



# **The Balancing Act of Speaking Multiple Languages among Immigrant Students at a Public University**

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- **Project Coordinator:** Manfredi Giliberti
- **Post-doctoral fellows:** Carolina Hausmann-Stabile & Igda Martinez



# OPENING



# Opening

- Rutgers University is home to a wide range of immigrant students from around the world
  - Students are frequently bilingual, even multilingual, speaking the languages of their families, religions, regions, and countries.
- Definition of immigrant students
  - Students who were born outside the U.S. and came as young children (1.5 generation)
  - Students who had at least one parent who was born outside the U.S. (2<sup>nd</sup> generation)



# Opening

- Immigrant families think a lot about how to pass family languages on to their children
- Developed various strategies for helping their children maintain family languages and learn English
  - At the same time, learning and maintaining family languages is a complex social and political process
- Examples of strategies:
  - Parents develop rules about language use
  - Students live in multi-generational families
  - Families live in ethnic enclaves
  - Students attend ethnic schools and religious institutions that support family languages



# Acculturation

- **Acculturation is a complex process in a multicultural context that comprises both enculturation and assimilation**
  - Many possible trajectories and outcomes
  - Vary by individual students and cultural groups
- **Enculturation:** processes that individuals, families and communities go through to learn and maintain their own culture or cultures
- **Assimilation:** processes of adopting cultural features from a new population, often a population that is socially and politically dominant

[Review of 80 years of anthropological research, Guarnaccia & Hausmann-Stabile, 2016]



# Study Approach

- Study is explicitly comparative across a diverse range of students
- Innovations in approach:
  - Use the words/experiences of diverse students
  - Examine the similarities and differences in these experiences from wide range of students



# Methods

- 21 focus groups – 160 students
  - 3 African/Caribbean groups (N=20)
  - 8 Asian groups (N=70)
  - 5 European groups (N=33)
  - 4 Latino groups (N=37)
  - 1 Group of mixed ethnicity students
- 1.5 - 2 hour focus group
- Individual questionnaire
- Individual narratives

