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“Maybe not 100%”: Co-constructing language proficiency in the Maya diaspora

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ABSTRACT

Language learning and the development of language proficiency are central concerns in the study of immigrant adaptation. This paper analyzes the social construction of language proficiency among Indigenous Guatemalan Maya youth in the United States—specifically, undocumented young adults who migrated to Los Angeles, California as unaccompanied minors and who grew up as low-wage workers. Our analysis shows that youth used “percentage talk”—i.e., construing current proficiency as a percentage of idealized full proficiency—as a discursive strategy to assess their language ability and level of social adaptación (adaptation) relative to native English and Spanish speakers, other Indigenous language speakers, and their past selves. Through percentage talk, youth wrestled with social stratification and inequality in the U.S. and Guatemala and imagined themselves as future members of Spanish- and English-oriented discourse communities. While outwardly individualistic, percentage talk also allowed youth to gauge their ability to support the language socialization and social incorporation of other L1 Maya speakers in diaspora. Youth’s tricultural adaptation and contestation of an all-or-nothing ideology of proficiency shows their nuanced understanding of the role of language in immigrant socialization.

ARTICLE HISTORY

KEYWORDS

Immigration; language socialization; indigenous

Much attention has been given to the rise of unaccompanied minor migration from the Central American countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras to the United States over the last decade. Migration flows and migrants’ pre-migration social status and access to capital are marked by the sending countries’ colonial legacies of displacement and subjugation, histories of political and economic integration with the U.S., and demographic compositions. In the U.S., migrants’ integration experiences also diverge according to these pre-migration characteristics (Feliciano, 2020).

In this paper, we analyze accounts of Spanish and English learning from Guatemalan Maya youth in the U.S. — specifically, undocumented young adults who migrated to Los Angeles, California, between 2003 and 2013 as unaccompanied adolescents and who grew up as low-wage workers. Many remained socially and financially tied to their left-behind families. In the U.S., children and adolescents who are apprehended at the southern border are formally categorized as “Unaccompanied Alien Children” (UAC) — individuals with no lawful immigration status, who are under age 18, and without parents or legal guardians who can take custody of them in the U.S. (Administration for Children and Families 2019). Countless others, however, are never apprehended. Though they are not juridically considered UACs, “unaccompanied” accurately portrays their experiences of growing up without a parent or primary caregiver in the U.S.

The Guatemalan Maya young adults in this study migrated to and grew up in the U.S. as unaccompanied, undocumented youth and, as such, experienced language socialization primarily through the context of work and community, rather than through family or school. Elsewhere (Canizales & O’Connor, 2021), we have argued that unaccompanied Maya youth conceptualized

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immigrant incorporation as a two-step process of *preparación* (preparation) and *adaptación* (adaptation); youth continually sought to “prepare” themselves (with new forms of knowledge, expertise, relationships, etc.) in different spheres of immigrant life in order to succeed at the long-term goal of “adaptation,” which we summarize below. In this article, we explore the social construction of language proficiency among Maya youth as one dimension of this process of preparation and adaptation. Specifically, we illuminate how unaccompanied Indigenous youth conceptualized proficiency and how ideologies of language learning and beliefs about language proficiency shaped youth’s imagined futures (Kanno & Norton, 2003).

All the participants in this study were L1 Maya speakers, some with and others without the ability to read and write their Maya language. Spanish learning was limited to those who had some formal schooling in Guatemala (typically no more than 3 years) or who had worked alongside parents in agriculture or as vendors at local markets where they might have come into contact with Spanish speakers. Youth who did not attend school and who worked in the household alongside female caregivers were primarily Maya-language monolinguals, reflecting their caregivers’ monolingualism (Menjívar, 2011). Hence, many migrated to the U.S. with limited Spanish-language proficiency and gained proficiency during migration and throughout their time in the Spanish-speaking immigrant community. After migration, youth made choices about how to invest themselves in Spanish and English learning and Maya maintenance in response to the variable circumstances of their work, community, and family lives.

These young people are among the Maya diaspora in the U.S., which is concentrated in traditional urban destinations for Mexican immigrant and/or Mexican-descent communities (Hagan, 1994; Popkin, 2005). Established migration networks and proximity to the low-skilled, low-wage industries of Downtown Los Angeles, California, draw many unaccompanied Guatemalan youth to the city (Canizales, 2021). Though Guatemalans began migrating to the U.S. during the 1950s, Maya refugee migration to Los Angeles became notable in the 1970s and 1980s as political and economic hostility in Central America intensified (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001). Today, over 1 million Guatemalans live in the U.S. and Los Angeles is home to the largest Guatemalan community outside Guatemala (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), concentrated in the Pico-Union/MacArthur Park neighborhood west of Downtown. It is estimated that between 50–60% of Guatemalans in Los Angeles are Maya (Canizales, 2015; Obinna & Field, 2019).

Prior research has shown that Maya-speaking immigrants claim proficiency in Maya, Spanish, and English strategically, in context-sensitive ways that reflect the historical marginalization of Maya languages as “lesser” and a corresponding desire to “pass” as non-Indigenous to mitigate discrimination in immigrant settings (Whiteside, 2009, 2013). While this was also true of our participants, we focus here on how their perceptions of their own and others’ language proficiency (i.e., in Spanish, English, and Maya) became a way to evaluate their degree of integration in the Latinx immigrant community and U.S. society more broadly.

We analyze a particular discursive strategy that unaccompanied Maya youth used to assess their preparedness to adapt to life as immigrants in the U.S.: “percentage talk,” or explicit talk about language proficiency couched in percentages that allowed youth to reflect on the usefulness and limitations of their uneven communicative repertoires (Rymes, 2014) in relation to others. Percentage talk allowed youth to wrestle with social stratification and inequality across borders and to imagine themselves as future members of Spanish- and English-oriented discourse communities in the U.S. Participants consistently described proficiency in terms of the percentage of “total proficiency” that they perceived as necessary to reach their imagined futures – specifically, as long-term U.S. residents who nonetheless displayed “resilient indigeneity” (Casanova, 2019) in maintaining Maya language and cultural practice in diaspora.

