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Are Latinos Over-Estimating Their Language Abilities on Self-Reported Measures?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The growing presence of the Latino population in the U.S. continues to challenge the ability of organizations in selecting the best linguistic strategy when communicating with Latinos. Commonly used self-reported measures of language behavior have limitations that may lead to unexpected outcomes when used in decisions regarding Latinos. This paper is designed to help organizations – academic, public agencies, and research practitioners --- improve their understanding of Latino language behavior as one avenue for enhancing the response of Latinos to their communications.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Organizations that depend on self-reported measures of language behavior to design studies or programs that target Latinos.

Background

It is an interesting challenge: how to best measure the language behavior of Latinos. In studies of Latinos, a good measure of language behavior is important for several reasons: it helps to define the target audience, guide the development of the message content, influences the media strategy to be used, and assists in decisions regarding the packaging or promotion of a product or service. Reliable and valid

measures of language behavior are clearly indispensable in studies and programs that include Latinos.

Although the study of language behavior can be complex and include various linguistic functions, past studies of Latinos have usually focused on two dimensions: language proficiency (how well the language is spoken) and language dominance (how often a language is spoken). The U.S. Census Bureau, for example, measures *English-language proficiency* by asking respondents on their questionnaire: "How well does this person speak English?" and includes the response options "very well," "well," "not well," or "not at all." Media ratings agencies, such as The Nielsen Company and Arbitron, measure *language dominance* by asking survey respondents a question similar to this: "Which language do you speak at home? Would you say only Spanish, mostly Spanish but some English, mostly English but some Spanish, or only English?" A response category for Spanish and English spoken equally is not read to the respondent but coded if it is mentioned. Media companies typically use information on language dominance to classify Latinos into two language buckets -- English dominant and Spanish dominant — which is used to adjust television and radio audience ratings and influence the media buying decisions of the nation's advertisers.

Potential Problems with Self-Reported Measures of Language

While such self-reported measures provide an easy way to measure the language behavior of Latinos, they are limited in three important ways. For example, language question formats like the one used by the Census Bureau lack context because the language abilities are assumed to apply to all tasks or situations, which is not always true. One's knowledge of English or Spanish may be adequate when talking about every day topics, but very inadequate if it includes more complicated topics like medical or legal terminology. Similarly, the language dominance measures would have us believe that an individual generally uses one language at home, but the language behavior in typical Latino households is not so simplistic. Younger Latinos often use English when talking to each other, but may use Spanish when talking to older adults. The language spoken at home may have even less relevance to other behaviors such as watching television, reading a book or writing which require different linguistic functions. The

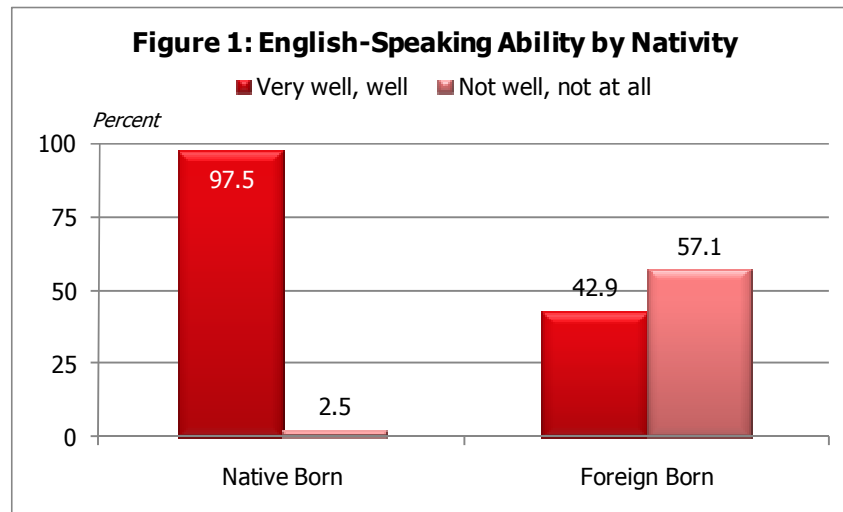
absence of behavioral validation is also problematic for self-reported measures of language. Without any *observable* evidence of language proficiency or usage, how much confidence can we place in an individual's self-assessment of their language behavior?

