

Ana Celia Zentella. 1997. **Growing up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York**. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. Pp. 323 + viii.

Growing up Bilingual is a moving depiction of the process of “doing being bilingual” in a U.S. Spanish-speaking community. Via a carefully crafted fusion of qualitative and quantitative research methods, Zentella, Professor of Black and Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, City University New York, presents the bittersweet stories of five working-class Puerto Rican girls and their families in El Barrio, East Harlem. In twelve chapters, we follow the girls from childhood through young adulthood and witness their acquisition and utilization of multiple language varieties within the complex speech community of *el bloque* (“the block”).

Chapter 1 establishes the “anthropolitical linguistic” goal of the volume-- “to understand and facilitate a stigmatized group’s attempts to construct a positive self within an economic and political context that relegates its members to static and disparaged ethnic, racial, and class identities, and that identifies them with static and disparaged linguistic codes” (13). In order to achieve this goal, Zentella carried out extended participant observation and audio and video recording with 20 families and their 37 children beginning in 1979 and ending more than a dozen years later. She then selected five of the girls for detailed analysis. They and their dense and multiplex social networks are introduced in Chapter 2, along with an extended transcription of a tape recording which successfully demonstrates the interpenetrating and multidialectal nature of bilingualism on the block.

Chapter 3 details the linguistic features of the varieties contained within this bilingual/multidialectal repertoire, namely Popular Puerto Rican Spanish, Standard PR Spanish, English-dominant Spanish, Puerto Rican English, African American Vernacular English, Hispanized English, and Standard NYC English. Specific codes were identified with certain social networks; however, members moved fluidly among different varieties because of changes in interlocutors and/or speech situations. No domain was reserved for one variety alone due to the interaction of monolingual speakers and bilingual speakers who practiced frequent code-switching. Despite considerable exposure to Spanish and varying proficiencies in the language, the overwhelming preference among the school-age children was for English, indication of the pervasive influence of the dominant culture and the language shift in progress.

Chapter 4 takes us into the children’s homes. Through exhaustive ethnographic description, we witness the daily interactions, child-rearing practices, familial conflicts, and language attitudes of block residents. We soon discover that “ultimately there were almost as many language patterns as families because of the unique configuration of several variables, including the number of caregivers and children, and differences in language proficiency, education, bilingual literacy skills, years in the US, gender and age of each speaker” (58). A major developmental task for each child was the deciphering of the complexity and richness of these variables. As might be expected, some were more adept

at this than others, and the five girls varied considerably in their linguistic proficiency in each of their codes as well as their metalinguistic awareness.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Zentella examines, by means of ethnographic and statistical analysis, the nature of “Spanglish” on *el bloque*--the many factors that triggered code-switches, the question of language dominance, and the utilization of code-switching as a conversational strategy, as well as the specific grammatical constituents and linguistic constraints involved. The content of these chapters will be familiar to readers who have followed her extensive research over the years. In general, Zentella’s findings sustain and extend much of what has been discovered in similar sociolinguistic analyses of other U.S. Latino communities. She makes it clear that English-Spanish code-switching is “a creative style of bilingual communication that accomplishes important cultural and conversational work” which she likens to a dance in which partners respond smoothly to each other’s steps and turns (113). The girls learned early on how to manipulate their codes in keeping with block norms, immediate goals, individual styles, and societal expectations about the respective roles of English and Spanish. Zentella concludes that their code-switching was “a way of saying that they belonged to both worlds, and should not be forced to give up one for the other” (114). Rather than being an a-lingual hodge-podge (as many claimed), it was actually a demonstration of adept bilingual juggling. Nevertheless, such skills were generally disparaged by outsiders and insiders alike.

By the beginning of the 1990's, *el bloque* had disintegrated as a viable Puerto Rican speech community due to the displacement of its members after arson and drug dealing had damaged the physical environment and an influx of African American residents had altered the language ecology. The five girls, as adolescents, went their separate ways. Their new social networks changed them linguistically in unexpected directions; however, none fully developed the bilingual/biliterate potential they exhibited in their early years. Bilingualism was far less important to them than was daily survival in the often harsh reality of their lives.

Zentella continued to stay in touch with the girls in their new homes. In Chapter 7 she gives a sensitive and perceptive account of their struggles to articulate their cultural and linguistic identity in the face of many personal crises. Again the rich ethnographic detail of the book allows us to survey the often contradictory actions and perspectives of the girls as they confronted racism, teenage motherhood, interrupted schooling, unemployment, and broken dreams. Chapter 8 explores in even greater depth the special case of Isabel, labeled as “learning disabled,” who developed a special emotional bond with Zentella that persists to this day. Isabel’s painfully touching story exemplifies the deleterious effect that misinformation regarding the process of bilingualism (especially among professionals like doctors, teachers, and social workers) can have upon the treatment of language minority children.

Zentella, whose own bilingualism has been a source of personal strength and cultural and political insight, is very much concerned with the future of Spanish in

communities like *el bloque*. For this reason, in Chapter 9 she scrutinizes the state of the language among the children. She assesses their production of verb morphemes within the Spanish tense-mood-aspect system “in light of the pervasive language shift that the community was undergoing as they were being raised” (179). She demonstrates that while there was some attrition or simplification of forms, in general “most of the Spanish they spoke met prescriptivist norms, and they also proved their communicative competence in other vital ways” (182) which enabled them to overcome any grammatical limitations. Once again, the girls varied significantly in the sorts of structures they favored and avoided, as well as in their self-assessment as Spanish speakers. Most of the problems they encountered with Spanish verbs were probably due to the fact that their Spanish development was incomplete at the time when English became their primary language. Those with the most extensive repertoires of standard verb forms had either studied in Puerto Rico, participated in bilingual programs, or lived in Spanish-dominant households. Readers who might wish to blame the families for permitting the shift to English to occur are cautioned by Zentella to not “ignore the extent to which members of the first generation hope to spare the next generation the educational, employment, medical, and legal problems they endured” (212).

