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Book Review: Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs. By Norma Mendoza-Denton. New Directions in Ethnography. London: Blackwell, 2008. xiv + 339, index. ISBN: 063123490X

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Journal of English Linguistics 2008 36: 374

DOI: 10.1177/0075424208325191

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But comparable English examples are British versus American spelling differences, such as *centre/center*, *fulfil/fulfill*, and *colour/color*. Other English examples are the joke orthographies for regional dialects on both sides of the Atlantic, such as American “Tawk Southun” and a volume recently sent to me by a friend in Northern Ireland: *John Pepper’s Complete Norn Iron Haunbook*.

Chapter 6 deals with the perennial concern of spelling reform. In English this has ranged from the substitution of a radically different alphabet to the regularization of existing patterns in standard orthography. Radical solutions include the Shaw alphabet, created as a response to a prize established by George Bernard Shaw’s will and thus far used mainly in a printed edition of his play *Androcles and the Lion*. More conservative solutions include the relatively modest revisions proposed by the Simplified Spelling Society (founded in 1908) or its current efforts simply to raise awareness of the issue (<http://www.spellingsociety.org/>).

Chapter 7 is a conclusion to the book, which might be summarized in these words from its final paragraph: “Orthographies are not simply remarkable technological achievements, though they are that. They are also complex social and cultural achievements, best viewed as sets of practices—some highly conventionalised and others relatively unconstrained. . . . They are microcosms of language itself, where the issues of history, identity, ethnicity, culture and politics which pervade language are also prominent. . . . Just as we—readers, writers, speakers and scholars—celebrate the creativity of language as a whole, let us embrace the creativity, adaptability and cosmopolitan nature of orthography” (167).

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Homegirls: Language and Cultural Practice among Latina Youth Gangs. By Norma Mendoza-Denton. New Directions in Ethnography. London: Blackwell, 2008. xiv + 339, index. ISBN: 063123490X.

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Norma Mendoza-Denton’s *Homegirls* provides a detailed interdisciplinary study of young Latina gang members at a Northern California high school. The majority of the book presents a detailed ethnographic account; three of the final chapters present a quantitative sociolinguistic study of the speech of young women at the high school.

The introduction explicitly addresses the intended audiences for the book, including undergraduate students, professional linguists and anthropologists, middle and high school teachers, general readers, and the “homegirls” included in the research. Mendoza-Denton succeeds in writing for this diverse range of audiences. Although the final chapters include technical detail on quantitative sociolinguistics that might not be easy reading for all of these diverse groups, the book contains outstanding and engaging ethnographic writing that is quite accessible to a broad audience.

The first chapter presents background on the ethnographic research. Mendoza-Denton describes the school where the research took place and explains how she began doing fieldwork there. The chapter emphasizes the different language ideologies held by students associated with different social groups at the school, focusing on a young woman who presents herself as not speaking English well (despite being quite fluent) for ideological reasons. Mendoza-Denton uses this girl’s experience to question the prevailing language ideologies used to determine “proficiency” within the educational system.

The second chapter discusses the early stages of ethnographic research, describing how Mendoza-Denton became familiar with the gangs and introducing the distinctions between *Sureñas* and *Norteñas*, the rival gangs at the center of the research. Mendoza-Denton describes her introduction to “clowning,” a form of speech play involving ritual insults common among *Norteñas*, as a case study for discussing issues of cross-cultural communication. Chapter 3 discusses the *Sur/Norte* distinction in detail, challenging prevailing assumptions in sociocultural research on gang members. Mendoza-Denton challenges the racism and sexism inherent in crime-focused representations of gang members by school officials, academics, and the criminal justice system. Mendoza-Denton argues that a view of gangs as street political organizations allows insight into the ideological foundations of the rival gangs that is masked by the racial/gender profiling rampant in much research on gangs.