Youth’s perceptions of language proficiency were co-constructed in relation to their perceptions of interactants’ proficiency. Youth gauged their own level of linguistic *preparación* for certain milestones on the journey of *adaptación* (e.g., getting a new job, talking comfortably with Spanish speakers, being able to advocate for other Maya) in relation to the perceived proficiency of others,

such as non-Indigenous/L1 Spanish-speaking Latinxs, the bilingual (Spanish/English) researcher, and English-speaking bosses. As time went on, unaccompanied Maya youth workers also harnessed individualistic understandings of language proficiency to consider the collective good. Youth's individualized talk about perceived proficiency ultimately allowed them to assess their ability to support the linguistic *preparación* and *adaptación* of other L1 Maya speakers in their local community. Adaptability was intrinsic to youth's individual *sobrevivencia* (survival) and that of the Indigenous immigrant community. Youth's talk about perceived proficiency framed linguistic adaptation as a natural extension of this.

Literature review

While much research on immigration and immigrant incorporation has treated Latin American-origin immigrants and their communities in the U.S. as a monolith, scholars have noted that Indigenous communities' migration experiences differ from their non-Indigenous counterparts (Canizales, 2019; Casanova, O'Connor, & Anthony-Stevens, 2016; Gómez-Cervantes, 2021). Contemporary Latin American societies continue to reflect colonial social hierarchies that unequally distributed political and economic power, representation, and opportunity between colonizers (white Europeans) and colonized (Indigenous, Black, and Mestizo) groups. In transit and in the destination country, systems of power hybridize with those of the sending society. Indigenous communities therefore experience "multilayered ways of being Indigenous across national borders and within migrant transregions crossing multiple ethnoracial structures" (Blackwell, Boj Lopez, & Urrieta, 2017, pp. 129–130).

An ecologies of adaptation framework posits that there are "various socio-historical and cultural contexts that Indigenous families and communities navigate" (Casanova et al., 2016). This suggests that earlier immigrant incorporation theories, such as the neo-classical (Alba & Nee, 2003) and segmented assimilation (Portes & Zhou, 1993) models, which treat immigrant communities as homogenous based on national origin, oversimplified the interactions between immigrant cultures and the acculturation processes they undergo in the receiving country. Recognizing that Indigenous communities are navigating the ethnoracial and cultural hierarchies of their home society, nested within those of the host society, suggests that their members experience incorporation as a stepped process.

Our prior research (Canizales & O'Connor, 2021) with Guatemalan Maya youth workers demonstrates that social incorporation is experienced and understood as a process in which migrants undergo *preparación* (preparation), or socialization to ideologies, practices, and institutions that make up a "*sistema* (system)" that differs from that of their home country, as well as *adaptación* (adaptation) to this system. Positioning themselves for long-term *sobrevivencia* (survival) in the U.S. required Maya youth to undergo three distinct forms of linguistic *preparación*: 1) *preparación* in Spanish for their *adaptación* to Latinx community life; 2) English-language *preparación* to expand their social worlds beyond the Latinx community, such as in workplaces and community spaces; and 3) the maintenance of their Indigenous languages to retain transnational family ties and support the diasporic community.

The social construction of perceived proficiency

Studies of second-language acquisition have often treated proficiency as a measurable property of individual speakers. However, some researchers have emphasized social dimensions of proficiency, including the ways that interlocutors make judgments about each other's linguistic competence and position themselves and others accordingly (Martin-Beltrán, 2010; Watanabe & Swain, 2008). In this view, language proficiency is better understood not as a static or measurable property of individuals but as a social object that speakers collaboratively produce through their construals of each other's competence. Constructions of perceived proficiency

appear to be a pervasive feature of interaction; even very young emergent bilinguals engage in evaluations of others' competence (Olmedo, 2003). Martin-Beltrán (2010, p. 270) observed that perceived proficiency is constructed both “at the interpersonal and institutional levels” – that is, it emerges from the interactional dynamics between individual speakers as well as through institutionally-sanctioned definitions and understandings of language proficiency.

We contend that perceived proficiency is not just consequential in the short term of face-to-face interaction. Rather, when language learners co-construct one another's proficiency, they are articulating imagined futures (Kanno & Norton, 2003), including future possibilities for belonging to particular discourse communities (Adawu & Martin-Beltrán, 2012; Martin-Beltrán, 2010). Talking about perceived proficiency allows speakers to imagine themselves (or others) as belonging (or not) to communities of speakers. Our analysis considers how the social co-construction of perceived proficiency also influences participants' language learning ideologies (Warriner, 2007) – i.e., beliefs about the desirability or necessity of learning either Spanish or English to varying degrees of proficiency, for particular ends. Language ideologies, or “cultural . . . system[s] of ideas about social and linguistic relationships” (Irvine, 1989, p. 255), are profoundly intertwined with processes of language socialization (Riley, 2011, p. 493). These ideologies influence how language learners “appropriat[e] and approximat[e]” elements of others' voices “for [their] own purposes” (Duff, 2019, p. 8).

This was especially relevant to the youth in this study, who came of age in a dynamic, globalizing context in which they had to mobilize resources from uneven communicative repertoires (Rymes, 2014) to interact with others whose repertoires differed considerably. That youth described language proficiency in terms of percentages shows that they took a dynamic view of bilingualism (García, 2011), focusing on how their positioning on the immigrant “linguaging continuum” (Mortimer & Dolsa, 2020, p. 10) equipped them (or not) to meet their communicative needs. “L1,” “L2,” and similar terms serve as useful shorthand for capturing the difference that Maya speakers perceived between their own proficiency, as emergent multilinguals who were most proficient in Maya languages, and the proficiency of other English and Spanish speakers who were positioned differently in the context of the U.S. labor market. The participants' metacommentaries on their language use make clear that, while they saw their Spanish and English proficiency as dynamic, they also contrasted it explicitly with the proficiency of non-Indigenous Latinxs and English speakers in the U.S.

