

## Language Gain, Language Loss: The Production of K'iche'tellano in Highland Guatemala

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### Abstract

*This ethnographic study examines the emerging language practices of a local Maya community in Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán, Guatemala. The authors utilize racial formation theory (Omi & Winant, 1994) to demonstrate how state apparatuses, such as language restriction laws and the constitution have contributed to the formation of racial categories such as Ladinos and Indians, racial constructs that did not occur prior to the Spanish colonialization. In addition to the structural effects on racial formation, the authors examine the cultural representations that emerge in the process of racial formation, namely Maya resiliency, a pan-Mayan identity, and evolving language practices that incorporate K'iche' and Spanish. Data in this article show that while members of this Maya community may fight to preserve K'iche' in the face of macro-level racial projects that aim to eliminate all Mayan languages, they simultaneously produce micro-level practices that sustain the ideological underpinnings that privilege the Spanish language. More specifically, we find that while participants' use of Spanish and K'iche' is highly contextualized, they also produce hybrid language practices that reflect the ongoing racial projects and linguistic transformations that Maya peoples undergo. We refer to the participants' mixed language code as "K'iche'tellano," a term that captures the competing, yet complementary interaction between the two languages: K'iche' and Castellano (Spanish from Spain). We conclude that the emerging language practices in highland Guatemala are neither assimilationist or counter-hegemonic, but both, representing the competing racial projects that operate in Guatemala.*

**Keywords:** Guatemala, Language Practices, Race, K'iche', Spanish

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Algo que me pasaba con mis nietos es que cuando yo les hablaba solamente en K'iche', ellos me decían "mamá, hable bien, nosotros así no la entendemos". Por eso las abuelas que están vivas ahorita tienen la obligación de enseñarles bien el idioma a los nietos, si no muriéndose las abuelas, muere el idioma.

Something that used to happen when I was with my grandchildren was that whenever I would talk to them in K'iche', they would tell me, 'mama, speak correctly, because we do not understand you when you talk like that'. That is why grandmothers who are alive now have the duty to teach their language to their grandchildren. If not, when the grandmothers die, the language will die too.

- Aurelia Gutiérrez, grandmother and bilingual teacher

Aurelia Gutiérrez's concern about K'iche' language loss is a concern many Maya peoples in Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán, Guatemala have in common. At the same time many Mayas work to preserve K'iche', as well as other Mayan languages, they also recognize the need to learn Spanish, the very language that threatens the vitality of K'iche'. Mayas are well aware that fluency in the Spanish language serves as a means to gain access to upward economic mobility, a formal education, and an elevated social status. As a result of Mayas' complex and diverging language practices, they are becoming increasingly bilingual and bilcultural, producing new cultural and linguistic modalities that are informed by the social, economic, historical, and political dimensions of their emerging identities. To

better understand postcolonial language practices in a local, rural community in Guatemala, this article reports data from an ethnographic study that analyzed the following factors: Maya cultural agency in the preservation of K'iche', the acquisition of Spanish as a second language in formal educational settings, and the resulting hybrid linguistic and cultural practices that emerge in a local Guatemalan community.

In order to theorize Mayas' emerging postcolonial hybrid language practices in Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán, Guatemala, we must contextualize language and cultural practices in a larger socio-political framework (French, 1999; Gal, 1993; Irvine, 1989; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). In the following sections we provide an historical background of language practices in Guatemala and use racial formation theory in order to understand the emerging acts of cultural agency and language practices in the face of historical and ongoing oppression of Mayas at the hands of the racially dominant Ladinos.

## Historical Context of Language Practices in Guatemala Spanish Colonialization

The threat to Mayan languages began with the Spanish colonialization of Guatemala in 1524 (Helmberger, 2006). During this time, the "Spanish Crown" aimed to castilianize Indians in order to convert them to Christianity. The efforts to castilianize Indians continued for several generations and became even more pronounced after Guatemala's independence from Spain in 1821 (French, 1999; Helmberger, 2006). After gaining their independence, the Guatemalan Ladino government aimed to establish Guatemala as a nation state, unified by one culture and one language (French, 1999; Helmberger, 2006; Richards & Richards, 1997). As part of this nationalist agenda, everything "Indian," including the many Mayan languages spoken in the country, were to be exterminated. Guatemala's first constitution, written in 1824, was heavily guided by this nationalist agenda, outlining the unification process and related demoralization of Mayan languages. The Decree of the Congressional Congress in 1824 mandated "the 'extinction' of the Indian languages due to the fact that they were so 'diverse, incomplete, and imperfect', and 'insufficient for enlightening the people or perfecting the civilization'" (Lewis, 1993).

