

TARA GOLDSTEIN, *Two languages at work: Bilingual life on the production floor*.  
Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997. Pp. xvi, 277.

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For readers who are interested in learning how and why speakers select among competing language varieties, Tara Goldstein's critical ethnography of immigrant factory workers in Toronto, Canada provides compelling documentation. Goldstein was employed as on-site English as a Second Language teacher at Stone Specialties, a manufacturing company which hired large numbers of Portuguese-speaking workers from the Azores. The workplace E.S.L. classes were less successful than expected, so she undertook an in-depth ethnographic study to determine why.

Between January 1988 and March 1990, Goldstein systematically observed and taped the language practices of the predominately female workers and line supervisors and carried out 39 open-ended interviews to probe their language and cultural attitudes. With the help of a Portuguese/English bilingual research assistant, she mapped out the patterns of code selection and devised an analysis that challenged the assumption that English was vital to the factory workplace and questioned the very nature of the E.S.L. curriculum.

According to Goldstein, the Portuguese Azoran workers are second only to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada in their low socioeconomic status. As speakers of neither French nor English (languages protected by the Official Languages Act of 1969), they are linguistically subordinate. Despite well-intentioned governmental efforts to eliminate barriers to equal employment opportunities via workplace English classes, the Portuguese workers do not apply what they learn in class to the production floor, nor are they able to parley their linguistic training into higher paying jobs.

Certain Portuguese cultural beliefs regarding gender relations, family responsibilities, work ethic, material success, and the role of power brokers ("cunhas")

are key to understanding the use of language at Stone Specialties. The owners utilize Portuguese networks, churches, and media to recruit workers, and this has fostered the creation of a pseudo “family” at the factory which evokes all the cultural associations accorded biological families in Portugal. Unionization of the plant has failed due to the owners’ able manipulation of the workers’ loyalty to the “family.”

The Portuguese language has social value as a symbol of distinctness and identification with others in the “family”. It is the primary language of the assembly line and is used even by Latino and Italian workers. A worker who does not speak Portuguese on the line runs the risk of verbal criticism (known as “falar mau”) and social isolation, a risk few are willing to take.

English is associated with discourse and roles that are not part of line work. Only the supervisors, managers, owners, and E.S.L. teacher utilize it regularly. Although English is linked to better-paying positions, it does not provide access to friendship and solidarity for the Portuguese. Workers with English skills generally acquired them before coming to the factory. Knowing English does not usually facilitate job advancement, since there are educational pre-requisites which few of the immigrants possess. Only males (permitted by their culture to attend night classes) or young women who immigrated at an early age and completed high school in Canada, utilize English with regularity and attain better-paying jobs.

While many of the line workers participate in the plant’s lunch hour E.S.L. classes, most do so to socialize with their co-workers. Except for the two bilingual supervisors, the Portuguese do not use English outside the classroom. Most accept their subordinate positions because their salaries are comparatively higher than they were in

Portugal and (with hard work and sacrifice) permit them to eventually purchase a modest home, the paramount goal of the immigrant community. Whenever workers are forced to use English to ask for vacation time or to register a complaint with the owners, they utilize a bilingual supervisor as a language “broker” to translate for them.

The bilingual supervisors, while better paid, are a conflicted group, since they have access to both cultures and languages and are expected to show allegiance to both. In order to keep their jobs, they must sustain a management posture which is associated with English, but this very posture threatens their acceptance by the Portuguese “family.” Their solution is to demonstrate their adherence to Portuguese work values by helping the workers complete assembly line tasks, unlike the other supervisors.

There is little code-switching at Stone Specialties, given the strict role differentiation of the two languages. Goldstein’s monolingual presence stimulates some English use. In addition, the bilingual supervisors code-switch among themselves, although rarely with the workers. The only English phrases used on the line are formulaic commands like: “Okay, ladies;” “Everything back on the skids;” “ Start the line;” or “ Thanks.”

The major strength of Goldstein’s study lies in the workers’ life histories. These contextualize her comments and clarify how using English at work can actually threaten the workers’ sense of well-being. For many Portuguese women, working at low wages in a factory near home which is run by amiable owners and filled with fellow Portuguese may actually be preferable to learning English, getting a higher education, and seeking

employment in a distant community in which English would be required and no emotional support would be forthcoming.

Goldstein does not, however, abandon the idea of trying to teach English to this population. While acutely conscious of the hegemonic role that she is being forced to play in perpetuating existing power relations, she feels that it is possible for an E.S.L. teacher to challenge the existing social order and obtain greater opportunities for her students.

She admits that at Stone Specialties, the management-provided English classes do not create economic opportunities for most of the factory workers. However, she considers that the classes are empowering for a number of reasons. They serve as an important (and for most, the only ) source of exposure to English. In hard times, although all of the factory workers are vulnerable to lay-off, those with weak English skills are the least likely to find other jobs after being laid off. Thus the skills learned in class may help them find new employment. In addition, the dependence of the workers on language “brokers” to convey their grievances to management causes feelings of embarrassment, humiliation, and powerlessness. Finally, the workers’ English language limitations have significant familial implications, since their Canadian-raised children have a good grasp of English and serve as family translators, thus undermining parental authority.

For Goldstein, the key to making the factory E.S.L. classes serve as a liberating force is to utilize them to challenge the class, gender, and linguistic oppression facing the immigrant women working on the lines. She advocates a “critical pedagogy” (à la Freire) to provide working-class students with a framework for thinking about their social

positions and the ways in which they can increase their economic, social, and personal power. Such E.S.L. classes would give students opportunities to question their self-perceptions, the roles they play, and the potential for changing their society. A dialogic approach in which teachers and students participate as co-learners with the goal of critical thinking and personal transformation can enable students to visualize better working and living conditions and to act to achieve them.

Goldstein recommends an E.S.L. curriculum that acknowledges and respects the language boundaries that construct and are constructed by the workers' interpersonal interactions. Since using English with non-Portuguese speaking personnel is not stigmatized by the "family," she suggests organizing the curriculum around interactions with Canadian bosses, landlords, professionals, and bureaucrats in order to provide the workers with the linguistic resources necessary for improving their lives. In Goldstein's opinion, despite the many constraints of the Canadian political economy, "a critical pedagogy of E.S.L. does, nevertheless, have the potential to encourage increased, more informed and perhaps even momentarily empowering participation in existing Canadian society" (p. 241.). She does not indicate whether she is actually in a position to implement such an approach.

I was particularly interested in Goldstein's work because of the parallels I saw with our situation in Puerto Rico. Although English is required from first grade on through college, there is considerable resistance to the language accompanied by a fierce loyalty to the Spanish vernacular. Like the Azoran plant workers, many students in Puerto Rico argue that they do not require English in their daily lives since Spanish fills virtually all their needs. Of course, a major difference between the Azorans and Puerto

Ricans is that the former represent an oppressed immigrant group within a large nation, while the latter are the majority group in a small nation dominated by an outside power. Nevertheless, the similarities are quite thought-provoking.

I would recommend this book to readers involved in language planning, bilingualism, "liberation" pedagogy, or teaching English for Specific Purposes. The volume is theoretically and methodologically well-grounded and substantiated. Goldstein's analysis is cogently (if repetitively) argued, and she situates the case study within a thoroughly comparative framework which facilitates its application to other settings. The only significant weakness (which she fully acknowledges) is her lack of proficiency in Portuguese which forced her to depend on the interpersonal skills, diplomacy, and intuitions of a bilingual assistant.