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¿Puras groserías?: Rethinking the role of profanity
and graphic humor in Latin@ students' bilingual wordplay

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Abstract

This article explores the role of profanity and graphic humor in the bilingual wordplay of Latin@ middle school students. We highlight the creativity, skill, and communicative competence embedded in this transgressive wordplay, revealing how these youth employed profanity and graphic humor to index ethnic solidarity and construct bilingual identities. We argue that further exploration of such wordplay might well reveal other functions and meanings that are obscured when it is simply dismissed as inappropriate.

Keywords: Bilingual wordplay; Latin@ youth; Transgressive language practices;
Communicative competence

Introduction

Profanity and graphic humor are often discouraged among children and adolescents, particularly in educational settings. Both explicitly and implicitly, normative linguistic boundaries and taboos restrict the ways that bilingual Latin@ⁱ youth use language to make meaning, significantly limiting notions of appropriate classroom language. But in many speech communities, witty and skillful verbal performances are positively appraised even if they transgress normative linguistic boundaries by invoking *groserías* ('bad words') and/or coarse humor. In fact, such *transgressive language practices* (Martínez and Morales 2012) often reflect linguistic dexterity and can be considered cultural displays of knowledge (Lee 2007). In this article, we take the perspective that bilingual Latin@ students' transgressive language practices are worthy of study. Drawing on scholarship in the *ethnography of communication* (Hymes 1974; Goodwin 1990) and *language socialization* (Ochs 1988), we argue that Latin@ students' bilingual wordplay displays creativity and skill that might easily be overlooked or condemned due to its transgressive nature.

Being bilingual and living in the United States affords many Latin@ youth access to at least two different sets of *words* and *worlds* when engaging in verbal play. These youth display communicative competence (Hymes 1974) when engaging in language practices such as *doble sentido*, or double entendre, which is a play-on-words involving a literal meaning and a playful meaning, akin to Bakhtinian (1981) "double-voicedness" in that it simultaneously expresses more than one intention. *Doble sentido* also often involves racy or vulgar humor, which is part and parcel of the dexterity, since someone engaging in *doble sentido* can get away with a transgressive joke in formal settings because the literal meaning may be quite innocent. Through the use of *doble sentido* and other creative forms of bilingual wordplay, Latin@ youth draw on

their linguistic repertoires to demonstrate lexical knowledge, display appreciation for semantic nuance, and construct particular identities for themselves and others. The use of both profanity and graphic humor within such wordplay often serves to heighten or reinforce these functions. Moreover, this transgressive form of bilingual wordplay is often encouraged and modeled by older youth and adults (Farr 2000). In this article, we highlight the creativity and skill embedded in bilingual Latin@ students' transgressive wordplay, and we argue that these students exhibit tremendous agency as they make use of their full linguistic repertoires to construct particular identities within the context of social interaction. We seek to re-present this wordplay as a potential window into the rich "underlife" of a classroom – the informal and unofficial *third spaces* (Gutiérrez et al. 1995) that comprise much of classroom activity.

Everyday Language Practices of Latin@ Youth

Research on the language practices of youth of color has amassed in education and related fields, helping us rethink what these youth do in their everyday talk from an assets-based perspective (Alim 2005; Gutiérrez et al. 1999; Lee 2007; Orellana 2001; Zentella 1997). Some of this scholarship has focused on Latin@ youth, addressing a range of issues, including English learners' attempts at passing for English fluent (Monzó and Rueda 2009); the significant role that immigrant youth play in translating and interpreting situations (Orellana 2001); the linguistic innovativeness and creativity that bilinguals display, often on a moment-to-moment basis, through the selection of multiple codes (Zentella 2002); and the hybrid language practices that youth employ in classrooms when they are encouraged to draw on their full linguistic repertoires (Gutiérrez et al. 1999). Taken together, this work has sought to "reposition what might be historically viewed as vernacular practices as intellectually rich" (Lee 2007:26-27).

Related work has explored how Latin@ youth are socialized into particular language practices. Sandra Schecter and Robert Bayley (1997), for example, investigated the language practices of children of Mexican ancestry in California and Texas. Although these children had different levels of Spanish use and fluency, they all viewed bilingualism as a positive attribute and Spanish as an important part of their cultural identities. Marcia Farr (2000) described the way men, women, and children constructed themselves as self-assertive and individualistic through a way of speaking that she called *franqueza*, characterized by frequent use of directives and direct questions. However, *franqueza* was complemented by another way of speaking called *echando relajo*, characterized by joking, indirect teasing, and punning (Farr 1994). According to Ann Eisenberg (1986), who documented similar language practices, not only did Latin@ children attend to these types of speech events in order to acquire the verbal skills necessary to participate in this wordplay, but adults also engaged children in *bromas de confusión* (joking intended to confuse children) to provide them with practice in handling themselves verbally in such situations. Some scholars have argued that the playfulness and artistic creativity in such wordplay inverts any negativity, making the interaction *play* (Limón 1989), and that this type of wordplay serves to build camaraderie, familiarity, and *confianza* or trust (Lauria 1964).