In continual efforts to transform Guatemala into a collective nation, the Spanish language increasingly served as the tool to assimilate and oppress Mayas. In the 1940s the government created the *Instituto Indigenista Nacional (IIN)* to oversee Indian affairs. This government agency dictated that Mayas could be educated in their primary language, but only as a means to gain fluency in Spanish. The IIN's assimilationist project also included the development of a Roman character, Mayan language alphabet. In an effort to simplify the translation from Guatemala languages to Spanish, the IIN produced an alphabet that contained no diacritical marks, was geared toward the sounds and spelling patterns in Spanish, and was not inclusive of the Mayan dialects and languages that were not easily translatable to Spanish (Helmberger, 2006; Lewis, 1993; Richards, 1989, 1993; Richards & Richards, 1997). In years to come, the Spanish language continued to gain legitimacy and power through government policies. Indeed, with the rewriting of the Guatemalan constitution in 1985, Spanish was declared the official language of the country, mandating that Spanish be used as the sole language of instruction in schools (Helmberger, 2006).

## Maya Resiliency

Despite the Guatemalan government's relentless attempts to do away with everything Indian, Maya peoples have demonstrated an incredible sense of resiliency by maintaining ethnic and cultural practices, producing a collective Mayan identity, and preserving many Mayan languages (French, 1999). Presently, there are more than 20 Mayan languages in use in Guatemala (Hawkins, 2005; Helmberger, 2006), with 60 percent of the country, inclusive of all indigenous peoples in Guatemala, speaking one or more of these languages (Arias, 2006).

The process of fighting for the preservation of a multicultural and multilingual Guatemala has involved the development of a pan-Mayan collective identity. (Helmberger, 2006). Ironically then, Mayas have had to band together to form a nation within a nation, often referred to as the Mayan Movement or Maya Nationalism, to produce a counter-hegemonic stance on the homogeneous ideologies of natio-

nalism (French, 1999). Some of the achievements that this pan-Mayan movement has accomplished include the creation of a governmentally-recognized unified alphabet for all Mayan languages, the establishment of the *Academia de Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala*, *Programa Nacional de Educación Bilingüe*, the development of numerous dictionaries, pedagogical and descriptive grammars, neologisms, and literacy materials for bilingual education (French, 1999).

Perhaps one of Maya peoples' biggest achievements to date is the 1996 signing of the Peace Accords. Not only did the Peace accords put an end to a brutal 36 year civil war in Guatemala that wiped out somewhere between 450 and 600 Maya villages and consumed nearly a quarter of a million lives (Arias, 2006), but it proposed a commitment to human rights, including rights to dignity, identity, health, security, and bilingual education to all Mayas (Helmberger, 2006). Day to day practices in Guatemala today, however, are not as optimistic as the Peace Accords projected. Mayas are still discriminated against and Mayan languages continue to emanate inferiority to the Spanish language. Arias (2006), for example, explains that Ladino teachers and their union oppose bilingual education, which resulted in a two-month long strike that paralyzed public schools throughout the country in January and February of 2003. In order to theorize how Maya peoples continue to inhabit a marginal status in Guatemala, we now turn to a discussion on racial formation theory and the continued racialization of the Maya peoples.

## Racial Formation Theory

Racial formation theory, developed by Omi and Winant (1994) is "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (p. 55). Race, according to this theory, is not fixed, inherited, a biological essence, a product of material conditions, or solely an ideological construct (Bartlett & Brayboy, 2006). Rather, race is unstable and decentered, "...a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55). "Racial formation is a process of historically situated projects in which human bodies and social structures are represented and organized" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55-56). Racial formation theory offers a distinct perspective in that it incorporates social structure and cultural representation. From this perspective, we can examine how racial constructs emanate from structured inequalities as well as how cultural representations emanate through racial constructs.