Self-reported language scales may also be subject to inflated estimates by Latinos. In a job that requires bilingual skills, for example, native-born Latinos may over-estimate their Spanish-language skills in order to receive top consideration. Foreign-born Latinos, on the other hand, may over-estimate their English-language abilities as a symbol of their successful adaptation to the mainstream culture – a symbol of pride. When presented with a task to demonstrate their language proficiency, however, the language skills of these individuals sometimes fall short of expectation. While this pattern of behavior may not be characteristic of Latinos in general, it has been observed often enough in our own research practice to merit further analysis.

A Closer Look at the Language Behavior of Latinos

The disparity between self-reported language abilities and actual language behavior was illustrated in a recent study conducted by Rincón & Associates in the Dallas/Ft. Worth metropolitan area (Rincon & Associates, 2011). A telephone survey was conducted with a random sample of 500 Latino adults, which included a measure of English and Spanish-language proficiency similar to the format used by the U.S. Census Bureau. Bilingual interviewers provided respondents the choice of English or Spanish as the interviewing language, regardless of the language used in the initial greeting. The following figures illustrate what we learned about the relationship between self-reported language and actual language usage.

According to Figure 1 below, a majority of the native-born Latinos (97.5%) stated that they spoke English very well or well – not too surprising given that they have probably studied English most of their lives. However, over four in ten (42.9%) of the foreign-born Latinos stated that they spoke English very well or well, while nearly six in ten (57.1%) felt that they spoke English not well or not at all.



Are foreign-born Latino adults over-stating their English-speaking skills?

Perhaps, but we have no way of knowing from the response to this self-reported measure alone. In regards to their Spanish-speaking skills, Figure 2 on the following page shows that most of the foreign-born Latino adults (99.1%) believed that they spoke Spanish very well or well, as one would expect. However, over eight in ten of the native-born Latinos (84.3%) stated that they spoke Spanish very well or well – not something that one would expect since native-born Latinos are not generally likely to study Spanish formally but use it more informally than foreign-born Latinos. If it is true that native-born Latinos are very proficient in speaking Spanish, one might expect them to choose Spanish rather frequently when provided the choice to communicate in English or Spanish.

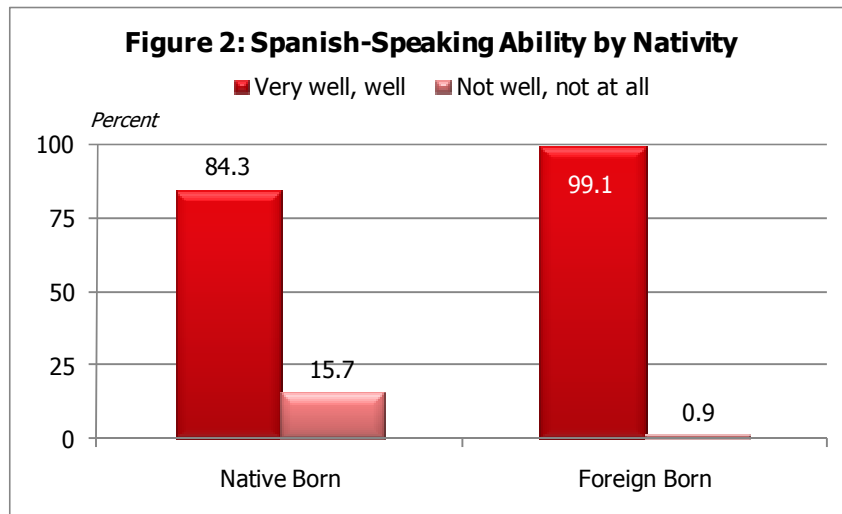
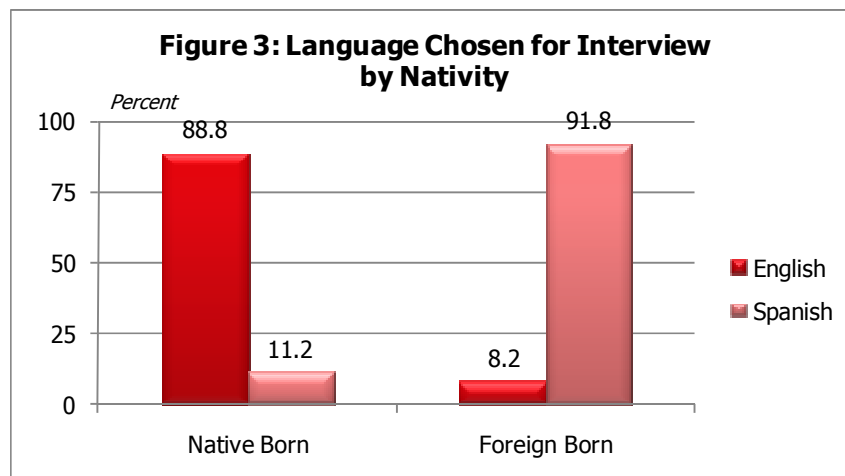