Our use of “L1” (etc.) should not be taken to reify a native-speaker ideal in second language acquisition (Doerr, 2009) nor to understate the fluid, flexible, and non-dichotomous nature of bilinguals' practices (sometimes called “translanguaging”; García, 2011), which has been attested in other work on language ecologies in the Maya diaspora (e.g., Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008). While theorists of translanguaging have advocated for attention to bilinguals' behavior “heedless of the social walls erected by the named languages” (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015), Maya youth's awareness of those social walls, and their discursive efforts to deal with them, are the subject of the analysis here. In view of this, “L1” and “L2” do not indicate claims about the linguistic system of bilinguals, a topic on which sociolinguists remain divided (MacSwan, 2017; Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2019); rather, they refer to the social salience of “named languages” (i.e., English, Spanish, and Maya languages) in the participants' efforts to prepare and adapt for long-term survival in the immigrant context of Los Angeles.

Methods

The data in this paper come from a larger study on the migration and incorporation experiences of Central American and Mexican young adults who arrive in the U.S. as minors and grow up without parents and legal status.¹ Research began in 2012, when the first author, Canizales, gained access to an informal support group for unaccompanied, undocumented indigenous Central American youth factory workers through its coordinator, a Salvadoran immigrant and well-recognized community leader in his

¹The project was approved by the University of Southern California IRB (Study ID UP-15-00606).

late forties who recognized the social, financial, and legal precarity of this population. Canizales conducted participant observations with the group through 2018, including four years of weekly field site visits between 2012–2016 and two years of “episodic fieldwork” (Whyte, 2013) between 2016–2018. Through key informants, Canizales adopted a snowball sampling strategy to meet and interview other Central American and Mexican unaccompanied, undocumented youth workers. In total, 75 in-depth interviews were conducted with undocumented young adults (18–31) who arrived in the U.S. as minors (11–17) from Central America and Mexico in the decade preceding the “humanitarian crisis” of 2014 (2003–2013).

Among the total sample, 48 were of Guatemalan origin and 36 (75%) were of Maya descent and native Maya language speakers. All study participants became full-time workers upon arrival in Los Angeles, concentrating in the garment industry ($n = 23$, 64%), hospitality (as line cooks and dishwashers, $n = 6$, 17%), domestic workers ($n = 2$, 5%), and other jobs like auto repair, warehouse packing, and homemaking. Another participant was unemployed at the time of our interview but oscillated between landscaping and garment work in a practice sometimes referred to as “*brincando*,” or job jumping (Hagan, Hernández-Leon, & Demonsant, 2015). As full-time workers, Maya youth were detached from traditional K-12 educational institutions. Some study participants eventually enrolled in adult schools centered on learning English for a few hours each day, Monday through Thursday. Some falsified their age and entered these after-work classes as minors; others were young adults. This was the case for 22 (32%) of the total sample of full-time workers ($n = 70$) in the original dataset, including Maya and non-Maya youth workers. Among the 22 adult English-language school-goers, 16 were Maya (72% of school-goers) at the time of our interview. Another 2 had been enrolled in school but were no longer enrolled and had no plans to return. Maya youth were overrepresented among school-goers, demonstrating their acute awareness of the language ecology they must navigate in Los Angeles.

Nine (25%) participants were women. Men were over-sampled due to their more consistent participation in the public settings where observations were conducted and interview participants were recruited. Women’s relative absence in these spaces likely stems from gender ideologies and occupational structures that confine Maya women to private spaces (Hagan, 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Menjivar, 2000). Recent work with Central American and Mexican youth who arrived in the U.S. as teens (13–17) shows that, as for young men, unaccompanied status required young women to engage in paid work. Because of expectations that women would also take on unpaid care work in the home, their educational prospects frequently suffered from a lack of opportunity and dearth of information, not to mention men’s active discouragement of women’s participation in public life, at least in some cases (Diaz-Strong, 2021). This was especially the case for teenage and young adult women who had their own children, but women without children were also asked to perform childcare and household chores. Under these conditions, immigrant and Indigenous women can become isolated in the workplace and their homes (Canizales, 2021). Thus, men in the study often provided the clearest explanations of the role of language in their navigation of work, school, and community life and the co-construction of linguistic proficiency through social interactions.

The participants included speakers of several Mayan languages: K’iche’ (32), Q’anjob’al (2), Mam (1), and Akateko (1). While heavily weighted toward K’iche’, the study sample represents some of the diversity of the Maya language family: K’iche’ and Mam, both widely spoken, belong to different sub-families of the Quichean-Mamean (Eastern Mayan) branch, while Q’anjob’al and Akateko, with fewer speakers, are part of the Western Mayan branch (Glottolog, n.d.; Richards, 2003). Many Maya languages are not mutually intelligible, though some closely related members of the family are, to different degrees (England, 2003). All interviewees included in this manuscript agreed to be audio recorded in full. Audio recordings were transcribed in their original language (mostly Spanish with some English elements). No interviews were conducted in Mayan languages.

Fieldnotes and transcripts were coded in Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, using a flexible coding strategy (Deterding & Waters, 2018). Guided by the broader research agenda, coding the entire data set began by indexing the main themes of pre- and post-migration experiences

in work, school, family, and community, which corroborated findings from previous research that Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities experience life in the U.S. differently. Abductive coding based on existing literature informed analysis around financial obligations, educational aspirations, and community participation as components of “*adaptación*,” while inductive analysis highlighted “*preparación*” as a distinct element of Indigenous Guatemalan youth’s immigrant socialization (see Canizales, 2021; Canizales & O’Connor, 2021). To examine the significance of language-oriented themes (e.g., “proficiency as percentage”), coded data were exported and shared with O’Connor, a linguistic anthropologist with expertise on language ideologies and identity in Latinx and immigrant contexts. The authors then collaboratively analyzed youth’s language-learning ideologies with respect to different languages, focusing on discursive events where youth talked about their perceptions of proficiency and youth’s use of percentage talk in reference to other speakers and imagined futures. Only portions of the Spanish-language data reported here have been translated into English. We use pseudonyms to protect participants’ identities.