The use of *doble sentido* and other forms of verbal play by Latin@ youth constitute a display of *linguistic dexterity* (Paris 2009) that reflects the expansive linguistic repertoires they have at their disposal. Marjorie Orellana and Jennifer Reynolds (2008) point out the ‘carnavalesque’ humor that results when children engage in wordplay “predicated on the similarities between everyday words and taboo ones” (58). Carnavalesque language, as described by Mikhail Bakhtin (1968), can be an act of rebellion, satire, or critique, but most often it involves play. Engagement in these language games requires cultural and contextual knowledge

in order to avoid becoming the butt of a joke or inadvertently insulting or offending someone due to not understanding the multiple meanings of a word. One specific type of wordplay that incorporates *doble sentido* is the *albur*. Ralph Cintrón (1997) defines the *albur* as “a verbal art, almost a duel, in which a poker-faced conversation is maintained during considerable sexual punning” (53). In his ethnography of language use in a Mexican-American suburb of Chicago, Cintrón found that for his participants, “playing *albures* was entertaining and a sign of cleverness, a way of gaining respect in an art form that was intricate and required...quickness” (1997:72-73). Often, it was not the joke itself that was particularly funny, but rather the coded words that signaled mischief. Similarly, Norma Mendoza-Denton (2008) found that gang-affiliated Latina youth engaged in *albures* as part of a broader set of competitive and performative language games. We seek to contribute to this literature on bilingual wordplay among Latin@ youth by exploring how younger children – middle school students – engaged in these transgressive language practices within the context of a public school classroom.

Competence and Performance in Everyday Language

Drawing on scholarship in the ethnography of communication (Hymes 1974; Goodwin 1990), we frame bilingual Latin@ students’ transgressive wordplay as a creative, skillful, and culturally embedded form of linguistic practice that contributes to the construction of bilingual identities. Rather than simply dismiss students’ language as inappropriate when it falls outside the boundaries of normally accepted classroom behavior, we can attempt to identify the *communicative competence* (Hymes 1974) that students develop and display as they engage with their interlocutors and make their meanings understood. Students’ knowledge of when, where, and how to use language appropriately is often exhibited within the context of specific verbal performances. In the ethnography of communication, the notion of verbal performance

encompasses both the everyday use of language in constructing social reality and the use of language in artistic ways. These displays of *rhetorical competence* (Farr 1993) might be viewed as both a reflection of linguistic competence and a form of verbal art. Farr (1993) points out that different discourse communities often have different discourse practices, rhetorical styles, and expectations of what constitutes ‘good’ speaking. In some speech communities, perceptions of effective speaking are explicitly linked to enjoyment of language use. Within such contexts, verbal performances can be considered cultural displays of knowledge (Lee 2007). In situations where language is used in performative or entertaining ways, transgressive language is often invoked as humorous, and displayed as part of rhetorical competence.

Language Socialization and Bilingual Identities

The field of language socialization (Ochs 1988) also informs our analysis since we understand that young people are socialized into linguistic practices as they become members of speech communities. Although we recognize that such communities are never static or homogeneous (Duranti 2005), we draw on scholarship that illuminates the relationship between individual speakers and broader communities of speakers. Of course, individuals are not passive acquirers who are simply filled with language, but rather they are interactively socialized. As bilingual Latin@ speakers engage in everyday social interaction, they simultaneously construct identities for themselves and others. This identity construction is *interactional* because it takes place within the context of interaction, and it is *intersubjective* in that it involves the participation of multiple subjects or interlocutors (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). Within many Latin@ speech communities, bilingual wordplay can contribute to this interactional co-construction of identity. Just as bilinguals switch languages for phrases or complete sentences, performing “acts of identity” (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985) in the process, the performative use of *doble*

sentido and other forms of transgressive wordplay can also be considered enacting identity.

With respect to the use of profanity and graphic humor, Shaylih Muehlmann notes:

“...[G]roserías perform a boundary-marking role, marking off a group of insiders from outsiders...

When those present erupt in laughter, they indicate that they understand the words and, in the process, identify themselves as insiders" (2008:38). These acts of linguistic identity place youth within a tradition and a cultural community, as well as sustain their positions as members of the local and broader speech community. Indeed, “[c]ursing as a linguistic strategy and stylistic device convey[s] familiarity, bonding, and intimacy between the interlocutors” (Galindo 1999:188). Verbal play in Spanish-speaking Latin@ contexts sometimes involves topics or words that outsiders might consider profane or transgressive, but that are often invoked in humorous contexts. We argue that the complexity of this wordplay is often overlooked in classroom settings due to the transgressive language involved, and we seek to look beyond surface lexical features to highlight the creativity, skill, and communicative competence displayed in these culturally embedded language practices.

Method

The data on which we draw in this article come from an ethnographic study of language and ideology in a sixth-grade English language arts classroom (Martínez 2009). The study explored the everyday language practices and attendant language ideologies of a group of bilingual Chican@ and Latin@ youth at a middle school in East Los Angeles, California. Although the study focused primarily on Spanish-English code-switching and students’ awareness, attitudes, and beliefs with respect to this everyday language practice, the corpus of data included multiple examples of students employing profanity and graphic humor.ⁱⁱ While some of these data were included in Ramón’s original analysis, they were analyzed only insofar

as they related directly to the primary focus on bilingual code-switching and attendant language ideologies. The impetus for a more focused analysis of profanity and graphic humor came from a series of conversations between the first and second authors about the prevalence of these phenomena among middle school students. Upon Zitlali's suggestion, we undertook a re-examination of the data with a specific focus on the role of profanity and graphic humor in bilingual wordplay. This article presents the findings that emerged from this more selective analysis of the data.

Setting and Participants

The study took place in a sixth-grade English language arts/social studies classroom at Eastside Middle Schoolⁱⁱⁱ, a public school in East Los Angeles that served students in grades 6-8. The demographic composition of Eastside Middle School was reflective of the working-class Latin@ community in which the school was situated: 98.8% of the 2,600 students were Latin@, 100% of them qualified to receive free or reduced-price lunch, and 40% of them were officially classified as *English Learners*. Ms. Ramírez^{iv}, the classroom teacher, worked with 29 students for a three-hour English language arts/social studies instructional block. In the aftermath of California's Proposition 227, which outlawed bilingual education statewide in 1998, English was the official language of instruction across both content areas in this classroom. Ms. Ramírez self-identified as Chicana, and she was bilingual in English and Spanish. All but one of her 29 students were Latin@s who displayed varying levels of proficiency in English and Spanish. Although Ms. Ramírez delivered almost all instruction in English, both she and her students drew on their full linguistic repertoires to communicate, often speaking Spanish and mixing English and Spanish in conversation across instructional and social contexts.