Chapter 4 further explores the ideologies of the *Norte/Sur* distinction framed by the concept of “hemispheric localization,” a semiotic process that maps global political ideologies contrasting the Northern and Southern hemispheres onto local contexts. Mendoza-Denton eloquently demonstrates the fluidity of boundaries between gangs through discussions of those who have changed gang affiliations and cultural norms such as exogamous dating practices (i.e., young women do not date members of their own gang). The fifth chapter focuses on ways of being *macha* as a gendered form of displaying toughness. In an extended discussion of the ideologies underlying makeup practices among gang members, Mendoza-Denton challenges the white bias underlying feminist analyses of cosmetics and beauty products. The young women use makeup to make themselves appear darker, emphasizing the gang ideology of ethnic pride. Cosmetics serve as a means of indexing a *macha* subjectivity, marking physical and emotional strength. For example, the distance which eyeliner extends past the eye is an indexical marker of aggression and willingness to fight. For the young women in the study, being *macha* includes being financially and emotionally

independent as adults, marking a desire for gender equality. Mendoza-Denton uses the young women's discourse of being *macha* to challenge views of gang membership as causing social injury to young women.

Chapter 6 examines the ways in which language use and material culture serve to establish distributed memory (a shared sense of common experiences tied to group membership) within the gangs. Mendoza-Denton uses Halliday's concept of "anti-language" to discuss discursive practices of "talking shit" (gossip intended to aggrandize one's reputation) and the use of language games among gang members. She extends the study of linguistic memorializing practices to networks for circulating poetry notebooks, photographs, and artwork among gang members. Mendoza-Denton uses these various texts to discuss the economy of affect within the gang, focusing on the ideology of "Smile Now, Cry Later" through which the young women link an outward emotional reservedness with their common experiences of immigration.

The next three chapters (7 through 9) switch from an ethnographic approach to fairly traditional variationist analysis of language variation among the gang members. Chapter 7 outlines the theoretical background for the analysis. Mendoza-Denton frames her analysis by linking sociolinguistic variation to exemplar theories in other linguistic subfields. After a brief history of variationist sociolinguistics, Mendoza-Denton presents her analysis of the "third wave" of variationist sociolinguistics (Eckert 2005), which applies traditional variationist methodology to local communities of practice determined through ethnographic research. The chapter ends with a critical discussion of the methodological issues related to sociolinguistic interviews.

Chapter 8 presents a detailed variationist analysis of variable articulations of /ɪ/ (the vowel in "bit"). Mendoza-Denton gives a clear and thorough discussion of methodology, even including MRI images to demonstrate the distinction between /i/ and /ɪ/. In keeping with strict methodological principles of the variationist paradigm, the analysis is restricted to those young women who are native English speakers. Rather than assume a binary opposition between the two phonemes, Mendoza-Denton analyzes variation in high front vowels according to three categories: /i/, "raised /ɪ/," and /ɪ/. The women are divided into categories based on ethnographic observation to examine the ways in which pronunciations of /ɪ/ vary across the social groups in the school. The results suggest that raising of /ɪ/ is significantly more frequent among core members of both gangs. Mendoza-Denton discusses the history of raised /ɪ/ both in terms of English dialectology and in terms of marking forms of Latina identity. Interestingly, the *Norte/Sur* distinction emphasized in the earlier parts of the book seems rather irrelevant to the patterning of /ɪ/.

The ninth chapter analyzes the use of what Mendoza-Denton calls "Th-pro" forms (*nothing, something, everything*). These forms show the highest levels of /ɪ/-raising, and Mendoza-Denton uses this fact to link phonological variation with discursive patterns of usage. After discussing the history of Th-pro forms in English and previous work on these forms in pragmatics, Mendoza-Denton argues for the grammaticalization of these forms as discourse markers. Mendoza-Denton suggests that

the use of Th-pro forms as discourse markers serves to mark Latina ethnic identity, particularly when combined with /ɪ/-raising and when pronounced with a [t] instead of an interdental fricative. Mendoza-Denton discusses the implications of this particular pronunciation (typically associated with second-language learners) by native speakers of English.