Results: Perceived linguistic proficiency and the functions of “percentage talk”

Percentage talk (of “full” knowledge of a language) was a common strategy used to assess linguistic *preparación* in Maya youth’s accounts of their language experiences in diaspora. This was true across participants, despite the fact that the accounts analyzed here come from one-on-one interviews. Percentage talk served several interrelated discourse functions that facilitated comparison and contrast among different speakers or types of speakers. Talking about percentages of linguistic knowledge figured *perceived* proficiency as *measured* proficiency. In other words, Maya youth’s percentage talk was recursive (Irvine & Gal, 2000) with ideologies of proficiency from Western schooling, in which an individual’s knowledge is assumed to be quantifiable and able to be measured in standardized ways. While this sometimes meant that youth talked about their communicative repertoires as deficient – i.e., that they only possessed a limited percentage of a language – it also allowed them to appropriate language assessment as an informal discourse to empower themselves at the workplace and in the community.

This is striking for several reasons: for one, study participants had relatively little access to formal education either in Guatemala or the U.S. (Canizales, 2021), which raises the issue of how they might have been exposed to such ideologies. (It is possible that some participants encountered similar beliefs about language proficiency and assessment in adult ESL classes in the U.S. or among English-learner peers). It has also been argued that beliefs about assessment among Maya immigrants in the U.S. stem from Maya parents’ contact with teachers and schools (Vásquez-Colina, 2019; see also Baquedano-López, 2021). Clearly, the youth in this study must have developed their beliefs about proficiency and language learning in other contexts.

In youth’s “social co-construction of perceived proficiency” (Martin-Beltrán, 2010, p. 258), they evaluated their own proficiency relative to the interviewer’s (in English and Spanish) and that of non-Indigenous Latinx immigrants (in Spanish; secondarily in English). They also compared their levels of linguistic *preparación* to the perceived English, Spanish, and Maya competence of other Indigenous Guatemalans, including their left-behind family members, and to their past selves (i.e., at the time of the interview vs. in the past). Assessments of perceived proficiency therefore pointed backwards, to less capable former selves, as well as forward, to futures that were connected to greater levels of proficiency for the participants or their families and fellow immigrants. Attending closely to the construal of proficiency within these three contexts – i.e., in relation to native English and Spanish speakers, other Maya individuals, and their past selves – shows how the participants imagined their trajectories of language socialization, their community membership, and their aspirations.

Participants saw English and Spanish learning as central to the process of *adaptación* to life in multiple diverse communities in the United States. Aarón put it succinctly: “For me, adapting in this country means working with the language . . . Adaptation, for me, is trying to figure out how to live

with others.” Most obviously, perhaps, given their marginal social and economic position in the U.S., Maya youth evaluated their English and Spanish proficiency with respect to L1 speakers of those languages and with an eye to gauging their level of *adaptación* in the present and prospects for the future.

The social construction of proficiency with L1 English speakers

Though the participants constructed differences between their proficiency and that of L1 speakers, this did not entail an all-or-nothing view of language learning and use, nor did it mean that the participants' goal was native-like proficiency in Spanish or English. Even incremental advances in perceived proficiency could lead to dramatic improvements in one's work circumstances. For example, a piece-rate garment worker named Andrés used percentage talk to illustrate the gap between his English proficiency and that of “people like you guys” (i.e., like the interviewer) “who speak English” as a first language, but also to put forth what he saw as a realistic view of his linguistic and work prospects:

I have the dream right now, I mean, of mastering - maybe not 100%, like people like you (pl.), the ones who talk like you (pl.), who speak English - but I have the dream of at least speaking the basics so that I can work in a job that isn't so backbreaking, not so much like a slave, an exhausting twelve-hour job where my mind gets tired out from all the noise for twelve hours and I get home tired and I have to go study.

Andrés's vivid description of his appalling work conditions underscored the social and linguistic distance between the interviewer's (Canizales's) English proficiency and his own. It also revealed one important function of “percentage talk”: to contest the idea that L1 Maya speakers could not improve their economic situation without aspiring to native-like proficiency in English or Spanish. Andrés acknowledged that, given his current, exhausting job, he was unlikely to be able to study enough to speak “100%,” like the interviewer. Nonetheless, he suggested that an advanced level of English proficiency was unnecessary to achieve his immediate goals. Maya speakers are not unique among immigrants in seeking a minimum level of proficiency in English to “get by” in the U.S. Rather, Maya youth's co-construction of perceived proficiency is distinctive because it sheds light on their evolving beliefs about the place of Spanish and Maya languages alongside English in the immigrant language ecology of Los Angeles as well as their strategies for pursuing linguistic capital without adult guidance or formal schooling (in many cases).

Andrés's comments about his lack of English proficiency compared to the interviewer could be read as self-deprecating. We argue, however, that they point to an emergent language ideology that Andrés shared with many of his coethnics in the Maya diaspora in Los Angeles. Acquiring competence in English and/or Spanish – and evaluating one's progress toward doing so – was not an end in itself. English/Spanish competence was only worthwhile as an element of *preparación* and insofar as it promoted *adaptación* and *sobrevivencia* (survival) over the long term. Andrés, like other Maya youth, had a plan in mind, and language learning was one form of *preparación* through which he worked to realize that plan. The contrast with the interviewer underscored the difference Andrés perceived between the kind of English he needed – “not 100%, like people like you” – and the kind of English the interviewer had.

Andrés's comments revealed a key economic reality for Maya immigrants: spoken Spanish or English proficiency is not needed to find employment in the secondary labor market (Waldinger, 2001) yet is critical for achieving mobility *within* low-wage occupations (Canizales, 2021). An example of this was the difference that youth noted between piece-rate workers and sample makers in garment factories. While piece-rate workers typically line factory floors, there are only a handful of sample makers in each factory. Additionally, piece-rate workers can only earn as much money as their cumulative work allows, but sample makers are promised an hourly rate for more detailed and specialized work. The role of sample maker was coveted among participants in the garment industry

because of its social prestige within the factories and because of the potential for higher, more secure wages.

