

Q&A: Even among immigrants, English is the preferred language in Miami

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For nearly a decade, FIU sociolinguist Phillip Carter has researched Miami English—a variety of English with subtle structural influence from Spanish, mostly spoken by second-, third- or fourth-generation native English speakers. Credit: Florida International University

Spanish is often framed as both essential and deeply rooted in Miami, a necessity to "get by" living in the 305.

In certain ways, it is. In other ways it is not, says FIU sociolinguist Phillip Carter.

While both Spanish and English are spoken in South Florida, according to his latest study, English is still viewed as "more important."

Following on the heels of his [Miami English dialect research](#) that went viral and garnered widespread national attention last year, Carter's latest research continues to look at how [language](#) is used in the 305. Alongside Salvatore Callesano, assistant professor of linguistics at University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Carter examined the nonconscious biases people harbor with regard to hearing English and Spanish.

Not exactly an easy task.

As Carter points out, biases can be so ingrained in us, we're not even aware of them. Biases with regard to language, for example, might influence what we think about other people: their level of education, employment, values and more.

In this Q&A, Carter breaks down the study's findings [published](#) in *The*

International Journal of Bilingualism, as well as what surprised him most and what he hopes Miamians take away from it.

You've spent over a decade studying language in Miami, and now you're very well known around the world for your work on Miami English. But as a sociolinguist, you're documenting how and why people use language. How does this study fit into that?

I see the story of language in Miami as being like a 10,000-piece jigsaw puzzle.

You can create a section of puzzle that stands alone. For example, you can start putting certain pieces together: the Cuban Revolution, that leads to Spanish-English contact and then the Miami English dialect. Sure, that looks like a story onto itself or a standalone puzzle. It is in a way. But it's also not disconnected from other things happening with language, identity, politics, ethnicity and so forth in South Florida.

So, when you have Spanish and English in contact it's not only producing linguistic effects that yield Spanglish or Miami English, but also major sociological questions, like: How do people judge one another for the way they speak?

Spanish and English are not set up here as "coequal." People absorb the message: Yes, there are two languages spoken here, but they matter in different ways: One language takes you this way, the other takes you that way. One may even be more important than the other.

And what does that tell us?

Almost immediately after coming to Miami what struck me was discrepancies in how one language is used over another in different spaces. I was interested in thinking about how the narrative of Spanish being essential in Miami is both true and not true at the same time. The goal was to find a way to study how people mentally represent those narratives and their sociological reality.

For example, maybe someone says, "I want to pass Spanish down to my kid." But the data shows that doesn't always happen. Instead, kids tend to choose English and not Spanish when they have a choice to speak either language. Sometimes this is a subtle preference for English and a subtle rejection of Spanish, and sometimes this is a very active preference for English and active rejection of Spanish. In either case, this means there are things in society working against that parent's wish to pass down Spanish. It's not that people don't try to implement it. It's more like they are trying to swim upstream.

Why does that happen? That's what we wanted to study and understand.

Measuring preference seems tricky. Because people are so complex. How did you scratch beneath the surface?

Yes, that's true. You can ask people, "What do you think about Spanish and English in Miami?" And we have done precisely that in another study. What they might say is not always—or does not always—govern how they behave.

That's because we have two systems in our cognition: implicit and explicit. Most habitual behavior has some explicit and implicit elements, but we know implicit elements can be distinctive.

Let me give you an example. Say you get on public transportation. There's a person with an open seat next to them. And then another empty seat somewhere else. Say you choose the seat that's not next to the person. That choice could be determined because you have an explicit belief for some reason about the person, tied to a negative stereotype—and you're consciously aware of it and very deliberately make the decision to avoid them.

On the other hand, maybe you have an implicit association at the level of non-conscious awareness, so even without know you're doing it, your implicit psychology kind of makes the decision for you. The same thing can happen with language.

When I started reading the social psychology literature, I came across Implicit Association Test (IAT)—made popular in the [mainstream media](#)—I knew it could be a tool to let us get at implicit bias, and better see what people were thinking in those snap judgment moments that happen at the level of a millisecond.