Data Collection

Ramón collected data in Ms. Ramírez's classroom during the 2007-2008 academic year. As a participant-observer in this classroom, he took extensive *ethnographic fieldnotes* on student interactions on a daily basis and interacted directly with students as they engaged in their daily routines, often assisting them with their classwork, engaging in informal conversations with them, leading whole group lessons and activities, working with individual students and/or small groups, and helping grade homework and other assignments. He also spent recess and lunch with students each day, following them to the playground and lunch area, eating with them, and talking with them about himself and about their own lives and experiences. In addition, Ramón video-recorded and audio-recorded verbal interactions that took place across the contexts mentioned above. Although video-recording and audio-recording may have mediated participants' interactions in ways that his presence alone might not have, Ms. Ramírez and her students eventually seemed to grow accustomed to the presence of the video camera and voice recorder. Moreover, the selective use of video/audio-recording methods and tools complemented Ramón's participant observation by enabling him to document micro-details of interaction that he would not have been able to capture otherwise, which ultimately allowed for a closer examination of the sequential organization of talk.

Authors' Positionality

Ramón is a Chicano/multi-racial university researcher from Los Angeles who is bilingual in English and Spanish and has close ties to this particular community. He taught at a nearby elementary school for six years and worked as a teacher educator at Eastside Middle School and other nearby schools for three additional years. Although he felt a certain sense of solidarity with Ms. Ramírez and her students, an intimate appreciation for their everyday language practices, and a strong connection to the local community, he recognizes that the social position

he occupied—including his position as a middle-class, adult, university researcher; his gendered identity as a man; and his phenotype as a light-skinned person—may very well have influenced how these students perceived him and, as a result, how they interacted with him and with each other in his presence.

Zitlali grew up in a Spanish-speaking household in the Midwest, the first of four daughters to two immigrants from Jalisco, Mexico. Spanish was her first language, but her schooling took place entirely in English and led to a predominant use of English outside the home. However, visits to Mexico and time spent with extended family there exposed Zitlali to verbal wordplay in Spanish and the use of *dobles sentidos*. She became fascinated with her Mexican family members' quick wit, their sophisticated attempts to get the best of each other verbally, and their command of various registers in the Spanish language – from formal and polite to slang and off-color. Over time, this personal interest in verbal play, transgressive humor, and use of language to index identity became an academic interest.

Both authors share a mutual interest in the everyday language practices of non-dominant youth, as well as a commitment to examine those practices through a non-deficit lens. Our familiarity with the discursive practices in question implied both affordances and constraints.

As Renato Rosaldo (1989) notes, the ethnographer, “as a positioned subject, grasps certain human phenomena better than others. He or she occupies a position or structural location and observes with a particular angle of vision” (19). Taken together, our perspectives and life experiences constituted what Rosaldo calls a “distinctive mix of insight and blindness” (1989:19). We problematize both the notion of an *official insider voice* and the notion of *disinterested objectivity* and neutrality (Tuhiwai-Smith 2005), recognizing that our positioned subjectivity mediated both our collection and analysis of the data.

Data Analysis

As mentioned above, this article presents findings from a re-examination of existing ethnographic data. We re-examined the entire corpus of data to identify instances of profanity and graphic humor that surfaced within the context of bilingual wordplay, coding both field notes and transcripts of audio/video-recorded data. Drawing on methods from *conversation analysis* (Goodwin 1990; Sacks et al. 1974), we then closely examined the instances of profanity and graphic humor that we had identified in the audio/video transcripts. Informed by Marjorie Goodwin's assertion that "any rigorous account of human interaction must pay close attention to the detailed structure of talk that occurs within it" (1990:2), we conducted a systematic, line-by-line analysis of these examples of bilingual wordplay. This fine-grained analysis of the sequential organization of talk helped us begin to understand how the students in this classroom were engaging in and making sense of this bilingual wordplay. It should be emphasized, however, that a close analysis of the micro-details of interaction is insufficient to fully understand the meanings that participants ascribe to their everyday cultural practices.^v Given that conversational exchanges "acquire their meaning from inside as well as from the outside of the exchanges themselves" (Duranti 1997:278), we sought to understand instances of bilingual wordplay in relation to the larger cultural context in which they were situated and from which they emerged. Taking an ethnographic perspective, we triangulated our emergent analyses of the video/audio transcripts by comparing them with the field notes and with what we knew about the students and their language practices from the original analysis of the data. In this sense, our approach to data analysis closely approximates what Frederick Erickson refers to as the "ethnographic micro-analysis of social interaction" (2004:viii). Ethnography was our *way of seeing* (Wolcott 2008) during both collection and analysis of the data. In the following section,

we share examples of students' transgressive bilingual wordplay in order to illustrate the creativity, skill, and communicative competence reflected therein.

Transgressive Bilingual Wordplay

Profanity and graphic humor were commonplace in Ms. Ramírez's classroom. On a daily basis, multiple students swore and/or invoked vulgar or racy content as part of jokes or other humorous talk. Although some students seemed to monitor and limit their use of profanity and coarse humor around Ramón, most of them cursed and invoked vulgarity quite freely in his presence, and some even did so when in direct conversation with him. Despite the prevalence of profanity and graphic humor, students in this class seemed to perceive engagement in this kind of bilingual wordplay as *transgressive*. Although students often cursed in the presence of the first author, they rarely did so while in the presence of Ms. Ramírez, who explicitly reprimanded students for such behavior on the few occasions that she overheard. Also, while overall instances of profanity and graphic humor were fairly evenly divided between English and Spanish, the instances of bilingual wordplay almost exclusively involved the use of swearwords and vulgar content *in Spanish*. This use of Spanish in unofficial, transgressive forms of talk contrasts sharply with the official use of English imposed by restrictive English Only language policy.