Figure 3 below, however, shows that this was not the case. The majority of native-born Latino adults (88.8%) chose English as the interviewing language during the telephone interview, despite having the choice of English or Spanish. Most of the foreign-born Latino adults (91.8%), as expected, chose Spanish as the interviewing language.



Implications for Industry Practice

These results suggest that self-reported language questions may over-estimate the actual language abilities of Latino adults, which could create false expectations among users of self-reported language data. The study results point to several practical implications for industry professionals. A *job applicant* who states that they have good reading skills in English or Spanish should be given a reading test in that language to validate their assessment if these language skills are important to performance of their job. In the *healthcare environment*, Latino patients with limited English-language skills may indicate that they “understand English” – but medical staff should not accept this self-affirmation without further probing to ensure that the patient truly understands a medical form or instruction. *Retailers* are not always equipped with bilingual staff or forms to ensure that their customers understand the contractual requirements associated with major purchases for automobiles, mortgages or other items. To expedite these transactions, sales staff sometimes accept a simple “I understand” from the Latino customer as confirmation that the contractual terms are understood and acceptable. In the absence of bilingual staff or forms, however, Latinos should not be asked to sign documents that they do not clearly understand.

In studies that include Latinos, *research practitioners* should always provide both English and Spanish-language options in regards to their data collection instruments and interviewing staff. As previously discussed, the social desirability of Latinos regarding their language abilities suggests that telephone interviewers should anticipate the possibility that native-born Latinos may choose a Spanish-language interview merely to “impress” the interviewer with their Spanish-language skills, while foreign-born Latinos may choose an English-language interview to “impress” the interviewer with their English-language skills. Well-trained bilingual interviewers should be able to judge if the language chosen by the Latino respondent is providing valid responses, and suggest the other language option if valid responses are not being provided.

The study findings should also give *media and marketing professionals* some pause for concern. Given the potential problems associated with self-reported language data, media professionals should exercise some caution when using Nielsen and Arbitron ratings, which are routinely adjusted by such measures. Marketers should try to simplify

the reading difficulty associated with the labeling and instructions on various products, recognizing that native-born Latinos generally have more limited Spanish-language reading skills, while foreign-born Latinos generally have more limited English-language reading skills.

Concluding Thoughts

In summary, it seems clear that more caution should be exercised when evaluating the language behavior of Latinos. Rather than relying on simplistic measures of home language dominance, language measures would be more valid by including reference to a specific task, situation, or persons involved. Where feasible, language proficiency measures should not be limited to self-reported assessments but also include a demonstration or test of the language abilities of interest. More importantly, Latinos should always be provided English and Spanish-language options to express their knowledge, attitudes or behavior and allow them to make the choice of which language to use --- which, in most cases, will define their language dominance and lead to improved outcomes in communications with Latinos.

About the Author

Dr. Edward T. Rincón, president of Dallas-based Rincón & Associates, is a research psychologist who has conducted studies of multicultural consumers over the past 30 years for private and public clients throughout the U.S, Puerto Rico and Mexico. Dr. Rincón has taught university courses on Hispanic marketing, statistics, survey research methods, and focus group techniques.

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References

Rincón & Associates. Dallas/Ft. Worth Latino Trendline Study 2010. March 29, 2011.