Mapping dialects and expressing attitudes: Prestige and stigma in Colombian Spanish

Gregory Newall, Indiana University

Prestige and stigma can describe specific linguistic variables whose production shows social stratification (Labov 1966, Trudgill 1972), and speakers may assign prestige and stigma to certain dialects (Preston 1996, Alfaraz 2000). In Spanish, Lipski (1994) and Lope Blanch (1993) note that within Hispanic countries, the capital city dialect is normally prestigious. Other dialects may suffer from stigma (Escamilla Morales 1993). This appears to be true in Colombia (Lipski 1994, Garrido 2007), yet there is also evidence of local (covert) prestige and ambivalence (Lipski 1994, Garrido 2007). Given this variation in language regard as well as the fact that Colombia has other large urban centers, regions may differentially assign prestige and stigma to various dialects. The present investigation focuses on the attitudes of speakers of another dialect of Colombian Spanish: Cali.

There were 21 participants aged 18-35 of both genders who were either college-educated or current university students. All participants completed two activities, based on previous suggestions of the benefits of multiple instruments (Preston 2004). First, participants indicated on a map of Colombia where they believed the dialects of Colombian Spanish were, and then they described the dialects. The map activity (modeled after Preston 1981) allows for investigation of local concepts of dialects and of prestige and stigma. To the knowledge of the investigator, it is the first of its kind for Colombian Spanish. Second, each participant responded to questions in an open-ended interview, about the best and worst dialects of the country and the use of specific linguistic features in the different dialects.

Results show that speakers use linguistic and extra-linguistic features to differentiate and characterize multiple dialects of Colombian Spanish. In contrast to Montes Giraldo (1982) and Garrido (2007), they identify anywhere between two and twelve dialects. The most salient dialect is the Caribbean Coastal one, which research shows to be stigmatized (Escamilla Morales 1993). The Cali dialect was not mapped by all participants, which may suggest some local linguistic insecurity. This is confirmed by interview responses, however, in contrast to previous research, speakers do not by plurality state that the Bogotá dialect is the best. Compared to the opinions expressed by speakers of other dialects (Garrido 2007), in Cali, there is greater variety in the assignment of prestige and a lack of allegiance to the national standard of the capital city. Also, there is less covert prestige of the Cali dialect than of the Coastal one. From these results, we can suggest that in Colombia, there are varying notions of prestige of the Bogotá dialect, as well as variation in prestige for one’s own dialect. As Coastal speakers generally claim local prestige, Cali speakers vary between linguistic insecurity, ambivalence, and local prestige.

Future studies may benefit from maps and interviews, as they allow for expression of linguistic identity and opinions in multiple ways, provide research with invaluable information that may help explain variation in prestige and stigma, and show how dialect descriptions differ between linguists and non-linguists.