

Indigenous Latino immigrants learn Spanish to help integrate, seek upward mobility

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With a growing diversity in the population of Latino immigrants to the United States, learning Spanish instead of just English is becoming an important factor for some in assimilation and upward social mobility, according to a study by a University of Kansas researcher.

"Latinos come from all different backgrounds, not just one large group," said Andrea Gómez Cervantes, a KU doctoral candidate in sociology. "Those with indigenous origins may speak a lot of different languages, such as Mixteco, Chuj or Tlapaneco, and not necessarily Spanish."

As more indigenous Latino immigrants from communities that have been historically marginalized from social services and institutions—including education—in Mexico and Guatemala, arrive to long-term established Latino communities in the United States, many learn Spanish.

Indigenous-origin Latinos learn Spanish through interacting with Spanish-speaking Latinos in their neighborhoods and at work, Gómez Cervantes said. Learning Spanish aids indigenous Latinos as they integrate into their communities, learn about work opportunities and gain important information on how to navigate U.S. social institutions. In contrast, non-indigenous Latinos are likely to learn English after arriving in the United States, she said.

Gómez Cervantes will present her findings Aug. 13 at the American Sociological Association's annual meeting in Philadelphia.

She conducted interviews with more than 60 indigenous and non-indigenous Latino immigrant members of mixed-status families, and she engaged in 18 months of ethnographic participant observations with Latino immigrants in Kansas.

"With indigenous groups that have migrated to Kansas, many of them actually learn Spanish in their communities here and not necessarily in their country of origin," Gómez Cervantes said. "Being able to speak Spanish becomes very important because now we have come to a time where there has been a growth in the Hispanic population over time."

Many bilingual people in Latino communities tend to serve as gatekeepers for resources and information about jobs and social services, she said. For indigenous groups, if they can gain Spanish skills, they are able to gain access as well, though it's likely more difficult than those who learn English.

"Their experiences are very different from the non-indigenous Latinos, so we need to understand why that is," Gómez Cervantes said. "Because of the social context that makes it harder for indigenous-origin Latinos to access these resources and also incorporate into the way that non-indigenous Latinos are able to."

The barrier can become apparent in more serious environments like court cases or legal matters in which immigrants seek asylum, because these processes can be much more difficult for someone who does not speak English or Spanish, languages where there are readily available interpreters.

Another dividing point among indigenous and non-indigenous Latino immigrants is that those able to learn English language have likely worked at places where most of their co-workers also spoke English. And they also had access to formal English-language classes. While

those first learning Spanish worked with co-workers who spoke Spanish and had limited access and little opportunities to engage in English-language classes. Thus, the working environments and resources available also open different language learning opportunities for indigenous and non-indigenous Latinos.

The findings show the growing diversity within the Latino population and address implications for communities that aim to provide [language](#) learning classes for [immigrant](#) groups. The research also can help those seeking to help [indigenous groups](#) preserve their native languages or those developing policies that could potentially help immigrants integrate into their communities in the United States, she said.

"It does show that for states that have English-only laws," Gómez Cervantes said, "that it's not necessarily as useful as giving immigrants opportunities to use their own languages to embrace different languages and different cultures."

Provided by University of Kansas

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