Ramón initially interpreted the prevalence of profanity and graphic humor in this classroom as simply reflective of how most pre-adolescents tend to talk in spaces where they predominate. However, a re-examination of the data from this study revealed that almost half of all instances of profanity and graphic humor took place within the context of bilingual wordplay—in other words, within bilingual conversations that involved the creative and skillful use of one or both languages. Many of these bilingual interactions involved the use of *doble*

sentido and/or the related discursive practice known as *albur*. This bilingual wordplay displayed creativity and skill—sometimes through the explicit use of profanity and sometimes through the careful and witty avoidance of profanity. While these instances of bilingual wordplay reflected students’ socialization into culturally embedded linguistic and discursive practices, they also often showcased students’ agentive use of language to index ethnic solidarity and construct individual identities as competent bilinguals. In what follows, we share three representative examples from everyday classroom interactions that illustrate the creativity, skill, and communicative competence displayed in these students’ transgressive bilingual wordplay.

“¡Qué pensativas son!”: Cursing without Cursing

The following excerpt from a conversation between Ramón and three students—Teresita, Zulema, and Mara—highlights the creativity embedded in students’ wordplay and underscores the transgressive nature of profanity in this classroom.^{vi} Teresita offers Ramón some flavored potato chips, which he declines, citing their monosodium glutamate (MSG) content. What ensues is an exchange in which all three girls contest Ramón’s claim that the chips contain MSG. When Teresita and Mara read the ingredients listed on the bag, Zulema engages in bilingual wordplay to criticize them for lending credence to his claim.

- 01 Teresita: *((offering First author some chips))* Want some?
- 02 Zulema: *((biting into a chip as she looks into the camera))* Delicious.
- 03 Ramón: No, thanks. It has MSG.
- 04 Teresita: No, it doesn’t!
- 05 Ramón: Yes, it does! Read the- read the-
- 06 Zulema: You and your little words!!
- 07 Ramón: Read the ingredients.

- 08 Mara: I know!
- 09 Ramón: Read the ingredients!
- 10 Zulema: What is it called again?
- 11 Ramón: Monosodium glutamate.
- 12 Zulema: Monosodium gluti- *((Looking at list of ingredients on bag, which*
13 *Teresita is holding up to read))*
- 14 Ramón: Glutamate.
- 15 Zulema: Look, the letters are too small. I'm not gonna waste my time
16 reading. *((Walks away from Teresita and Mara))*
- 17 Teresita: *((closely inspecting list of ingredients on bag))* Hmm.
- 18 Mara: *((leans in to inspect list of ingredients with Teresita))*
- 19 Zulema: *((Off camera, reading a sign posted on classroom wall))* You see, I
20 could read this cuz it's not that small.
- 21 Mara: It doesn't even have some.
- 22 Teresita: Gu- It says "guanle."
- 23 Zulema: ***Y ustedes que le hacen caso, ¿qué pensativas son!***
- 24 Ramón: No, it's- I'm serious. It's in there.

A literal translation of Zulema's utterance in line 23 above might render it as, "And how *thoughtful* you are for listening to him" (i.e., for doing as he says and reading the ingredients).

The broader interactional context, however, alerts Zulema's interlocutors to the fact that this utterance is rife with *doble sentido*. Her response in line 6 above, for example, suggests that she doubts the veracity of Ramón's claim (and that she perhaps even doubts the existence of MSG).

Although she asks first author to repeat the word *monosodium glutamate* in line 10 and then

attempts to pronounce it in line 12, her subsequent utterance in lines 15-16 (“Look, the letters are too small. I’m not gonna waste my time reading.”) makes it clear that she does not view a close examination of the ingredients as a worthwhile investment of her time. Noteworthy here is the fact that this utterance co-occurs with her temporary exit from the scene. As Zulema utters these words, she walks ‘off camera’ and away from her classmates, who continue to inspect the list of ingredients on the bag. The co-occurrence of this utterance with Zulema’s physical retreat from the location further contributes to an air of incredulity. It becomes clear that a literal interpretation of Zulema’s remark in line 23 would fail to convey its deeper meaning, as she is obviously not complimenting her classmates. Within this context, the word *pensativas* (*adj.* pensive, thoughtful) is meant to index the swearword *pendejas* (*n.* stupid, dumb, idiotic), invoking the common vernacular insult, “¡Qué *pendejas* son!” (How stupid you are!). In essence, Zulema is calling her classmates dumb for taking first author seriously. This act of semantic substitution relies on her interlocutors’ familiarity with this vernacular expression, as well as on the fact that the lexical items *pendejas* and *pensativas* share the same initial syllable (/pen/). Substituting *pensativas* for *pendejas* thus allows Zulema to insult her classmates without actually insulting them—indeed, without actually using a curse word.

This particular play on words relies on and displays Zulema’s proficiency in Spanish, as well as her familiarity with the practice of *doble sentido*. To begin with, Zulema demonstrates sufficient lexical knowledge to be able to use *pensativas* to stand in for *pendejas*. In large part, the skill and craftiness of this verbal feat lie in the fact that *pensativas* effectively indexes profanity without referring explicitly to the profane. Zulema thus exploits the marked contrast between the referential and indexical meanings of *pensativas* in this context to successfully insult her classmates and get away with it. Her insult is no less effective for its lack of explicit

profanity, however. In fact, it might be argued that this use of *doble sentido* is an even more effective way for her to insult her classmates, as it involves an element of sneakiness. Zulema seems to delight in getting away with this insult—in being transgressive without technically transgressing any boundaries.