Moving from piece-rate work to sample-making required some English proficiency, since these coveted jobs were often discretionarily assigned by factory owners and floor managers. Speaking some English, youth speculated, would draw the favor of English-speaking White and Korean American factory owners. Juan, who worked as a sample maker and was not enrolled in English classes, identified spoken English as the route to mobility within the garment industry and, like Andrés, used percentage talk to characterize the degree of proficiency necessary for specialized, better paying work. In an interview, Juan detailed an interaction with his supervisor from that same morning: “For example, they gave me a blouse today. [His supervisor says] ‘You sew this blouse today. And this, I want it to be this style.’ And they show you.” Juan described the project as a “puzzle,” where “sometimes you get stressed.” He continued, “What helps me is that I speak a little bit of English. Not 100%, but I understand it.” Juan acquired the sample maker position in no small part because of his ability to speak directly to his floor supervisor in such interactions. In doing so, he not only escaped the challenges facing piece-rate workers (Canizales, 2021) but was able to mitigate some of the stress associated with sample-making.

Despite speaking less than “100%” of English, Juan felt a sense of pride as he drew on his English resources to secure and maintain his position as a sample maker. His pride was bolstered when he compared himself to immigrants who “[are] in school but do not take the risk of looking for another job.” Juan’s percentage talk came across not as a deficit discourse but as an indicator of his savviness in knowing exactly how much proficiency was needed to achieve specific, work-related goals from a position of disadvantage. Juan was quick to recognize the economic edge that a relatively low percentage of proficiency could confer if one was willing to take advantage of interactional opportunities.

The social construction of proficiency with L1 Spanish speakers

Maya youth also compared their proficiency in Spanish to that of L1 Spanish speakers. Unlike comparisons with English speakers, these comparisons often relied on fears that Maya youth would be identifiable as L1 speakers of Indigenous languages and, therefore, singled out for anti-*indio* racism and discrimination by Spanish-speaking, non-Indigenous Latinxs. Andrés explicitly linked Maya youth’s L2 Spanish to racist remarks and stereotypes of *indios* as uneducated, rural, and backward:

They discriminate against you a lot – “Don’t worry about it, he’s an *indio*” ... I’ve come across people, especially Mexicans, “You don’t speak Spanish well, you’re an *indio*” or “You have a poor dialect.” That’s what they say.

Thus, ideologies of Spanish learning and Spanish proficiency were intertwined with ideologies about Maya languages, which sometimes resulted in ambivalent or contradictory expressions of proficiency. In describing school, Felipe, said, “School is nice because you can meet new friends. I like it because I feel really happy. I am studying three languages. Sometimes I regret having the [K’iche’] language that I have.” When asked why, he responded,

Because I don’t speak Spanish well. I feel worried that someone will hear me, and they will think I don’t speak it well ... Some people tell me not to be embarrassed because I can speak three languages (laughs) and they can only speak Spanish and English. I speak Spanish, English, and my *dialecto* [‘dialect’, i.e., K’iche’]. “You’re the best!” they say.

Felipe contrasted his “regret” at speaking K’iche’ with his non-Indigenous peers’ contention that he was “the best” because of being trilingual. He was aware of others’ surveillance of his language and how his non-native Spanish features could index indigeneity, commenting that he felt “worried” and “embarrassed.” When asked whether he felt ashamed of being Maya or speaking K’iche’, he responded, “I think so, that I’m ashamed. I don’t like it. Because I’m not like the people who speak Spanish.” The discourse of regret was also associated with a language ideology among the

participants that Maya languages were valuable and to be cherished, on one hand, and responsible for “setting them back” with respect to Spanish and English learning, on the other.

Another participant, Carlos, shared similar feelings of shame and embarrassment at being identifiable as a Maya speaker upon arriving in the U.S.: “I was a little ashamed of speaking K'iche' when I arrived, so I was like, ‘No, then I have to learn Spanish.’” Gonzalo, a florist, linked these feelings to an internalized sense of inferiority among Indigenous migrants because of the “fear” they brought with them from Guatemala: “We arrive with that fear . . . We feel like we're less than the people who are born here, we feel lesser, why? Because we're afraid, we're ashamed of speaking K'iche'.” Some participants expressed nuanced understandings of the colonial processes of racialization according to which Indigenous languages and peoples were differentiated from their European counterparts (Irvine & Gal, 2000). Under Spanish colonization, as Hanks (2010) has painstakingly shown, Maya languages had to undergo semiotic *reducción* (reduction) at the hands of Spanish scribes in order to be made “commensurate,” or roughly comparable, with Spanish and thus appropriate for translating Christian texts. Joel, a garment worker, saw evidence of this history, in broad strokes, in his Guatemalan Maya peers' attempts to pass as Mexican, commenting, “I think it starts with colonization, with the Spanish . . . ‘It's all from the devil,’ the ceremonial practices and everything . . . So that has to be eliminated.”

Participants discussed several discursive strategies associated with this dimension of *adaptación*, which involved hiding their L2 Spanish and Maya language proficiency and attempting to “pass” as non-Indigenous. For example, some Maya youth avoided salient non-native features or explicitly denied speaking Maya languages, a phenomenon we discuss in detail elsewhere as a key survival mechanism during youth's initial post-migration period (O'Connor & Canizales, *Forthcoming*). Barillas Chón (2022, p. 13) documented similar practices among Maya and other Indigenous youth attending high school in the U.S., observing that youth often spoke Spanish as a “preemptive strategy” to mitigate racism and discrimination.

The participants distinguished between different ways of using language – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – in their constructions of perceived proficiency. Enrique, a dishwasher at a Pico-Union Thai restaurant who had learned to read and write Spanish fairly well in Guatemalan schools, said that he could read about 50% of English, but only understood about 20–30% of what he read, and only spoke about 20%: “I'm behind in speaking [English].” By contrast, Andrés estimated that he read “about 70%” and spoke “about 80%” of Spanish. While Maya youth assessed their proficiency across multiple dimensions of Spanish and English, they connected everyday *sobrevivencia* mainly to proficiency in *spoken* Spanish and English. Having some degree of spoken proficiency would allow them to *defenderse* – look after themselves – in situations involving wage theft, according to Gonzalo, or work-related medical issues, according to Enrique (Canizales & O'Connor, 2021). The latter concern has become even more acute during the COVID-19 pandemic, as emerging evidence suggests a correlation between language preference, immigrant origin, and excess mortality among Latinos in California, especially those working in the low-wage occupations now deemed “essential” (Riley et al., 2021).