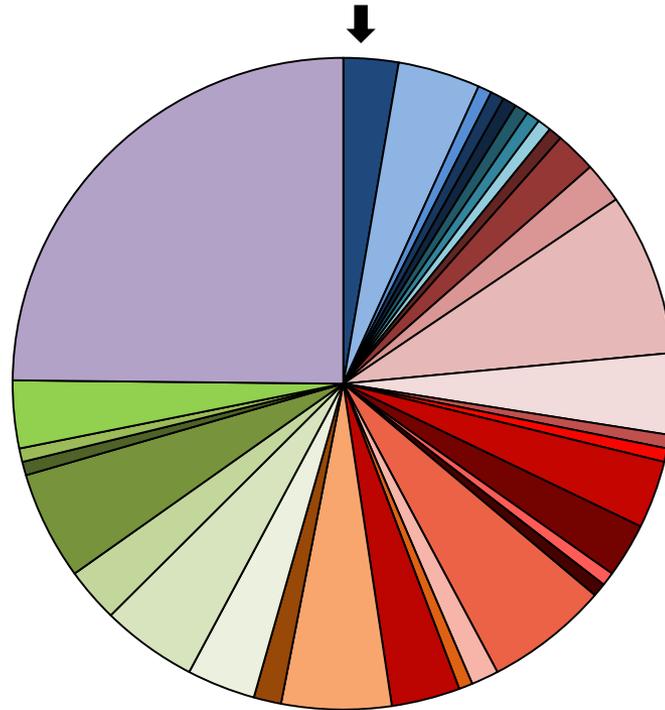


# MAJOR FINDINGS



# Languages Spoken by Participants

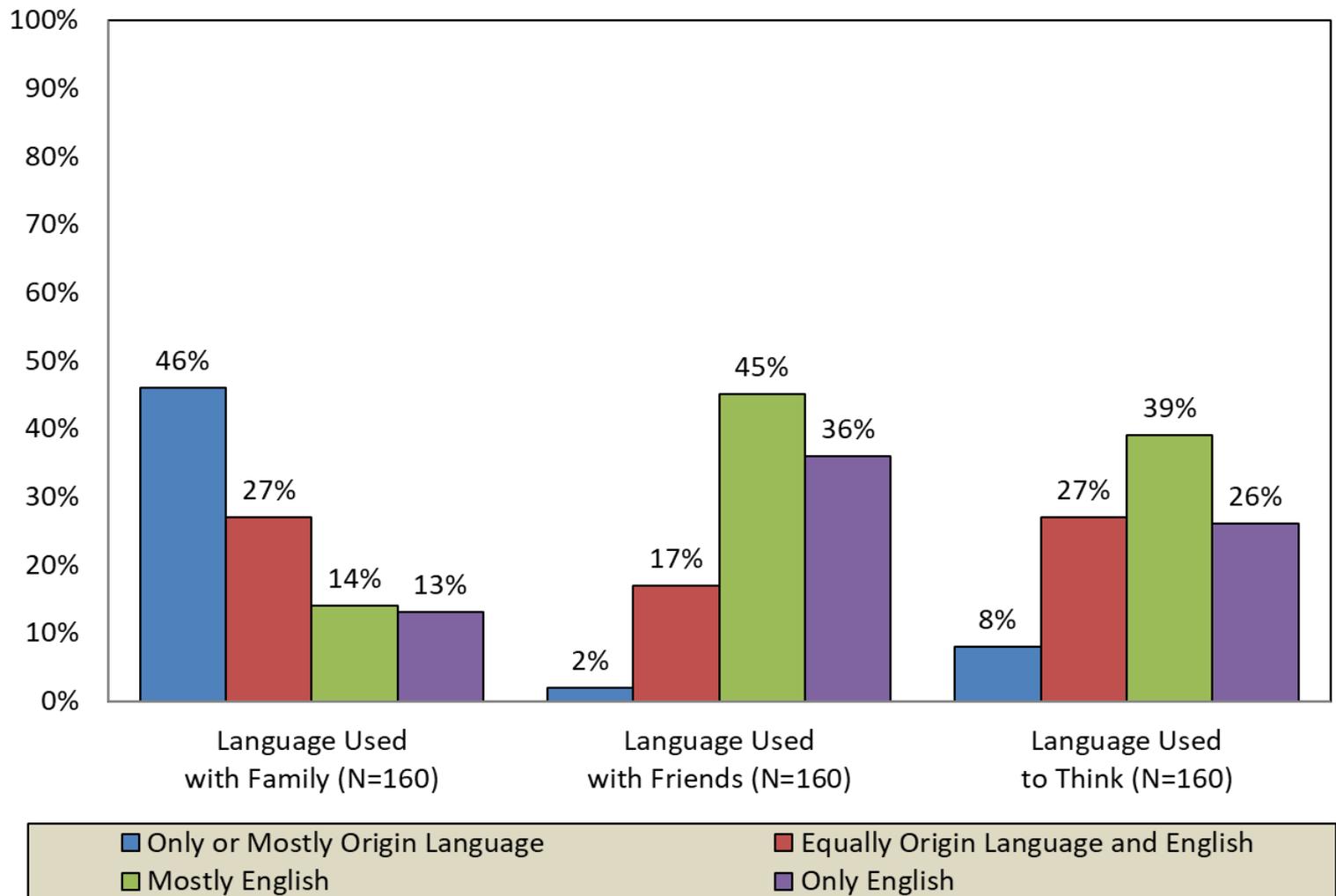
33 different languages



■ Creole 3% (Caribbean, N=4)	■ French 4% (Haiti, Africa, N=6)	■ Igbo 1% (Nigeria, N=1)
■ Kikuyu 1% (Kenya, N=1)	■ Patois 1%(Caribbean, N=1)	■ Swahili 1%(Kenya, N=1)
■ Twi 1% (Ghana, N=1)	■ Yoruba 1% (Nigeria, N=1)	■ Bengali 1%(Bangladesh, N=1)
■ Cantonese 2% (China, N=3)	■ "Chinese" 2% (China, N=3)	■ Gujarati 8% (India, N=12)
□ Hindi 4% (India, N=6)	■ Japanese 1% (Japan, N=1)	■ Kapampangan 1% (Philippines, N=1)
■ Korean 3% (Korea, N=5)	■ Mandarin 3% (China, N=5)	■ Punjabi 1% (India, N=1)
■ Shanghainese 1%(China, N=1)	■ Tagalog 6%(Philippines, N=9)	■ Tamil 1% (India, N=2)
■ Telugu 1% (India, N=1)	■ Urdu 35 (Pakistan, N=5)	■ Vietnamese 5% (Vietnam, N=8)
■ Visayan 1% (Philippines, N=2)	□ Georgian 3% (Georgia, N=5)	□ Greek 5% (Greece, N=7)
□ Italian 3% (Italy, N=4)	■ Polish 5% (Poland, N=8)	■ Russian 1% (Russia, N=1)
■ Sicilian 1% (Italy, N=1)	■ Turkish 3% (Turkey, N=5)	■ Spanish 25%(Latino Countries, N=37)



# Preferred Language Use by Social Contexts





# Italian Students & Language

- Most of the Italian students grew up speaking Southern Italian languages, either Neapolitan or Sicilian
- Italy had many languages before the unification of Italy into one nation in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century
  - Imposition of Northern Italian as “standard Italian”
  - Only 2.5% of Italians could speak standard Italian when the nation unified in 1861
- Students have experienced discrimination for speaking Italian regional languages



# Tensions between Sicilian & Italian

“I actually first started speaking Italian. I didn’t know any English until about first grade. My grandparents only spoke Italian. My father still to this day really only speaks Italian. He knows a little bit of English, but just conversational pieces. My mother speaks English well. But I first started speaking Sicilian and then maybe later on when I was seven or eight, my mother saw that I was only speaking Sicilian and I wasn’t really speaking **correct Italian**, and she really encouraged me to start learning how to speak **proper Italian**.”



# Italian Students & Language

“So I can distinguish between Sicilian and Italian, which is a plus. When you go to Italy, even in Sicily today, a lot of people still do speak Sicilian. Before they used to teach Sicilian in school in Sicily. But now they’re teaching **correct** Italian so that when you go out into the real world, people don’t laugh at the way you speak.”