The specific practice of substituting *pensativas* for *pendejas* was quite common in this classroom. Ramón overheard and documented multiple instances of students uttering this phrase at recess and lunch, as well as in the classroom during instructional time. Although some of these instances involved Zulema as the primary speaker, most did not. Within the local context of this classroom, this phrase seemed to circulate as a widely understood and frequently invoked ‘inside joke’ of sorts. In most cases, the speaker accentuated the initial syllable in *pensativas* by drawing it out, resulting in a significant pause before the remaining syllables were uttered (i.e., “*pen:::sativas*”). This pause seemed intended to create momentary semantic ambiguity, thus highlighting the potential for interpretations beyond the literal. By the time a speaker supplied the final syllables, their interlocutors had been given sufficient time to entertain the possibility that the word being uttered might, in fact, be *pendejas*. In this particular instance, Zulema does not extend the initial syllable. However, her utterance here seems to function in much the same way as it had when uttered by her classmates in earlier interactions. By invoking this phrase in the conversation above, Zulema thus indexes solidarity with her classmates and with the local bilingual context of this classroom. She seems to assume that Teresita and Mara will understand the double meaning conveyed by her utterance--perhaps a safe assumption given how frequently this phrase circulated in this classroom. Beyond that, Zulema also indexes affiliation with a broader discursive community of bilingual speakers. Although we did not find this particular phrase attested in the literature, we had encountered it in actual bilingual speech among adults

and children in contexts outside this classroom. Moreover, as noted in our review of relevant literature, the broader practice of *doble sentido* itself is widely attested across multiple bilingual speech communities (Cintrón 1997; Limón 1994). Given what we know about language socialization processes (Ochs 1988), it seems quite likely that Zulema and her classmates had been exposed to the practice of *doble sentido*—and perhaps even to this particular phrase—during interactions within the broader discursive communities outside their classroom. In this sense, Zulema’s utterance might well reflect socialization into this particular type of bilingual wordplay—socialization into a humorous playfulness with taboo language.

A consideration of the language socialization processes relevant to Zulema’s utterance above should not be interpreted as a negation of individual linguistic agency. Regardless of where Zulema first heard “¡*Qué pensativas son!*” or why she chose to invoke it in the interaction above, this utterance nonetheless stands as an example of individual craftiness and bilingual skill. It represents the intersection of individual agency with the social structure instantiated in classroom norms governing the use of profanity. Indeed, it is precisely Zulema’s skillful and witty *avoidance* of profanity here that underscores the transgressive nature of cursing in this classroom. By skirting around the word *pendejas*, Zulema—like her classmates on previous occasions—reveals that she views this particular curse word as taboo. Her use of *doble sentido* here can thus be read as a witty and playful assertion of linguistic agency in the face of linguistic boundaries—as a way of probing and testing those very boundaries without completely transgressing them.

“¡Lo cagaste!”: *Cussing as Identity Work*

It was not only the skillful avoidance of specific curse words, however, that revealed the transgressive nature of profanity in this classroom. More often, in fact, it was the explicit use of

profanity itself—and the talk immediately adjacent to this profanity—that revealed that these students viewed cursing as taboo. One illustrative example comes from an interaction involving Jorge, Mara, Zulema, and Jenny. The students were all seated at their desks, preparing decorations for the Open House for parents that was scheduled for that evening. Some students were working in pairs to prepare red and yellow streamers to hang from the ceiling. Jenny and her partner, Laura, collaborated to twist two long rolls of red and yellow streamers together. As Laura carefully braided the separate rolls together, Jenny wound the braided streamers into a single roll, holding it tightly to ensure that it would not come undone. This was somewhat time-consuming, and, like the other pairs of nearby students, Jenny and Laura talked quietly to each other as they worked. Suddenly, Jenny dropped the roll of braided streamers onto the floor, and it unraveled completely within a matter of seconds. Notice how Jenny’s classmates react when they witness this occurrence:

- 01 Mara: Oo::::h!
- 02 Zulema: ((gasps)) Jenny!
- 03 Mara: O:::h[
- 04 Jorge: [*¡Lo cagaste!*
- 05 Mara: O::h- ((laughs faintly))
- 06 Zulema: ((laughs loudly))
- 07 Mara: ((to Zulema)) Shut up! It’s recording!
- 08 Zulema: So?! It’s not us!
- 09 Jorge: Why are you laughing?
- 10 Zulema: ((laughs))

As this transcribed sequence of talk reveals, Jenny's mishap with the streamers prompts an animated response from her classmates. Mara is the first to respond (with an exaggerated and drawn out "Ooh!" in line 1), followed by Zulema, whose utterance in line 2 is preceded by an audible gasp. Mara then chimes in again, in line 3, with a drawn out "Oh!" It is clear from these first three lines that Mara and Zulema are both surprised that Jenny has dropped the roll of streamers, perhaps even shocked to see her hard work come undone so quickly. Jorge's contribution in line 4 can thus be seen as both a continuation of this interactional sequence and an escalation of the overall tone. His utterance—"*¡Lo cagaste!*"—is an approximation of the common vulgar expression "*¡La cagaste!*" (literally, "You crapped it!"). Although this phrase might be translated as "You messed up!" for audiences with delicate sensibilities, a far more accurate translation would be "You fucked up!" Jorge ups the ante, so to speak, by introducing an air of critique to the existing atmosphere of surprise. Moreover, by using profanity to deliver this critique, he transgresses classroom norms, further intensifying the tone of this interaction.