The final chapter presents a short conclusion. After discussing phonetic awareness through a discussion of Mock Spanish usage with one of the young women in the study, Mendoza-Denton presents an overview of the main goals of the work, emphasizing the goal of linking macro and micro variables in sociocultural analysis.

Homegirls is a very impressive work. The ethnography is beautifully written, combining highly engaging narratives with important theoretical issues. One of the most interesting aspects of the work is the use of varied methodologies that cross the traditional division between linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics. Mendoza-Denton skillfully glides across a wide range of methodologies, including narrative reflexivity, participant observation, discourse and textual analysis, Varbrul analysis, and discourse pragmatics. The sociolinguistic analyses present very different results from the ethnographic research, splitting the work into two distinct sections. While the ethnographic portions of the book focus almost exclusively on the *Sur/Norte* distinction, this distinction plays little role in the quantitative results, which show variation at the level of gang membership rather than at the level of individual gangs. The sociolinguistic portions of the work present interesting and important findings for the study of language variation and change. In particular, the ways in which Mendoza-Denton links phonological change with discursive patterns of usage are an important contribution to the study of language change. Mendoza-Denton's ability to work within multiple frameworks raises new and important questions about what we can learn from different methodological approaches. The ethnographic portions of the book present a very nuanced understanding of the fluidity of membership in social categories. Yet the quantitative paradigm requires categorization of both individual research subjects and the continuum of articulatory production for /ɪ/-raising. This raises the question of the degree to which the difference in results is related to the difference in methodologies. While the inclusion of ethnographic information in "third wave" sociolinguistics certainly provides for more subtle analyses of variation, the outputs of programs like Varbrul cannot approach the level of analytic detail possible from ethnographic research because they require sorting data into closed categories. There are, of course, other statistical approaches capable of analyzing continuous data (e.g., Nguyen 2006), and one wonders if a different approach would have found quantitative evidence linking language to the *Norte/Sur* distinction.

Homegirls addresses a wide range of important issues for varied audiences. The research on language ideology and second-language learning will be of interest to researchers in education, TESOL, second-language acquisition, and sociocultural linguistics. The ethnographic research has important implications for the study of ethnicity and gender that extend well beyond the culture of youth gangs. The quantitative

research demonstrates important relationships between processes of grammaticalization, discourse, and phonological change. Mendoza-Denton succeeds in creating an accessible and interesting work that directly addresses important theoretical issues and demonstrates the relevance of research in sociocultural linguistics in addressing larger social issues.

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Simpler Syntax. By Peter W. Culicover and Ray Jackendoff. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005. xvii + 589. ISBN: 0-19-927108-9.

DOI: 10.1177/0075424208327510

Simpler Syntax is an ambitious book based on the following premise: linguists should conclude from the past 50 years of research that the syntactocentric approach of mainstream generative grammar (MGG) is no longer tenable, and now there is a need to move to a less parsimonious account where the syntactic component of language is simpler and more explanatory work is done by other components of the grammar, particularly semantics and pragmatics. Culicover and Jackendoff (C&J) compare their approach to a toolkit: languages have a set of possibilities for pulling together structure and meaning, but each language has a different way of matching these tools to its various constructions.¹ This view leads to a consistent manner of argumentation throughout the book. For a given construction, C&J will show that there are semantic and pragmatic factors that govern the phenomena that MGG has attributed to an elaborate syntax. Since the semantics and pragmatics are required then anyway, they can also be used to explain properties previously attributed to syntax, thus reducing the syntactic complexity of the grammar.

The tome covers a wide range of topics. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the authors' approach. Chapters 2 and 3 give a historical look at the development of generative grammar, particularly in the Chomskyan tradition, speaking positively of the earlier directions the research went in but questioning the reasons for the latter stages of Government & Binding and Minimalism. In particular, C&J assert that the latter