We can absorb or attach negative associations to one language or another. Say, our parent punishes us in that language. Or someone habitually corrects how we say speak in that language. Those things can change our perception of that language.

So, how did the experiments work?

First, we used written words in Spanish and English. We saw how quickly people could match positive attributes with those words. What you get is a score that tells you how fast and accurately people can make a compatible pairing. In other words, is it easier or harder for folks to match positive attributes with words in English or words in Spanish?

In the second experiment, we wondered what would happen if they

listened to words, since so much of language in Miami is about what people hear, not what they read. My colleague had the brilliant idea to use U.S. cities that can be pronounced in Spanish and English like Los Angeles, Tucson, and San Antonio.

And in the third, we used "nonce" words in both languages. That's a made-up word that doesn't exist but looks like it belongs in the language. For example, in English that could be: splinted, snickly, throcket, skalled. Or in Spanish: frila, prenta, prespa, culfa.

And what did you find?

In all three experiments, we found that basically no one had an automatic preference for Spanish.

Maybe three or four people out of the more than 80 participants had an automatic preference for Spanish. But the overwhelming majority of folks had a nonconscious bias or automatic preference for English.

I want to emphasize we had statistically significant difference in our [study group](#)—in terms of where people were born, how long they'd been in the U.S., and so forth. But it all came down to the degree or strength to which they preferred English, not whether they had biases toward Spanish or English. For example, about 40% of study participants had a "strong preference" for English at the nonconscious level. If we look at moderate preferences, we found only 14% of participants to have "slight" or "moderate" automatic preferences for Spanish, but 65% demonstrated a "slight" or "moderate" preference for English.

We found that country of birth was a predictor of bias (being born in the U.S. vs. Latin America.) Being born in the U.S. meant people had a stronger preference for English. However, being born in Latin America did not predict a preference for Spanish—just a less strong preference

for English than being born in the U.S.

What was most interesting to you as a social scientist?

I think the thing that stood out to us was that for the immigrant folks—the people who moved here from Latin America—we found that the longer they live in Miami, the stronger their automatic preference became for English.

Again, that suggests people have internalized a view in which English is dominant and essential and that gets stronger the longer you're here. That's so interesting to us because it calls into question so many of the narratives we hear about language and immigration.

I hope the results from this study invite us to add some complexity to the way we think of language and the place we live.

We often talk about Spanish and English in Miami in very black and white terms, but in reality, there's so much complexity to our linguistic situation that it's rarely either/or and almost always both/and. Yes, Spanish is everywhere. It's very much around us. And at the same time, so is English, and English predominates in our local institutions. And those narratives about English and value of English get internalized. And that's precisely what the study shows.

**Maybe someone sees this study and says, "Yes, this isn't surprising. Sure, maybe I have a preference..."
What do you hope is a takeaway for them?**

Well, I'm thinking about two groups of people.

People who are born here, who receive inherited messages from society,

politics, families, and schools. And often don't question those narratives until much later. We saw this with the Miami English story. People say "Oh! That is why we say it this way..." or "You're telling me this is a dialect that's systematic and rule- governed and not 'bad English?'" And they come to question things but only when they're given the occasion to see it through a different lens.

And then people who come here from elsewhere as children or adults with ideas about what it means to be in the U.S., who also receive inherited messages about language and place, what it means to be in Miami and to use language here.

For both groups, those received or inherited messages may not be accurate to what's going on in our sociological environment. Our inheritance is not always in our best interest.

So for all of us, I think of the study as kind of like walking into a room where the light is on a dimmer—and then the light gets turned up completely. Let's talk about it in the light of day, with the realities we know from both research and people's experiences and not continue passing down narratives that may be hurtful to us and our children. Because when you start to have conversations with people, you can see how much other folks are wrangling with these issues anyway. We just don't have a wider dialogue about them in Miami, and I think that we should.

Provided by Florida International University

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