The social construction of proficiency in Maya languages

As mentioned above, metacommentary about Maya youth's L2 Spanish proficiency often went hand-in-hand with talk about their proficiency in K'iche' or other Maya languages. Participants connected the discourse of being *atrasado* (‘behind/held back’) on account of Maya languages to an ideology of semilingualism (MacSwan, 2000) among L1 Spanish speakers. That is, some interpreted Maya youth's relative lack of Spanish proficiency as evidence that they did not have fully developed competence in any language. Andrés reported that he had heard comments such as, “You don't speak this and you don't speak that, and you shouldn't be here, you should be in *indio*-land or in the mountains taking care of animals.” Such comments connected speaking Maya to beliefs in Indigenous languages as *dialectos*, less-than-full languages, and to stereotypes of rural backwardness

and ignorance. Insofar as Maya youth saw being *atrasado* as the opposite of *adaptado*, these discourses also associated Maya proficiency with difficulty in responding to the contingencies of immigrant life.

“Percentage talk” was a double-edged sword in the context of circulating ideologies about semilingualism and deficit-based responses to Maya youths’ language. At times, it served a positive function, allowing youth to gauge their level of *adaptación* and progress toward social and economic goals. At other times, percentage talk, which invited youth to “measure” their perceived proficiency against others’, led them to conclude that they were coming up short in all three languages. Andrés, who attested to others’ negative beliefs about Maya semilingualism, said that he could read “about 70%” and speak “about 80%” of Spanish; English, by contrast, was a work in progress: “I’m getting there a little bit with English. Maybe I’ve got around 7% and I’m lacking the 93%.” Strikingly, Andrés did not claim to speak “100%” of K’iche’, his L1. Rather, he represented his K’iche’ proficiency as the flipside of his English proficiency, suggesting that he had either never acquired, or had started to lose, around 10% of “full” competence in K’iche’. His comments are worth quoting at length, as they demonstrate the complex functions and ideologies involved in Maya youth’s percentage talk:

Maybe I write around 40% [in K’iche’] but I speak around 90%. I’m missing the other 10% because there are things like, let’s see, for example, sometimes [when speaking Spanish] instead of *disculpa* (‘sorry’) we combine it [with English] “Sorry.” So, we already combine Spanish and English, and so that’s where we are with K’iche’. That’s why I say that maybe I speak 90% of K’iche’ and ... sometimes they put it in Spanish. Instead of saying, “oh”- in K’iche’ we call it [inaudible K’iche’ utterance], it’s a way of saying “sorry.” And sometimes [when speaking] K’iche’, [we say] “Oh, *disculpa*,” [in Spanish], we don’t say the K’iche’ phrase anymore. It’s gotten combined and that’s why I say that it’s 90% that I speak, not all of it, and there are also [K’iche’] words that I don’t know.

Andrés compared his use of Spanish phrases in K’iche’ utterances to immigrants’ mixing of English and Spanish. Instead of seeing K’iche’-Spanish codeswitching in terms of linguistic flexibility, Andrés saw it as evidence of deficit or as a lack of proficiency in any one language. This reflects a sociolinguistic context in which Maya speakers’ language was continually stigmatized and derided as illegitimate, as “neither this nor that.” Aarón, like Joel, remarked that Maya speakers bore the scars of colonial language ideologies from Guatemala, which bred a sense of inferiority and *timidez* (‘fear/shyness’) in the U.S. Spanish colonizers forced Maya speakers to change their language, he said, quoting them as follows: “Your language isn’t worth anything,’ if not simply ‘You speak a dialect.”

But participants’ semilingual framings of K’iche’ proficiency also point to another function of percentage talk. It could be used to weigh the possibility of language shift, of a community-wide trend away from Maya languages, owing to immigrant speakers’ contact with Spanish and English as well as Guatemala-based family members’ *preparación* and *adaptación* in their home country. Tomás provided an example of how individual Maya speakers could experience this. He said that he felt good about speaking K’iche’ but ruefully admitted that he struggled to speak fluently because he was surrounded by Spanish speakers:

I feel good because it’s my first language, but I don’t know - well, where I’m living now, they just use nothing but Spanish. I realized that when some [Maya] friends came to visit, I don’t know, it’s a lot of work to speak K’iche’ again ... I stutter a lot.

Aarón, who migrated to the U.S. in part because of his feelings of social isolation as a K’iche’ speaker in Guatemala, spoke of his attempts to socialize relatives in Guatemala into the languages he associated with social incorporation: “Now, they know Spanish maybe 60%, English maybe 40%, but we’re getting there. We’re getting there.” Aarón also reflected on his family members’ *preparación* in light of what he called his own lack of *preparación* in Guatemala, which he blamed for his former inability to “adapt” to Spanish and non-Indigenous culture. Despite Aarón’s nuanced understanding of colonial language hegemony, this implies that he held K’iche’ responsible, in part,

for his being *atrasado* in Guatemala and initially upon arrival in the U.S. He juxtaposed the difficulties he experienced in Guatemala on account of his failure to “adapt” with his efforts to resolve the issue in the U.S.:

Why was I suffering here for five years? Because no, I didn't adapt to the language ... that's why I suffered so much, [and] over there [in Guatemala] I suffered a lot because I didn't adapt to the language of the other culture, for example, Spanish, and arriving here it was the same thing. I didn't adapt, I felt discrimination, and so now, yes, since I'm learning Spanish as well, I no longer have a problem speaking Spanish with other cultures from Mexico, South America, Central America.

Aarón speculated that his suffering in Guatemala was due to a lack of linguistic *preparación* and a resulting inability to adapt. In contrast, he saw that he had been able to mitigate his suffering in the U.S. little by little through a different process of *preparación* that allowed him to adapt more effectively within his nested contexts of incorporation (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018). Through this experience, Aarón became a prominent advocate of language learning, the form of *adaptación* he most associated with addressing various forms of suffering. In addition to the labor-related suffering discussed previously, Aarón connected language proficiency to overcoming feelings of social isolation and loneliness. If he had adapted better and developed a similar sense of community in his hometown, Aarón mused, he might not have migrated to the U.S. Hence, helping to improve the Spanish proficiency of his left-behind family might prevent their migration and the associated suffering.