It seems clear from their initial reactions to Jorge's utterance that both Mara and Zulema perceive it to be funny. In line 5, Mara smiles before letting out a faint laugh. Then, in line 6, Zulema laughs out loud, leaning forward as she does so. At the same time, however, both girls seem to view Jorge's utterance as transgressive. Immediately preceding her smile and faint laughter in line 6, for example, Mara exclaims, "O::h" before abruptly cutting herself off. Unlike her first "Oh" (in line 3), which is directed towards Jenny, the "Oh" in line 6 seems to be directed towards Jorge, since she looks directly at him before uttering it. This second "Oh" thus seems to convey disapproval in a way that the first does not. Upon hearing Zulema's laughter, Mara tells her, "Shut up! It's recording!" (in line 7), pointing towards the video camera and drawing her attention to the fact that their behavior is being documented. This utterance has a

disapproving and chastising tone to it. Indeed, Mara seems to perceive it as transgressive to even acknowledge Jorge's transgression, as if such acknowledgment were tantamount to encouraging and supporting his behavior. Noteworthy here is the fact that Zulema does not dispute Mara's implication that Jorge's utterance was transgressive. When she responds, "So?! It's not *us!*" in line 8, she simply claims innocence by distancing herself and Mara from the guilty party. By asserting that *they* have done nothing wrong, Zulema implies that Jorge's remark did, in fact, transgress the boundary of acceptable classroom speech. Not about to take all of the blame, however, Jorge implicates Zulema and Mara when he asks, "Why are you laughing?" (in line 9), suggesting that they are guilty by virtue of finding his profane utterance humorous. Here he challenges Zulema's claim of innocence, invoking the logic reflected in Mara's previous concern about being guilty by association. Zulema's final laugh, in line 10, might be read as a defiant assertion of her right to laugh with impunity, as a deliberate attempt to probe linguistic boundaries without explicitly transgressing them (as in her use of *doble sentido* in the previous example), or simply as a reflection of the fact that she finds the situation humorous. In any event, this entire sequence of talk clearly reveals that these students view the utterance in question as both funny and transgressive. Indeed, it might be argued that they find the utterance humorous precisely because of the profanity invoked.

Jorge's humorous invocation of the profane also constitutes an example of the interactional and intersubjective construction of identity. In previous work (Martínez 2009), Ramón has argued that Jorge often engaged in active identity work through his everyday use of language. Jorge was light-skinned and considerably less proficient in Spanish than most of his classmates, and both of these perceived 'attributes' often became the topic of public commentary. He was often teased, and his grammatical errors in Spanish were frequently highlighted

(especially by Zulema). In short, he was regularly positioned as a less-than-competent bilingual in a room full of mostly bilingual Latin@ peers. When viewed against this backdrop, Jorge's utterance in the interaction above can be interpreted as an act of identity construction. Especially in light of the fact that his Spanish proficiency was so frequently and publicly called into question, interactions such as the one transcribed above represent opportunities for Jorge to position himself as a proficient bilingual. When he says, "*¡Lo cagaste!*" in the presence of Zulema and Mara, Jorge performs an identity that challenges the image of him as incompetent. He makes his classmates laugh by cursing in Spanish, thus succeeding at being both funny and bilingual. His use of this specific curse word at this specific moment displays communicative competence, and seems to earn him the respect of his classmates. The identity of competent bilingual thus emerges interactionally, as Jorge positions himself as proficient enough in Spanish to make his classmates laugh. Of course, his classmates also play an important role here. If we view identity as the "social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:586), then Zulema and Mara make an extremely important contribution to the intersubjective construction of Jorge's identity. Their laughter essentially ratifies his proficient use of Spanish profanity. Moreover, Zulema refrains from highlighting the fact that Jorge only approximates the conventional wording of the vulgar expression (i.e., saying "*lo cagaste*" instead of "*la cagaste*"). She reacts to the curse word itself—*cagaste*—seeming to disregard Jorge's use of the incorrect pronoun. In this way, Jorge's classmates collaborate in the construction of his identity as a proficient bilingual. Jorge's bilingual cursing—and the talk adjacent to it in the interaction above—can thus be seen as an instance of interactional and intersubjective identity work. Jorge's humorous use of profanity serves to index solidarity with his bilingual Latin@ peers, enabling him to enact an identity as a funny and proficient bilingual.

“¿Lees bien?”: A Critical Caveat

The two previous examples illustrate the pivotal role of profanity and graphic humor in these students' bilingual wordplay. By highlighting the skill and creativity displayed in this wordplay, however, we do not wish to romanticize cursing, nor do we mean to naively suggest that students' invocation of graphic humor was inherently or exclusively positive. Students' engagement in this transgressive bilingual wordplay was, in fact, sometimes quite problematic. In the transcript below, for example, Alejandra and Teresita engage in the practice known as *albur*. Recall that an *albur* involves the duel-like use of *doble sentido* to accomplish sexual innuendo in such a way that it escapes the notice of one's interlocutor. As José Limón (1994) notes, this sexual punning often invokes homoerotic themes from a heteronormative perspective. In the following example, the girls attempt to trick first author into admitting that he is a lesbian.

- 01 Alejandra: Mister, do you *lees bien*?
- 02 Ramón: What?
- 03 Teresita: Are you a *lees bien*?
- 04 Alejandra: ¿*Lees bien*? (emphasizing it)
- 05 Ramón: U::m:::- Do you guys know what that word means?
- 06 Teresita: Ye:s!!
- 07 Alejandra: Ye:::s!!!
- 08 Teresita: ***Que si lee- lees bien.***
- 09 Alejandra: ¿*Lees bien*? ¿*Lees bien*?
- 10 Ramón: Yes.
- 11 Teresita: ***No*** lesbian, mister. Geez!
- 12 Alejandra: He i::s!