# Italian Students & Language

- “I know that when I’m in Italian class I try to speak as properly as I can, but when I meet somebody for the first time, regardless of where they’re from, I will speak in my dialect, because usually they’ll recognize it and you get a kind of closer connection.”
- “And that just dates back to us not being a republic before 1861 or whatever year it was. I’m not that great with history. If you’re in Italy and you’re living in the region of the dialect that you’re speaking, everybody speaks that way. But when you’re here, you’re kind of bringing a little bit of that with you when you speak to somebody else and you meet them and it’s a way of not losing that piece of your culture.”



# Italian Students & Language

- Use of Italian regional languages with family source of connection, warmth and pride
- Among themselves, students would still speak family languages
- Striking prejudices based in language have survived since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Italy and crossed to the U.S. in various ways
- Themes are central to understanding acculturation within historical, cultural and immigration contexts



# African Students & Language

- The use of English in former British colonies in Africa has different significance
- In contrast to the Italian case, English came to Africa via British colonization
- Kenya uses both Swahili and English as national languages



# African Students & Language

- ***“Moderator:*** *So this might be a leading question, but let me ask it. So do you think it has to do with colonialism?*
- **Female Participant:** Yes.
- ***Moderator:*** *That your schools said only speak English, British English.*
- **Female Participant:** But I think it’s helpful ...
- **Female Participant:** Okay, example. My school, you were only allowed to speak English. Like they forced us to. They tried to teach us how to speak English. I think that’s beneficial for myself.”



# African Students & Language

“It’s perplexing; it’s like colonialism. I don’t think it’s because we’re colonized. It’s like you’re supposed, I just thought you were in school, you have all day to speak other languages at home. So while you’re in school you should be able to speak **proper English**. And I mean if you’re going to learn and if you’re going to compete on a global scale, then I think you need to speak the language that everybody speaks. I don’t think it’s because we’re colonized or something. I mean I know there are effects of colonialism in Africa and I’m not oblivious to that. But in that regard, I don’t agree.”



# Nigerian Students & Language

“It’s just part of discipline, I think. You’re in school so there’s no vernacular – they call it vernacular. And I guess vernacular refers to any of your native languages. So you always spoke in English. You addressed everybody in English. And then when you were in Igbo, Hausa classes you were allowed to speak those languages. And once it’s over, you go back to speaking English. I never spoke Yoruba in school unless I was in Yoruba class. It’s just because it was frowned upon.”



# Kenyan Students & Language

“I was in an international school before I went to Canada. As we got older, we started speaking many of our languages. My friends who were Kikuyu would speak Kikuyu when they were talking about someone and didn’t want them to hear. Then my teacher complained. Why are you speaking Kikuyu in an international school? You’re just only meant to speak in British English. She made a rule you’re not allowed to speak any of your languages. Even Swahili was an issue. She said, okay, when you have your Swahili class, you can speak Swahili. But when you’re here, just speak British English.”



# African Students & Language

- The reference for **proper English** is British rather than American English
- The key points that emerge from these observations is that the acculturation experience of African students involves coming to the US speaking English
  - When they got to the U.S., they often felt there was a certain superiority to their English compared to what was spoken here
  - Where this really came out was in the issues of differentiating themselves from African Americans



# African Students & Language

- A key feature of the discussions with African origin students would fit within the framework of Claude Steele's concept of "stereotype threat"
- African origin students spent a great deal of time discussing how their parents and they worked to distinguish themselves from African American students
- Parents saw themselves as fitting more with the immigrant narrative of parental sacrifice and children's educational success
- Children were often close friends with African Americans in their schools & communities



# POLITICS OF LANGUAGE USE



# Politics of Language Use

- Particularly in the U.S.,
  - There is considerable intolerance towards children maintaining family languages
  - Children are often discriminated against, and sometimes punished, for using family languages
- Families are well aware that their children need to learn English to succeed in the U.S.
  - They want their children to excel academically
  - This is often a central rationale for family's immigration project



# Politics of Language Use

- Broader political and historical forces have profound effects on language use
- True both in home countries and in the U.S.
- Stigma attached to the labels of “dialects,” “vernacular,” or “tribal” languages
- Suppression of local languages as part of nation building projects



# Politics of Language Use

- “Historical trauma” produced by these projects
- “Stereotype threat” (Claude Steele) of being compared to African Americans
- Exoticization of accents as further stigmatization
- Growth of “English only” movements as threat to immigrant languages



# RECOMMENDATIONS



# Overarching Recommendation

- **Provide the resources and supports to transform the high educational aspirations of immigrant families and students into reality**
  - “... generate the optimism of immigrant parents among U.S.-born parents” (Kao & Tienda, 1995, p. 17)



# Recommendations for Universities

Develop new curricular/co-curricular programs to enhance the experience of immigrant students and university diversity

- Enhance **ethnic studies programs**
- Build on the **impressive language diversity** and skills of immigrant students to develop a **Language Engagement Project**



# Contact Information

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