The process of racial formation is carried out in both macro- and micro-level social practices (Omi & Winant, 1994). Macro-level social practices can include institutional and state policies and procedures, while micro-level social practices operate in peoples' day-to-day racial judgments and discursive practices. As summarized by Omi & Winant,

*...the theory of racial formation suggests that society is suffused with racial projects, large and small, to which all are subjected. This racial "subjection" is quintessentially ideological. Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of her own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Thus we are inserted in a comprehensively racialized social structure. Race becomes "common sense"—a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world (p. 60).*

Since race is an unstable and arbitrary social construct, Omi & Winant suggest that we can only understand racial formation in contextualized and historical analyses. Even though Omi & Winant base their theoretical framework on the historical and ongoing racial projects in the United States, it can easily be applied to other countries that are undergoing similar racial projects. As Omi and Winant explain, modern conceptions of race did not occur until the European arrival in the Americas. For Guatemala then, the emergence of race did not occur until the Spanish conquest. Prior to this event, there was no unified definition for a Ladino or Indian. Rather, there were Spaniards, Xincas, Garifun, Alaguilacs, Kaqchikel, etc. Even today, Guatemala is made up of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups. Amongst the Maya peoples of Guatemala, they speak more than 20 Mayan languages and represent 23 different ethnic groups (Arias, 2006). Despite this ethnic and linguistic diversity among Maya peoples, racial formation projects, such as the regulation of language use, reduces Mayas to one racial category: Indian. As part of the racialization process, all the cultural richness and diversity that Mayas represent become stripped away as a means to systematically devalue and erase everything "Indian".

One of the racial projects that function in Guatemala is the ideological loading of languages. That is, languages do not merely serve as a means of communication from one person to another, but have come to represent a currency that can be used to gain social status, employment, and material goods. In Guatemala, Spanish has taken on the ideologies of power, privilege, and opportunity, while indigenous languages have come to embody a sense of inferiority, including a lack of intellect and civilization. As stated previously, the ideological work that racial projects perform are contextually and historically based. Thus, it is important to point out that the ideological significance of the Spanish language, for example, is not likely to carry the same ideological significance in a different context with a different historical background. In the United States, for example, Spanish is a colonized language. Given the racial projects that have taken place and continue to unfold in the United States, including Western Expansion and various language restriction policies, including the denial of bilingual education in some states, Spanish has come to embody the same inferior status as indigenous languages in Guatemala.

In this paper, we use racial formation theory to analyze the language practices in a rural, highland Guatemalan community: Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán. We show that while members of this community may fight to preserve K'iche' in the face of macro-level racial projects that aim to eliminate all Mayan languages, they simultaneously produce micro-level practices that sustain the ideological underpinnings that privilege the Spanish language.

## Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-method approach to collecting data, in which the primary researcher, Martha Bitar, collected both qualitative and quantitative data while living in Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán. Most of the qualitative data for this study was collected at the *Escuela Oficial Urbana Mixta Daniel Armas* Elementary School. This research project primarily utilized ethnographic research tools (Spradley, 1980), including formal and informal interviews with teachers, parents, students, and community members, as well as participant observations in a 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom and some of these students' after-school activities (e.g., cheerleading practice and soccer and basketball games). On average, the primary researcher spent 15 hours a week conducting participant-observations in a 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom of 32 students for a period of 10 weeks.

In all, 44 participants from the community of Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán were interviewed. The 44 interviews were with: 11 teachers at Daniel Armas Elementary School, 2 teachers located at another elementary school, 1 teacher who had just graduated and was in search of employment, 1 secondary school principal, 8 women who did not complete their schooling (highest level of education ranged from elementary to secondary), 14 parents of students at Daniel Armas Elementary School, 3 workers at the municipality, and 4 store owners in the community. Of all of these interviewees, 40 were bilingual in K'iche' and Spanish, 3 were monolingual Spanish speakers (1 elementary teacher and 2 store owners), and 1 was bilingual in Spanish and Cachiqual (elementary school teacher). Thirty-six of the interviewees were asked directly about their language practices.