As is clear from the sequence of talk above, Alejandra and Teresita are not yet entirely proficient in the art of the *albur*. Mendoza-Denton (2008) observes that the trick of an *albur* is “to direct an ambiguous sexual innuendo and have the target reply to the surface meaning without registering the sexual meaning, thus outwitting them and demonstrating both the target’s innocence and one’s superior cunning and verbal skill” (188). Alejandra and Teresita do not immediately succeed in this regard, as they make multiple unsuccessful attempts at wording the question in such a way that it makes sense in both languages. In line 1, for example, Alejandra asks Ramón, “Mister, do you *lees bien?*” While this code-switched interrogative might sound somewhat redundant, it still conveys the surface meaning (i.e., Do you read well?). This question is far less effective, however, at conveying the intended sexual meaning (i.e., Are you a lesbian?). Alejandra’s inclusion of the auxiliary verb *do* here makes “Do you lesbian?” the only possible sexual reading of this utterance. Because such a question does not make sense in English, this can be viewed as a failed attempt at demonstrating verbal skill. When Ramón asks, “What?” in line 2, this might signal to both girls that Alejandra’s attempted *albur* was unsuccessful. Teresita intervenes, in line 3, attempting to remedy Alejandra’s botched effort. Although her question (“Are you a *lees bien?*”) lends itself to a sexual reading, it fails to clearly convey the intended surface meaning since “Are you a do you read well?” makes little sense. Alejandra then redeems herself, in line 4, by wording the question in a way that makes sense in both languages, thus creating sufficient ambiguity to render both readings possible. Her utterance here—“¿*Lees bien?*”—could be taken literally (i.e., as the Spanish question “Do you read well?”) or it could be interpreted as a single-word interrogative in English (i.e., “Lesbian?”).

Notice, however, that Ramón does not supply the expected yes/no answer to Alejandra’s question.^{vii} Instead, he hesitates and expresses uncertainty before calling into question the girls’

own understanding of the word *lesbian*.^{viii} When he asks, “Do you guys know what that word means?” in lines 5-6, Teresita and Alejandra respond (in lines 6 and 7, respectively) both affirmatively and emphatically, almost as if offended by this apparent challenge to their superior cunning. Needless to say, Ramón’s question reveals that he has understood the intended sexual meaning, thus foiling the girls’ attempt at outwitting him. Still very much in the game, so to speak, Teresita then follows up by feigning innocence and attempting to explain the surface meaning in line 9. However, her attempt here initially fails at the level of syntax. Notice that she begins by referring to Ramón formally (i.e., as *usted*), which can be seen in her initial conjugation of the verb *leer*. She starts to say, “**Que si lee bien**” (“If you [formal] read well.”), but then immediately self-corrects, apparently realizing that this conjugation of the verb does not sound enough like the English word *lesbian*. Her mid-course correction here (“**Que si lee- lees bien.**”) involves switching to the informal (*tú* form), which enables her to continue feigning innocence while simultaneously producing an utterance that is open to sexual interpretation. Alejandra then interjects (in line 10) with the same successfully-worded interrogative from line 4, this time uttering it twice in rapid succession (“**¿Lees bien? ¿Lees bien?**”). First author finally provides the desired response in line 11 when he says, “Yes.” Still feigning innocence, Teresita says, “**No** lesbian, mister. (Not lesbian, mister.) Geez!” in line 11, suggesting that first author is out of line for suspecting a sexual meaning. At this point, Alejandra seems to claim victory, apparently believing that she has lured Ramón into admitting that he is a lesbian. She declares, “He i::s!” and then laughs as she looks around at her classmates. This final utterance suggests that Alejandra feels that she has sufficiently ensnared first author in her language trap.

The great irony here, of course, is that neither of the girls is entirely successful at entrapping Ramón. To begin with, it makes little sense to call Ramón a lesbian since he is a man. The girls seem to delight in the act of invoking a sexually-charged word without concern for whether or not this label applies to the target of their verbal entrapment. Moreover, this entire interaction is a collaborative effort marked by repeated unsuccessful attempts. What this sequence of interaction reveals, among other things, is that these girls are still approximating this adult-modeled language practice—still learning the ropes, so to speak. Although we can only speculate as to how this particular *albur* found its way into their discursive repertoires, it seems likely that it had circulated widely at their middle school and that it might have been modeled for them, at some point, by older youth. In this sense, the girls' interaction with Ramón here reflects their socialization into a particular discursive practice. However, it also reveals how youth come to acquire the skill embedded in such bilingual wordplay through active engagement in that very wordplay. Although the girls struggle to successfully produce this *albur*, their approximations exhibit an understanding that what they are saying is funny, skillful, and transgressive. Needless to say, this particular *albur* also requires a certain level of bilingualism on the part of both the speaker and her interlocutor. It simply would not make sense in either a monolingual English or Spanish speech community. The fact that Alejandra and Teresita are able to approximate the intended sexual innuendo requires and displays a base level of bilingual skill. Moreover, their approximations are noteworthy in that they represent the appropriation by *girls* of what is, by and large, a male-dominated discursive practice.^{ix}

We would be remiss, of course, to simply highlight the skill reflected in this bilingual wordplay without addressing the fact that it constitutes homophobic speech. Indeed, the most salient aspect of the interaction above, in our view, is the way that it reflects heteronormative

ideologies. What undergirds this particular *albur* is the notion that being a lesbian is somehow a bad thing—aberrant and deviant. This is clearly reflected in the way that the word *lesbian* is framed as an epithet. We highlight the problematic nature of this particular instance of bilingual wordplay not to dismiss the skill embedded therein, but rather to underscore the fact that this skill *co-occurs* and *overlaps* with homophobic language. Within the context of this interaction, the display of skillful bilingualism is interwoven with the display of homophobia such that it is impossible to disentangle the two. This, we would argue, is a reflection of the fact that youth are socialized into homophobic and heteronormative contexts just as they are socialized into particular ways of using language. Of course, instances of homophobic speech such as the one above do not simply *reflect* heteronormative ideologies, but rather they also *reproduce* those very ideologies. In this sense, Alejandra and Teresita are not only victims of socialization into a bigoted society, but also social actors who actively perpetuate homophobia in and through their talk. We share this example as a very deliberate cautionary measure in the hopes that it might inform the work of other researchers and educators who are similarly inclined to recognize the creativity and skill embedded in bilingual youth's transgressive language practices. If we do not carefully examine instances of profanity and graphic humor in youth's everyday talk, we risk romanticizing homophobic speech in our rush to highlight skillful bilingualism. That having been said, we argue that educators should not ignore or shy away from examples of transgressive bilingual wordplay such as this one. Insofar as such wordplay is rooted in homophobic and heteronormative ideologies and assumptions, it constitutes a unique opportunity for problem-posing education. Teachers who witness such wordplay might seize on these 'teachable moments' by engaging students in dialogue in order to highlight, interrogate, and challenge homophobia and heteronormativity.

