

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Two Languages at Work: Bilingual Life on the Production Floor by Tara Goldstein

Review by: Alicia Pousada

Source: *Language in Society*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (Sep., 1999), pp. 460-463

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4168949>

Accessed: 31-10-2018 22:15 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Cambridge University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Language in Society*

JSTOR

TARA GOLDSTEIN, *Two languages at work: Bilingual life on the production floor.*  
Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997. Pp. xvi, 277. DM 198.00.

Reviewed by ALICIA POUSADA  
English Dept., University of Puerto Rico  
Rio Piedras, PR 00931  
[apousada@coqui.net](mailto:apousada@coqui.net)

For readers who are interested in learning how and why speakers select among competing language varieties, Goldstein's critical ethnography of immigrant factory workers in Toronto provides compelling documentation. She was employed as an on-site teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL) at Stone Specialties, a manufacturing company that hired large numbers of Portuguese-speaking workers from the Azores. The workplace ESL 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 she carried out thirty-nine 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. Her analysis challenged the assumption that English was vital to the factory workplace, and it questioned the very nature of the ESL curriculum.

According to Goldstein, the Portuguese Azorean workers are second only to the Aboriginal peoples of Canada in their low socio-economic status. As speakers of neither French nor English (which are protected by the Official Languages Act of 1969), they are linguistically subordinate. Despite well-intentioned government 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 parlay 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 crucial in understanding the use of language at Stone Specialties. The owners utilize Portuguese networks, churches, and media to recruit workers; this has fostered the creation of a pseudo-family at the factory, evoking all the cultural associations accorded biological families in Portugal. Unionization of the plant has failed because of 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 there even by Hispanic 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. By contrast, English is associated with discourse and roles that are not part of line work. Only the supervisors, managers, owners, and ESL teacher utilize it regularly. Although

## REVIEWS

English is linked to better-paying positions, it does not provide access to friendship and solidarity for the Portuguese. Workers who have English skills generally acquired them before coming to the factory. Knowing English does not usually facilitate job advancement, since there are other educational prerequisites that 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.

Although many of the line workers participate in the plant's lunch-hour ESL classes, most do so to socialize with their coworkers. 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; with hard work and sacrifice, these salaries permit them eventually to 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, though better paid, are a conflicted group. They have access to both cultures and languages, and are expected to show allegiance to both. To keep their jobs, they must sustain a management posture that 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 to complete assembly-line tasks, something the other supervisors do not do.

There is little code-switching at Stone Specialties, given the strict role differentiation of the two languages. Goldstein's monolingual presence stimulated some English use. In addition, the bilingual supervisors code-switch among themselves, though 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 – one 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 where 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. Though acutely conscious of the hegemonic role that she is forced to play in perpetuating existing power relations, she feels that it is possible for an ESL teacher to challenge the existing social order, and to 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 other reasons. They serve as an important source – and for most workers, the ONLY source – of exposure to English. In hard times, though all the factory workers are vulnerable to layoff, 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 ESL 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 Paulo 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 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 ESL 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 ESL does, nevertheless, have the potential to encourage increased, more informed and perhaps even momentarily empowering participation in existing Canadian society” (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 with the situation in Puerto Rico. Although English is required from first grade through college, there is considerable resistance to the language, accompanied by a fierce loyalty to the Spanish vernacular. Like the Azorean 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 Azoreans 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 thought-provoking.

## REVIEWS

I 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 (though 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.

(Received 8 May 1998)

ROBERT J. BAUMGARDNER (ed.), *South Asian English: Structure, use, and users.* (English in the global context.) Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. Pp. xx, 286. Hb \$44.95, pb \$16.95.

Reviewed by JAMES W. GAIR  
*Modern Languages, Cornell University*  
Ithaca, NY 14853  
jwg2@cornell.edu

Fifty years after the nations of South Asia gained their independence from Britain, the language of the colonialists remains very much alive in the region. In fact, in some respects it is even more alive than at the time of departure – as witnessed by the efflorescence of South Asian writers in English of international stature, to the extent that the *New Yorker* has devoted the major part of an issue to them (June 23–30, 1997).

Given the omnipresence of English in the foreigner-local interface and its visibility in the media and signage, the casual visitor to South Asian countries might be forgiven for concluding that English was more widely and deeply situated there than it actually is. This surface visibility masks the fact that a significant command of English is very much a minority phenomenon, and that it is a first language for virtually no one. Actually, the exact percentage of the population that controls it significantly is not easy to determine. In his preface to this book, Braj Kachru claims that 6 percent is a conservative figure; but Baumgardner gives a figure of 3 percent, in line with many other estimates. One thing that is clear, however, is that English in the region has importance, visibility, and a range of functions that belie its small minority status. Also, as Sidney Greenbaum points out in his afterword (echoing Baumgardner and Kachru), even the 3 percent estimate translates into 33 million people. Thus users in India alone – 25 million at the time of writing – give India third rank among countries in which English is spoken (p. 242).

The present volume contains sixteen articles selected from fifty-eight presented at the First International Conference on English in South Asia, organized by Baumgardner and held in Pakistan in January 1989. One unusual aspect of that