The other eight interviewees, which included the women who did not complete their education, participated in a focus-group interview as well as a one-on-one interview. In both interviews the women were asked questions about schooling experiences and family life (topics that did not relate to the research project) so that we could examine their language practices as they took place within the interview without them consciously thinking about the topic of language practices as they were being interviewed.

Quantitative data were collected from 32 sixth graders and nineteen teachers at Daniel Armas Elementary School. All of these participants filled out a questionnaire (adopted from Collins, 2005), which asked them to evaluate their use of the two languages.

Aside from the school, qualitative data were also collected through participant observations at the market, the streets, the municipality, and the office of the Coordinador Tecnico Administrativo (CTA). Also, quantitative data were collected from 129 conversations that took place in various contexts. From these conversations, data sheets were filled out including information on ethnicity, sex, and age, as well as the place the conversation took place. The following sections represent some of the themes we identified from these various data sources.



## Spanish is “Taught”; K’iche’ is “Learned”

The maintenance of K’iche’ has been a bottom-up process, in which community members go to great lengths to preserve native language use in homes and communities. With no institutional or state support, and often in hostile, military enforced contexts, Mayas have generated ground-level methods to preserve the K’iche’ language. As a result of the bottom-up language preservation process, as well as the language restriction policies governed by the nation, K’iche’ has become unofficially designated as a “home language,” a language that is acquired and nurtured in home and community contexts. In this capacity, K’iche’ has come to embody images of home, family, and culture.

While K’iche’ maintenance practices are strongly in place in Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán, community members are fully aware of the social and economic benefits that are associated with the Spanish language. In the labor market, those Guatemaltecos who are less competent in Spanish are at a disadvantage in an already competitive labor market. Due to the ideological power that is attached to the Spanish language, community members encourage youth to learn Spanish in addition to K’iche’. In an interview with the assistant of the CTA, he explained that many parents admit that the only reason why they send their children to school is so they can learn Spanish. During an interview with Pedro Lopez, the principal of the secondary school, he said that he and the other teachers try to use Spanish for very formal work reunions, or for those meetings that require the use of very “technical terms”. As a result of the macro-level racial projects that operate in Guatemala, Spanish has become ideologically linked to the official business conducted by the state, government, schools, merchants, as well as other business settings that are situated outside of home/community contexts.

The contrasting language practices and ideological loading of K’iche’ and Spanish have resulted in highly contextualized language acquisition and speaking practices of the two languages. In the data from this study, we found that K’iche’ in Nueva Santa Catarina, Ixahuacán is the Mayan mother tongue—a language that is learned in the home and in local community-based contexts. Spanish, on the other hand, is taught in “official” public contexts, such as schools. In other words, Spanish is “taught”, while K’iche’ is “learned”. (Wardhaugh, 1998). Amongst the forty K’iche’-speaking interviewees in Nueva Santa Catarina Ixahuacán, all of them said they learned K’iche’ at home and Spanish at school. The data sheets that participants filled out, as well as the observed conversations, show that K’iche’ is used for the majority of the conversations in the community. From the 129 observed conversations in community settings, 107 were in K’iche’ and 22 were in Spanish.

We also found that Spanish is used in conversations with Ladinos, and when it is perceived that the language of the receptor is Spanish. From the 11 interviews with teachers at Daniel Armas Elementary School, 9 said they use Spanish when talking to a stranger, because they do not know if he/she speaks K’iche’, and because this practice establishes a sense of professionalism. All of these participants agreed that the more comfortable they feel with the person, the more possibility that they would transition into speaking K’iche’. The two teachers who did not agree with this were an exception because they were either Spanish monolingual or Spanish-Cachiquel bilingual, so the question did not apply to them. Spanish is also used when the speaker perceives a high socio-economic status or educational background in the receptor. From the eleven teacher interviews, 8 of them said that Spanish and K’iche’ have the same prestige, and are equally important, yet when they were asked to whom they would speak Spanish, they answered, “to those that are well dressed”, those who “occupy a position with authority”, or with “very academic people, [who] are professional”.