The data discussed in this section yield two key insights. First, *adaptación* was connected not just to developing and gauging one's proficiency in English and Spanish, but also to moving away from Maya languages, which were associated with the suffering participants had experienced in Guatemala and to some extent in the U.S. Even so, some youth (like Andrés and Tomás) expressed concern over what they saw as the attrition of their individual K'iche' competence. In community settings, participants sometimes grappled with what these individual-level changes might mean for K'iche' in the community as a whole. Second, co-constructions of proficiency were not just used to measure individual Maya youth's competence against others' perceived competence; they also related to youth's desire to advocate for others' well-being by preparing *others* to adapt. This could apply to family members who were considering immigration as well as other Guatemalan immigrants to whom they were not directly related. In the next section, we theorize an apparent paradox of Maya youth's percentage talk in terms of *sobrevivencia*, or youth's conceptualization of the ability to survive over the long term in the U.S. While participants' constructions of language proficiency were initially related to individual success (e.g., gaining access to easier and better paying jobs; finding a girlfriend), over time, they came to reflect collectivistic motivations.

Co-constructing language proficiency for *sobrevivencia*

Youth's talk about *sobrevivencia*, or their desire to survive and thrive over the long term, speaks to the purpose of *preparación* and *adaptación* as well as the role of perceived proficiency in these interrelated social processes. We have argued that percentage talk transformed perceived proficiency into measured proficiency, a strategy that youth linked to individual and collective ideologies of *sobrevivencia*. Youth's individual *sobrevivencia* was tied up with their roles as workers and their imagined futures as participants in social networks with diverse sociocultural ties. Thus, constructions of proficiency emboldened youth to take risks such as those that enabled occupational mobility or expanded their social networks and social worlds.

Aarón exemplified pursuing individual *sobrevivencia* through linguistic adaptation for social integration. In his hometown in Guatemala, as we have seen, he felt isolated from peers because of his Maya identity and language and his self-professed inability to “adapt.” Once in Los Angeles, however, Aarón assessed his Spanish and English proficiency in order to chart his *adaptación* and ability to function in multicultural spaces and social groups in the U.S. Aarón believed language proficiency was necessary to adapt “*con todo el mundo*” (“with the whole world”). Beyond this, he

said, language proficiency “has no purpose” if “one still feels lonely.” Unlike in Guatemala, Aarón’s linguistic abilities gave him the confidence to make friends and change his condition of loneliness to one in which he had “*un montón de amigos* . . . a lot of friends from different cultures and I feel good.”

In cases where language presented roadblocks, youth decided whether and to what extent linguistic resources were needed, based on their perceptions of their proficiency, and began seeking out those resources. In this, their experiences differed starkly from those of “accompanied” (parented) immigrant youth, whose pursuit of English is frequently guided by adults and curricula in K-12 schooling. As in language learning settings with refugee and immigrant adults (Baynham, 2006), youth directed their efforts according to their awareness of exactly what communicative resources they needed in order to function competently in specific situations.

This was observed when, in the Spring of 2015, a group of youth asked Canizales to organize biweekly tutoring classes to review worksheets and exams from their English classes, either to reinforce lessons or to answer questions youth felt too embarrassed to ask their instructors. During the group’s first meeting in March 2015, the conversation quickly turned to the translation of commonly used phrases such as, “*¿Cuál es la clave del baño* (What is the restroom door code)?,” “*¿Dónde están los probadores* (Where are the fitting rooms)?,” “*¿Cuál es la próxima parada* (What is the next [bus] stop)?”. Similar lessons continued through Summer 2015. Throughout, youth demonstrated their pressing concern for navigating specific everyday social interactions. Without the ability to manage such interactions, Maya youth would have to return home when they needed to use the restroom while at a restaurant or coffee shop, leave articles of clothing behind when unable to try them on, or walk several miles after missing their bus stops in order to avoid interactions with non-Maya or Spanish speakers, potentially unmasking them as Indigenous or L2 Spanish-speaking.

Omar exemplified the transition from individual to collective understandings of *sobrevivencia*. Omar recalled that during his first four years in Los Angeles, between the ages of 14 and 18, he “didn’t understand life . . . Life was just entertainment, I didn’t think of doing anything. I didn’t think about studying. I did think about learning English, but only to communicate with girls.” As Omar became more embedded in his Los Angeles community during his transition into young adulthood, he began imagining a long-term future in the U.S. (O’Connor & Canizales, [Forthcoming](#)) and “think [ing] differently.” Beyond the individual benefits of entertaining himself or communicating with potential love interests, he became motivated to

learn English [so] I can help people because, sometimes, say I have *paisanos* (fellow Guatemalans) that don’t even speak Spanish well [or] English either, so then I can help with anything they need because it is necessary for someone to prepare themselves.

Omar’s Spanish-language proficiency relative to his compatriots prompted his identification as a potential mentor and catalyzed his desire for English-language *preparación*. As Omar intertwined his goal of *sobrevivencia* with that of his community, he began to recognize K’iche’-Spanish bilingualism as a tool for individual and collective *sobrevivencia*.

Individual gains in proficiency validated youth’s ability to contribute to others’ language socialization, ultimately supporting their *adaptación*. In addition to developing one-on-one mentorship connections, youth also practiced group-level mentorship. In February 2013, as Canizales participated in a support group meeting, she listened as a former piece-rate worker named Raul and three Maya women talked about their work experiences in the garment industry, including stress associated with unstable employment, the inability to find new job sites, and insecurity of wages. The young women expressed their *timidez* (timidity) in speaking with others, male and non-Maya coworkers specifically, which hindered opportunities for social, financial, and cultural capital accumulation (Canizales, 2021). Raul sympathized with the three women, explaining that before he left the garment industry, “I felt my energy draining, my mind was draining.”