That next generation is precisely the focus of Chapter 10, in which we revisit the five girls, now adults, and meet their children. Zentella compares patterns of child-rearing in Puerto Rico and white middle class Anglo America and illustrates how the present generation of New York Puerto Ricans is variably exposed to contradictory cultural norms from both traditions. Once more, through fine-grained ethnographic description, we are taken through the daily routines of the families, with particular focus on their language use. The English shift so apparent in the early lives of the five girls is even more pointed in the lives of their children-- “...most of the Spanish addressed to infants and toddlers was in short sentences and basic tenses, all of the mothers spoke English more often than Spanish, and the majority of their children’s first sentences were in English” (241). While the mothers were adamant that their children would be bilingual, few were actively fostering that condition, assuming perhaps that the community patterns operative during their own childhoods (but no longer viable) would provide the necessary ingredients.

To complete the intergenerational comparison, in Chapter 11 Zentella probes the life of Isabel’s daughter, Maria. Like her mother, Maria was labeled as “developmentally delayed,” probably due to a combination of hereditary, familial, linguistic, educational, and health factors. Her learning difficulties and her mother’s well-intentioned efforts to prepare her for pre-school resulted in her eventual refusal to speak anything but English and her consequent emotional estrangement from her Spanish-dominant father. With Zentella’s assistance, Maria is now receiving treatment for her problems, but considerable academic and linguistic damage has occurred.

The final chapter of the volume is dedicated to the premise that very little is known about what it takes to raise a bilingual child in the U.S. and that expanding linguistic repertoires should be a national priority. Although lack of English proficiency is perennially blamed for Puerto Ricans’ high drop-out rates, unemployment, and political

powerlessness, in reality English is supplanting Spanish for most second and third generation New York Puerto Ricans, while academic and economic success continue to elude them. “English fluency, even monolingualism, is not the guaranteed passport to educational and economic progress that organizations like US English claim” (263). Ironically, other Latinos with less English proficiency have advanced more.

Zentella contemplates why this might be so, rejecting facile and damaging stereotypes about “culture of poverty,” “underclass,” and “welfare dependency.” While not claiming to have the answer to the paradox, she asserts that any research on the discrepancies among ethnic groups in the U.S. must take into account race, class, gender, occupation, time, size, destination, and objectives of immigration flow, political relationship with the United States, and economic infrastructure of areas of residence, factors which contribute more to the academic and economic success of a group than do English proficiency or dialect, both of which are themselves determined by those very factors.

Throughout the volume, Zentella quotes extensively from the residents of *el bloque*, and we hear their frustrated longing to live the “American dream,” which as she aptly points out is not dreamt in English only. Speakers of other languages in the United States represent untapped national resources. The subtractive language policies of the past which are in vogue again only increase their linguistic insecurity and undermine their potential contribution to U.S. society. Proponents of cultural and linguistic exclusivity ignore the tangible benefits of broadening the national repertoire to meet the global demands of the 21st century.

Zentella favors quality, maintenance-oriented, bilingual education that expands the linguistic repertoires of both students and teachers. She advocates a “teaching from strengths” approach in which teachers build upon what their students know how to say and do in order to develop proficiency in other areas. In such an approach, teachers discard the usual equation of standard features with intelligence, educational commitment, and morality, and accept linguistic and cultural differences without blaming the community or the parents for those differences. Teachers allow students to express themselves without constant correction of their language. They impart formal uses of standard English and Spanish in ways that “supplement, not supplant” the children’s home varieties. Knowledge about the vernacular dialect transfers over to the learning of the standard dialect, and both co-exist peacefully, enhancing the students’ self-identity and survival skills. Students are encouraged to become “junior ethnographers” and identify contextually appropriate language usage.

Zentella cautions that “merely changing the language of the classroom does not transform an educational system” (282). She would also like to see the development of a Freirean “critical pedagogy” which challenges traditional student/teacher power relationships and gives students a voice in questioning their own reality. In this process, bilingualism itself can be a major theme of discourse.

She concludes by stating that the major problem facing the U.S. is not linguistic and cultural diversity, as some would have it, but rather “an inability to accept an expanded definition of what it is to be a US American today” (286).

Growing Up Bilingual is a profoundly compelling account of what it means to come of age in an economically impoverished but linguistically rich cultural environment. Without romanticizing an often grim situation, Zentella tells a story that has long needed to be told. It should be read by every teacher and social worker who deals with Puerto Rican children. It should also occupy a prominent spot on the bookshelf of anyone seriously interested in language policy, ethnolinguistics, applied linguistics, bilingual education, ethnic identity, or Hispanic studies.

While the book is statistically and scientifically rigorous, it is eminently readable, and the long ethnographic passages shed considerable light on the vicissitudes of life in El Barrio. As one who has done ethnographic fieldwork on nearby blocks, I can personally attest to the accuracy of Zentella’s rendering which made me relive and rethink my own experiences in that same intensely vibrant community. My only criticism would be that the book took so long to come out, since it has been sorely needed and will be surely appreciated.

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