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Constructing Latina Identity through Language: Celebrity Code-Switching and Community Perceptions

We are going to analyze language choice as a linguistic means of Latinx identity construction by different celebrities and explore how this is sometimes not accepted by the Latinx community on social media. We have chosen to analyze several videos in which Anya Taylor-Joy, Jennifer Lopez and Jenna Ortega perform their Latinx identities in the US.

As we know, identity is something people 'do' rather than something they have, and it consists of performances of self in different contexts, that is why we talk about the construction of an identity. We make choices about how we speak based on how we want to present ourselves. People use language as a way to construct their identity depending on where they are, who they are with, what they are doing, etc. And, since we are part of various communities and groups, we enact our identities by participating in practices associated with these groups, such as eating traditional food, using the language, speaking with a particular accent, dressing in specific ways, etc. These practices differentiate individuals from other groups.

As regards Anya Taylor-Joy, she is an actress who constructs her identity as an Argentine woman living in an English-speaking country. In several interviews, she speaks about her time living in Argentina and her strong connection with the Argentine culture, even though she was born in the United States. Anya often indexes her identity as a Latina living in the United States by code-switching between British English and Argentine Spanish in many interviews.

As discussed in Fuller & Leeman (2020), the term "codeswitching" refers to the "alternation or combination of different languages or varieties within a conversation or utterance" (p. 82), and they also state that "the combining of resources drawn from across languages is another resource for constructing and performing identities" (p. 134).

In addition, we will exhibit how Anya Taylor-Joy´s identity performance is perceived by the Latinx community. According to social media posts and comments, it is generally well received. People often praise how she speaks and how she presents herself as a Latina in the US, making her feel part of the Argentine community.

However, there are other celebrities that try to convey the Latinx identity and fail in the eyes of the Latinx community, often due to their lack of proficiency in Spanish. We will briefly discuss two specific cases. The first one is Jennifer Lopez, a famous singer and actress

born in the Bronx, a neighborhood in NYC with a large Latinx population. She identifies as a Puerto Rican because her parents were born there. The second case is Jenna Ortega, an actress born in the US who claims Latinx heritage due to her Mexican and Puerto Rican grandparents. However, many people on social media believe that neither of them is "Latinx enough" because they do not speak the Spanish language fluently. Negative comments on social media can be justified by the ideology that states that Spanish is an essential component of Latinx identity.

According to Fuller & Leeman (2020) "Language Ideologies are ideas about language structure and use, they can be about language in general, specific languages, specific language varieties or specific ways of using language. (...) Language Ideologies are not just individual opinions or impressions held by individual people, instead they are tied to societal values and norms" (p. 63-64). In this case, there is a common belief, both within and outside the Latinx community, that people are not "Latinx enough" if they do not speak the Spanish language. This expectation to speak 'flawless' Spanish is often viewed as a way to demonstrate one's cultural authenticity. For example, Anya Taylor-Joy has conducted entire interviews in Spanish on different occasions with no difficulties at all. But Jennifer Lopez and Jenna Ortega have not been able to do so. Although Jennifer Lopez has tried to conduct entire interviews in Spanish, she often switches to English when she finds it difficult to express herself fully.

However, as Fuller & Leeman (2020) suggest, we are not entirely free to claim the identity we wish. Instead, we are constrained both by the opinions of other people and by ideological and structural forces. In fact, there is often tension between the identities we claim and those that others ascribe to us, and neither is sufficient to fully account for our identity. This tension is evident in the criticisms faced by Jennifer Lopez and Jenna Ortega, who, despite claiming a Latinx identity, are frequently scrutinized by social media users for not achieving the Spanish language fluency expected by some members of the community. Jennifer Lopez and Jenna Ortega are criticized for indexing an identity that, according to Latinxs on social media, does not actually fit them. It is often said that famous people perform these identities only because there has been a recent 'Latinx Boom' in music and culture and, in certain contexts, being Latinx is celebrated and viewed as something to be proud of. For example, Jennifer Lopez markets bilingual songs and caters to a wider audience. One of her most famous songs, "No me ames", is very popular among Latinxs. As a consequence, she is not limiting her market to English-speaking people; she is trying to reach both communities. In Lopez's case, her bilingual songs exemplify how celebrities may

leverage linguistic resources to appeal to multiple audiences, thus performing and commodifying their Latinx identity. Yet, despite these efforts, she and other celebrities like Jenna Ortega face accusations of "inauthenticity" from some Latinx communities due to their perceived lack of language proficiency.

The same situation can be observed among non-famous people, where it is also seen as essential to speak Spanish fluently in order to be recognized as Latinx. However, this is not the only factor to take into account when constructing an identity. For example, in Shenk's study (2007), three friends discuss which one is more Mexican considering three different aspects. One of them states that being a Mexican involves being proficient in Spanish, another one states that ancestry is what makes a person Mexican, and the last one prioritizes birthplace and citizenship.

As regards how the level of integration into the Latinx community influences the perception of Latinx identity, we can say that it does not have an influence on these celebrities' own perception as Latinxs because no matter what people say, they state that they feel Latinx. For example, Anya-Taylor Joy has declared in many instances that she enjoys eating Argentine food, such as "empanadas" or "dulce de leche", and that she also wants to live and work in Argentina. On the other hand, Jenna Ortega and Jennifer Lopez do not seem to follow many Latinx traditions, yet they still claim to be Latinas. This highlights the complex nature of Latinx identity, suggesting that, while language plays a crucial role, it is not the sole determinant of one's authenticity as Latinx.

Moreover, if the children of immigrants who were born in an English-speaking country are not exposed to, in this case, the Spanish language, they are less likely to develop proficiency in their biological parents' mother tongue. Such is the case of Jenna Ortega, whose parents are Spanish speakers but she was raised speaking English and had low exposure to Latinx cultural activities. Taking into account factors such as exposure to the language and the amount of interaction with native speakers, the culture, the age; an immigrant child can acquire a native-like accent in their early years of life. Nevertheless, if an immigrant arrives in the host country as an adult, it can be more challenging to pick up a native-like accent, though not impossible.

This is similar to the experience of some Argentine young adults who have emigrated to other countries like Italy without command of the Italian language, since they have not acquired the language when they were children. According to Lenneberg (1967), there is a critical period in which we can acquire languages easily and natively. After this period, acquisition seems to get harder. Now, it is not easy to pick up the language after the critical

period and in a community that they do not know. Many immigrants state that they feel more comfortable with people who speak Spanish, highlighting the challenges of adapting to a new linguistic environment after this critical period has passed.

To conclude, celebrities like Anya Taylor-Joy, Jennifer Lopez, and Jenna Ortega demonstrate that Latinx identity is not fixed but is constantly negotiated based on factors such as language, culture, and public perception. While Anya Taylor-Joy is embraced and celebrated by the Latinx community for her ability to connect with cultural and linguistic aspects, Jennifer Lopez and Jenna Ortega face criticism due to the societal expectation that fluency in Spanish is essential for authentic Latinx identity. This dynamic reflects broader language ideologies that prioritize Spanish as a marker of cultural authenticity, which can create tension between self-identification and community acceptance. Ultimately, this analysis invites us to consider that language is just one of many factors that contribute to creating Latinx experiences. While language is an important aspect of identity, it's just one of many factors, including ethnicity, cultural practices, personal experiences, ancestry, and individual self-perception. Understanding these complexities allows for a more inclusive perspective on identity that transcends simplistic definitions and recognizes the varied realities of both celebrities and everyday individuals.

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