Participant-observation data from this study reinforces the idea that K’iche’ is the preferred language among local community members, except when an outsider enters conversations. When I (Martha Bitar) was helping a group of sixth grade girls make up dances for a cheer leading demonstration, we would have rehearsals every afternoon. All eight girls knew both Spanish and K’iche’, although they had different levels of Spanish fluency. Every time they would address me, they would do it in Spanish. However, when they talked to each other, they spoke in K’iche’. So, even though they all had demonstrated proficiency in Spanish, they preferred to use K’iche’ among their friends and Spanish with outsiders.

The participants’ highly contextualized use of Spanish and K’iche’ maintain the ideological significance of each language. That is, participants’ day-to-day micro-practices align well with the macro-practices of the nation. Both micro- and macro-practices produce Spanish as central to business, professional, and academic related practices, while K’iche’ is produced as a marginal, community-based language. These context-specific language practices suggest that the two languages function separately with

little to no interaction between the two languages. However, the next section demonstrates that a fusion of the two languages is an emerging language practice among the participants in this study. In the next section we identify participants' emerging hybrid language practices and theorize these micro-practices within a larger racial formation project.

## K'iche'tellano

While much of the data in this study suggest that language codes are rigidly divided amongst official and home/community contexts, a deeper analysis of the data suggest that participants produce hybrid language practices that reflect the on-going racial projects and linguistic transformations that Maya peoples undergo. Thus, the day-to-day micro-practices that Mayas enact, embody a fusion of the two language systems that compete for legitimacy. We are referring to this mixed language code as "K'iche'tellano" because we believe this term captures the competing, yet complementary interaction between the two languages: K'iche' and Castellano (Spanish from Spain). Some of the language practices that represent this fusion of language systems include the production of new words and phrases in Spanish that draw from meanings in K'iche', the intermixing of grammatical rules from one language to another, and the alteration from one language to another in a single conversation, also known as code-switching.

The first hybrid language practice is the production of non-existing words and phrases in the Spanish language that borrow from the meanings of words in K'iche'. The production of these "new" terms often catch on within the community and then become common verse among community members. One example, given by Justo Tepaz, who is a teacher at the Daniel Armas Elementary School, as well as assistant of the CTA, is a substitution for the standard Spanish word for prejudice, ("prejuicio"). The speakers of the community draw from meanings produced in the K'iche' language to create the word, "Adelanto-juicios", (forward-judges).

The next hybrid language practice is the overlaying of grammatical rules in the two languages. For example, when speaking Spanish, community members commonly borrow from K'iche' grammatical patterns to produce a new speech model in Spanish. An example of this overlaying of grammatical patterns occurs in the use of indefinite articles (un, uno, una, unos, unas), followed by a possessive pronoun (mi, tu, su, nuestro, vuestro), and then the noun. For example, speakers from the community often say "un mi sobrino" for "my nephew." In standard Spanish, it would be either "un sobrino", using the indefinite article followed by the noun, or "mi sobrino", using the possessive pronoun followed by the noun, but never both the article and the pronoun followed by one noun. Needing to emphasize possession, one would place the possessive pronoun after the noun, saying "un sobrino mio"

This speech pattern in Spanish borrows from the grammatical patterns in the K'iche' language. To indicate possession in K'iche', nouns are altered by adding the possessive pronoun to the noun, forming one word. For example, to say nephew, "sobrino", in K'iche' ("ikaq"), one must specify whose nephew it is. To say my nephew, "mi sobrino", one would add "w", which is the possessive pronoun for "my". Then, the result would be one noun, "wikaq", which means "my nephew", and not a noun and a pronoun. Nouns in K'iche' are followed by definite or indefinite articles, so after having the noun "wikaq", or my nephew, one should add the article. In standard Spanish, as well as in English, it would be incorrect to add an indefinite article before a noun that already carries a possessive pronoun because the pronoun is showing that it is a specific noun, and not any noun. Indefinite articles are used for unspecified nouns. In K'iche' the indefinite article is added anyway. Then, speakers of the community add "jun", or "a" (which is "un" in Spanish) to the noun, forming "jun wikaq" or "a my nephew", which would be translated directly to Spanish as "un mi sobrino". This last form is the one used in Spanish by the speakers of the community.

