficulties providing the information requested by the Census. We presupposed as well that these would be the individuals with whom we would encounter more literacy and oral communication problems than others in the community (e.g., those raised in the U.S.).

After examining all available sources of demographic data dealing with the community of Pilsen, we continued to make contacts with residents of that area through our tutoring sessions at Casa Aztlan, a grass-roots community organization in Pilsen where literacy classes in English and Spanish are taught. These contacts proved to be very important in developing a relationship of mutual trust with the members of the community; such a relationship, of course, was crucial in obtaining the most accurate information possible for our study.

The chosen census tract is located between Racine and Laflin and between 16th St. and 22nd St. It is the most populated census tract in Pilsen (7,348), with the second highest percentage of Spanish-origin population (89.5%), and the second highest percentage of Mexican population (83%). Residents of this tract have a median family income of $12,275, according to the 1980 Census.

The selected census tract 3106 contains approximately 30 to 35 city blocks. We were able to eliminate many of these blocks for a variety of reasons; for example, seven blocks were eliminated because they were on commercial streets. On another multi-block street there were no houses all along one side because of railroad tracks; five blocks along this street were eliminated. Seven or eight more blocks were eliminated because they are in an industrial area. After eliminating all these blocks, we contacted various people from different local organizations to secure their help in approaching residents. Some of the organizations we contacted included Asociacion pro-Derechos Obreros, Casa Aztlan, Pilsen Neighbors, and 18th Street Development Corporation. Two of the officers from these organizations were especially helpful in providing us with the addresses of residents and registered voters who lived within the chosen census tract. We also communicated with the Chicago City Council alderman from Pilsen, and several other community leaders.

Before contacting the people from the list we had prepared, we eliminated more blocks within the census tract--those which contained schools, parking lots, abandoned houses, and playgrounds, all of which take up large portions of their block. After further surveying the neighborhood, we decided to concentrate on five blocks that were almost entirely residential. Using the lists, we contacted, on a door-to-door-basis, many of the residents who live on the five chosen blocks. Our main purpose was to find people who were well-known on their block and who also knew their neighbors. We expected that finding such people would facilitate our meeting their neighbors, by reducing suspicion on their part, making it easier for us to interview them.

After speaking to many of the residents, we narrowed our area down to two blocks, since each of these blocks contained a woman who knew many of her neighbors and who agreed to our using her name as a reference with her neighbors. Before making the final decision on one block, the entire census project staff met with these two women, Mrs. H and Mrs. V. We also made an approximate but close count of the houses, two-flats and apartment buildings on each of the two blocks. By doing this we were able to conclude that there were approximately 61 households on each block. We chose Mrs. V.'s block because she is more involved with her neighbors; her husband is a Democratic precinct captain and she herself is in charge of the Neighborhood Watch Program on the block.

Profile of Selected Participants

Of the 39 people interviewed, each household decided who among them would respond to the questionnaire, 21 were female and 18 were male. With regard to place of origin, 24 were born in Mexico, 12 were from the United States of Mexican parents, one was from Puerto Rico, and two were from El Salvador. The majority of those born in Mexico came from the central states, especially from Mexico and Guanajuato.

Regarding how many years they had lived in the United States, most of the 34 residents who talked about their length of residency in the United States had lived here quite a long time: over half (23) for at least 15 years and all but two for at least five years.

The composition of the block residents mirrors the composition of Pilsen in terms of types of occupation (Chicago Fact Book Consortium, 1984). Of the 39 people interviewed, 12 had manual labor jobs, eight were employed in white collar jobs, two were retired, one was unemployed, nine were homemakers, and eight did not report any type of employment.

The educational status of the 39 residents interviewed also reflects the situation of the community at large. Of the 37 persons who reported their level of education, three had never attended school, two had attended high school but did not indicate for how long, nine had received a high school diploma or G.E.D., two had some college experience and one had a Bachelor of Arts degree. The majority of those who had completed the eighth grade had done so in Mexico. Of the 12 people who chose to answer the questionnaire in English, only two had completed between 5 to 8 years of education; all the others had finished high school or had had some college experience. Thus the educational levels were generally higher for those who chose to do the questionnaire and interview in English, i.e., for those who were raised in the U.S.