Raul explained that he was growing in confidence and courage in his new job as a landscaper alongside his English-speaking employer and an English-Spanish bilingual Mexican coworker. He

was even learning some English words while he worked and his timid demeanor among non-Maya or Spanish-speaking coworkers was changing: “When I was with 3 or 4 people, I [used to feel] afraid, but I am fine now.” As the group of four discussed their work and its effect on their health and *sobrevivencia*, Raul equated his exit from the garment industry and entry into landscaping as “recovery” from the violence and exploitation of the garment industry: “Gardening is healing for me. Now I know that things are possible, *tengo un año en recuperación* (I have been in recovery for one year).” Raul modeled his adoption of Western ideologies of individualism and suggested to the group that their “recovery” was possible if they wanted it for themselves, just as he had wanted it for himself: “I can put effort into it, everything is possible. The road that you take is your own, of course, but I have to value myself. I have to help myself.” By establishing in a group setting that his linguistic *adaptación* had improved through interaction, such that his energy and mind were restored to the point of diminishing his *timidez*, and that this was done out of self-duty, Raul leveraged his individual story of *sobrevivencia* for the collective good.

Discussion and conclusions

As unaccompanied Central American youth migration has persisted over the last decade, scholars have taken to examining their patterns of incorporation. Recognizing that language acquisition acts as a traditional marker of immigrant incorporation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) and that Indigenous immigrants navigate complex “ecologies of adaptation” (Casanova et al., 2016), this paper has theorized the social construction of language proficiency among Maya youth as a dimension of the *preparación* necessary to achieve *adaptación*. Findings show that Maya youth participants described perceived proficiency in terms of percentage of “total proficiency.” Using percentages, youth quantified how much Maya, Spanish, or English proficiency was necessary for them to participate actively and effectively in work, community, and family life in the U.S. Percentage talk also cast language ability as interaction- and context- specific. Reflecting colonial linguistic hierarchies, youth tended to view language ability through a deficit lens, characterizing their proficiency according to their *inability* to use a language for a particular purpose or in a specific way (e.g., the inability to speak English or the inability to speak K’iche’ without Spanish influence).

Having little formal schooling, Maya youth based their proficiency percentages on perceptions developed within distinct interactional contexts. They assessed their linguistic *preparación* and *adaptación* relative to native English and Spanish speakers, other Indigenous immigrants, and their past selves. In comparing the language proficiency of “native speakers” to their perceived proficiency, youth assessed their level of *preparación* relative to how much total *preparación* was necessary to attain various goals. Percentage talk informed youths’ determinations of whether they had “enough” English or Spanish to pursue imagined futures (Canizales & O’Connor, 2021). Maya youth’s precarious social, economic, and political position as Indigenous migrants, low-wage workers, and unaccompanied, undocumented young people meant that these futures were both local and transnational (Canizales, 2021), reinforcing the value of maintaining Maya language and cultural practice in diaspora. That youth do the work of tricultural adaptation and refuse an all-or-nothing ideology of language proficiency is a testament to their adaptability and resilience (Casanova, 2019).

Furthermore, despite the individualized nature of percentage talk, Maya youth also drew on percentage talk to gauge their ability to support the linguistic *preparación* and social *adaptación* of other L1 Maya speakers. Language proficiency – in Spanish, English, and Maya languages – was central to the diasporic community’s prospects for *sobrevivencia*. In framing language learning as a dimension of *preparación*, the Maya youth treated bilingualism as “non-dichotomous ... continuously emergent ... and primarily about meaning making rather than an end in and of itself” (Mortimer & Dolsa, 2020, p. 1). In addition to “meaning making,” facilitating social connectedness and social integration were primary functions of bilingualism from Maya youth’s point of view. An all-or-nothing view of language proficiency is not a viable option for youth who struggle and advocate on their own behalf. For such youth, even a relatively low percentage of idealized “full”

proficiency in Spanish or English may be sufficient to accomplish their interactional goals or to enact symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2006) in certain situations.

Youth's co-construction of language proficiency in the workplace and in relation to transnational communities testifies to their agency, adaptability, and resilience in contexts without "adult supervision," on which immigrant youth's educational attainment is often presumed to hinge (see Gonzales, 2015; Portes & Fernández-Kelly, 2008; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Because Central American adolescent arrivals who migrate as unaccompanied minors and stay unaccompanied are relegated to low-wage work (Canizales, 2021; Diaz-Strong, 2021; Martinez, 2019) and come to participate in local communities in ways often thought of as reserved for adults (Canizales, 2019), youth did not measure their linguistic abilities relative to an institutional standard in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Instead, linguistic proficiency was measured by their ability to interact with others in everyday scenarios and public spaces like grocery and clothing stores, coffee shops, and on public transportation. Maya-speaking youth judged themselves to be well "adapted" if they were progressing toward trilingual proficiency and if their proficiency aligned with the futures they imagined for themselves.

As unaccompanied Central American youth continue to migrate to the U.S. without legal status and grow up without parents or adult caretakers, the contexts and modes of language learning and measures of linguistic proficiency employed by the Maya youth in this study may prove more widespread. The Maya participants in this study migrated as adolescents, which would classify them as members of the 1.25 generation (aged 13–17 at migration) (Rumbaut, 2004). It is instructive to contrast the English-language learning experiences and emergent language ideologies of these youth with those of undocumented or underdocumented youth who arrived in the U.S. as accompanied members of the 1.5 generation (under 13 years of age at migration) and generally grew up attending U.S. schools (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012; Rumbaut, 2004). So-called "Dreamers" frequently feel assimilative pressure around English, in the sense that English is crucial to their struggle to assert themselves as legitimate "Americans" (Gallo, Link, Allard, Wortham, & Mortimer, 2014), especially given the widespread language ideology that associates "standard" English with American national identity.

By contrast, the youth in this study were not necessarily aiming for *advanced* proficiency in English but wanted to attain the degree of proficiency they deemed necessary to function in U.S. society in particular ways. Percentage talk about perceived proficiency allowed Maya youth to assert their agency as language learners (Deters, Gao, Miller, & Vitanova, 2015). It made it possible to articulate how youth perceived their current level of proficiency and to determine for themselves what languages, and to what degree, would be required for them to pursue their imagined futures. Rather than feeling pressure to assimilate by achieving advanced proficiency in English, youth generally aimed for the minimum "percentage" necessary to take certain kinds of advantageous risks. Youth's deployment of perceived linguistic proficiency for individual and collective *sobrevivencia* demonstrates their agency in understanding and navigating the social, economic, and legal precarity they face. These processes warrant further scholarly attention.

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