Another example of language practices that incorporate both languages, or what we are referring to as K'iche'tellano, is the common practice of code-switching. Brice and Brice (2000) define code-switching as the use of complete sentences, phrases, and borrowed words from another language. In an effort to collect data on the actual production of K'iche'tellano, 8 interviews were conducted in K'iche' on topics that were not directly related to language practices: school and home. We believed that an interview on language use would potentially make the participant aware of their language use. By interviewing the participants on other, non-related topics, we hoped the interviewees would focus on the questions and responses, and not on the form of expression. In order to record the language in

its most natural form, the questions were asked by a native K'iche' speaker who acted as an interpreter. Below is an interview about family and schooling with a 19-year-old housewife who did not complete her schooling. It is important to note that the production of K'iche'tellano is not only produced by the interviewee, but by the K'iche' translator who is asking the questions. These data speak to the pervasiveness and ease to which K'iche'tellano is produced. The bolded text represents words that are spoken in Spanish.

Rosario: Jachike **grado** xate'lwi par i clase

(When did you drop out of school?)

Manuela: Xa'q' xewi **tercero primaria**

(I only stayed until third grade)

Rosario: Ixjanipa' pari ja'

(How many are there in your family?)

Manuela: E'**seis** alabom **y cuatro** alitomab'

(Six men and four women)

Rosario: Jachike at kowi ri at chk'ech ri awachala'l

(Which one among your siblings are you?)

Manuela: Pa **cinco** in kowi chkech

Soy la quinta

(I am the fifth one)

Rosario: Ri at weta xabano' **seguir** par i clase, jawach ta kula' xa xaban **graduar** awib' chech

(If you would have stayed in school, what degree would you have obtained?)

Manuela: We ta xinban **seguir** kurij la' xin wesaj taj jun **maestro**

(I would have become a teacher)

Rosario: Ja din mas kab'an preferir **la maestra o maestro**

(Do you prefer having a female or a male teacher?)

Manuela: Xaq' kis junam kuyao'

(It is the same)

Rosario: Ja wach u **responsabilidad** juni xoq' paja'

(What is a woman's responsibility at home?)

Manuela: Ku josq'ij ri u paja' ku chajo ri ra'l

(To clean up and change the kids clothes)

Hybrid language practices, including code-switching, shape the cultural demands of community members in Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacán. Code-switching, for example, is an unstated, yet demanded expectation of community members. Seven out of the eight teachers who were asked about code-switching explained that code-switching is a common practice they participate in. These community members believe that code-switching is a way of showing that they belong to the community. During an interview with an elementary teacher, she said that speakers from the community mix K'iche' and Spanish because "that is the way everyone speaks around here". Thus, community members become culturally linked through their production of hybrid language practices in K'iche' and Spanish.

## Conclusion

The production of K'iche'tellano, or hybrid language practices, reflects the ongoing racial projects that are underway in Guatemala. These emerging language practices in highland Guatemala are neither assimilationist or counter-hegemonic, but both. That is, participants in this study simultaneously com-

bat the macro-level racial projects by teaching their children K'iche' and maintaining this language code in home/community contexts, while at the same time embracing this racial project by emphasizing the need to learn Spanish, as well as rendering Spanish as the more dignified language, the language professionals and educated people speak. These two competing practices are collapsed into the everyday micro-level production of K'iche'tellano. That is, in a single conversation, whether it be through the production of non-standard Spanish words and phrases that borrow from K'iche', the overlaying of K'iche' grammatical patterns in Spanish, or code-switching, the participants in this study produce a dual or hybrid language code that simultaneously defies and reifies the racial projects that operate in Guatemala.

As Omi and Winant (1994) have argued, we are all subjected to racial projects, "...often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation" (p. 60). As such, the participants in this study were never formally taught the ideological significance of K'iche' and Spanish, and in extension, they were never formally taught the highly contextualized language practices or the various modes of K'iche'tellano that we have outlined here. Nevertheless, the participants in this study have learned these language practices, which serve as "unofficial" markers to a unified community.

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