The majority of those interviewed (20) considered themselves "mexicanos," whereas six preferred to be called "Mexican-American," and four preferred "Mexican". Notably (and in contrast to studies of the southwestern U.S.), residents unanimously objected to the terms "Chicano/a" and "Latino/a," generally associating these terms with "street language". One crucial difference between Chicago and the southwest, of course, is that Illinois was never a part of Mexico and thus does not have an "indigenous" Mexican-origin population. Rather, like all groups except Native Americans, the Mexican-origin population in Chicago has largely been built, especially in recent decades, by immigration from Mexico.

With regard to language skills, 36 of those interviewed reported having learned Spanish as a first language, and only two indicated that the first language spoken had been English. Thus Spanish was overwhelmingly the first language of residents, although 17--almost half--considered themselves bilingual; 10 of the bilinguals were more comfortable speaking Spanish and 7 preferred to speak English. Twelve of the bilinguals said they could speak Spanish and some words in English, whereas only one said he could speak only some words in Spanish. Of all the 39 people interviewed, only three said that they were Spanish monolinguals, and none reported that they considered themselves monolinguals in English. The overall picture is one of a wide range of self-reported bilingualism--almost no one reported being totally monolingual, either in Spanish or in English.

Literacy Patterns

The overall pattern here (at least by residents' self report) is one of fairly widespread basic (i.e., functional, as opposed to "critical") literacy skills. Only one person reported being unable to read or write (and one did not comment); the former was assisted by us in responding to the questionnaire, i.e. we asked the printed question orally. The rest reported varying combinations of literacy skills, some in Spanish, some in English, and some in both languages. About 10 people reported being biliterate. A much larger number, 23, reported being literate only in Spanish (these skills in general having been acquired in Mexican elementary school (primaria) or what is called in the U.S. "middle school" (secundaria). Finally, 14 people reported being literate in English. Interestingly, one person reported reading in Spanish but writing in English, and one other person reported the reverse: writing in Spanish and reading in English. This latter person indicated that although s/he could write some Spanish, s/he had difficulty reading it. This case is not as unusual as it may sound; our other ongoing ethnographic study in this neighborhood (Farr, 1989) has revealed people who learn to write (in Spanish) in order to write letters back to family and friends in Mexico, but who still say they "cannot read," presumably meaning reading with any fluency. Others learn to read first, then write, the model usually followed in formal schooling.

Another interesting pattern regarding the reported uses of literacy is in the work domain. Extremely few (five) persons reported reading or writing at work, and only one of these people reported using literacy in both languages. This low level of demand for literacy on the job is in itself a notable finding, especially in light of the perceived need for literacy skills in the workplace. It may be that in some more highly-paid (e.g., business and professional) occupations, more literacy is required, or that more jobs in the future will require it (The Bottom Line, 1988). Currently, however, most jobs held by the majority of residents of one city block in the heart of the Mexican-origin neighborhood in Chicago do not require literacy, at least by residents' self-report.

In stark contrast to the low level of reported workplace literacy, 32 people reported a range of reading activities in Spanish (15), English (nine), or both (eight), an additional 12 people (including the five who claimed to use literacy at work) reported using writing for non-work purposes, e.g., for personal and official letters, or for poems and stories. Two aspects of these figures seem important here: first, there seems to be a "hierarchy" between reading and writing in that many more people reported reading than writing activities, whether at work (five reading and 2 writing) or at home (32 reading and 12 writing). In addition, by far the most popular use of non-work writing was for personal letters (nine out of the 12 people). Second, it is clear that these residents use literacy far more often outside of work domains than in them; their literacy skills may, in fact, exceed the demands for them, at least in work contexts.

ANALYSES OF PROBLEMS

Field Work Problems

The problems we encountered during fieldwork are quite germane to Census concerns, since the problems we encountered are probably those that Census takers regularly encounter whenever they attempt to interview residents in a neighborhood such as Pilsen. In the majority of cases, Census interviews are attempted with those households that do not return the questionnaire by mail, and, since (given the results explained in later sections of this report) we would expect a low rate of return in neighborhoods such as the one in which we conducted our study, we think it safe to assume that many oral interviews will be attempted in such neighborhoods. A discussion of problems encountered in obtaining interviews, then, is highly relevant to the 1990 Census, and so it is provided here.

During the last week of February and throughout March, 1989 we concentrated on making appointments with the residents of the block. Because many people on the block did not have telephones, we were in some cases unable to confirm our appointments, and often when we arrived at their homes residents were not home. Other times we were unable to get into the appropriate buildings because of locked (outer) doors which had no doorbells. Other