More Than Meets the Ear

As the examples above suggest, students' transgressive use of profanity and graphic humor in this classroom was more than just 'cussing.' Their engagement in this transgressive wordplay displayed creativity and skill, indexed ethnic solidarity, and served to help individual students construct identities for themselves as competent and funny bilinguals. The first example revealed the cultural knowledge and linguistic skill involved in Zulema's witty avoidance of profanity. By referring to her classmates as "*pensativas*," she was able to skillfully invoke profanity without actually cursing. The second example demonstrated how Jorge cursed in Spanish as a way of indexing solidarity with his bilingual Latin@ classmates. By making his classmates laugh, Jorge positioned himself as a funny and competent bilingual, an identity which his classmates seemed to ratify within that particular interaction. Finally, the last example showcased Alejandra and Teresita approximating the discursive practice known as *albur*. Although they made multiple unsuccessful attempts before finally getting it right, their efforts reflect both bilingual skill and the process of language socialization. Of course, as we discussed above, this example also highlights how heteronormative ideologies are reflected and reproduced in homophobic speech. Our point here is that there was often 'more than meets the ear' when these bilingual youth engaged in profanity and graphic humor—that they were never 'just cussing,' but rather were often engaged in complex discursive practices. In addition to revealing offensive, sexist, and homophobic perspectives, such wordplay often reflected considerable verbal skill and creativity while serving valuable communicative functions in this classroom.

Discussion and Implications

Several scholars have argued for the need to take language play seriously, suggesting that it might both reveal and contribute to linguistic competence and meta-linguistic awareness (Bell

2013). We propose that this need is even greater with respect to bilingual Latin@ students because the skill, creativity, and communicative competence displayed in their wordplay might easily be ignored and/or misunderstood in many classroom settings. As Ana Celia Zentella (2003) notes, “many children of multicultural, multidialectical communities enter school with more inter-racial, cross-cultural, and multilingual experience than their teachers, but that knowledge goes untapped or is discredited” (57). Monolingual teachers who work with these students would likely not grasp the creativity and skill reflected in their wordplay. Bilingual teachers who are not Latin@ might similarly ignore these students’ linguistic dexterity and communicative competence. Even bilingual Latin@ teachers who are familiar with the discursive practices highlighted above might not recognize the complexity of what these youth are doing in and through their everyday language use precisely because they view such language as inappropriate or taboo. In this sense, we suggest that the transgressive bilingual wordplay in which these students engage might well constitute an untapped pedagogical resource.

Informed by sociocultural scholarship that promotes leveraging students’ everyday language practices as resources for teaching and learning (Lee 2007; Orellana and Reynolds 2008), we suggest that the transgressive bilingual wordplay in which bilingual youth engage deserves greater scholarly attention. If the transgressive wordplay in this particular classroom is any indication, there is likely much to be learned from such inquiry. The following questions might guide this type of inquiry: What discursive practices are on display when bilingual youth engage in profanity and graphic humor? What skills are reflected in these discursive practices? What communicative functions does such wordplay serve in the classroom? How do these skills and functions overlap with what we expect youth to learn in school? Starting with these questions would focus our attention on how bilingual youth’s everyday language practices

overlap with official academic knowledge.

Building on Carol Lee's (2007) *cultural modeling* framework, we might then explore how to leverage this wordplay as a pedagogical resource. As Orellana and Reynolds (2008) suggest, "we need to study what happens when teachers make good use of bilingual students' creative capacities, daily-life practices, and full linguistic repertoires" (63). We might take documented examples of students' transgressive bilingual wordplay—for example, their use of *doble sentido*—back to the students themselves as a way of focusing their attention on the skill, creativity, and communicative functions evident in their everyday language use. Cultivating this type of metalinguistic awareness would facilitate demonstrating connections between their everyday language practices and the academic knowledge privileged in school. Given the ways in which such transgressive wordplay might overlap with offensive or hateful speech, however, we would certainly think carefully about which examples of profanity and graphic humor to highlight in this regard. For example, the interaction in which Alejandra and Teresita engaged in a homophobic *albur* would not be a productive example to use when highlighting students' skill or creativity. Precisely because of how the display of skill and homophobia are so interwoven and difficult to disentangle in this example, we would not use it to complement students or draw attention to their verbal skill. We might, however, take such an example back to students in order to initiate problem-posing dialogue and interrogate heteronormative ideologies. Any examples that we did decide to use would be selected carefully with such considerations in mind. Regardless of which examples we chose, however, we would be challenging teachers and students to look beyond the 'profanity' in such wordplay in order to recognize the skill, creativity, and communicative competence embedded in their everyday transgressive language.

Conclusion

By highlighting the creativity, skill, and communicative competence displayed in these students' transgressive bilingual wordplay, we have sought to disrupt prevailing assumptions about the role of profanity and graphic humor in the everyday speech of bilingual Latin@ youth. Following José Limón (1989), we challenge dominant perspectives that would reduce such wordplay to mere 'cussing.' By employing profanity and graphic humor in their everyday bilingual talk, these youth skillfully and creatively transgressed normative linguistic boundaries in their classroom in ways that indexed solidarity and contributed to the construction of bilingual identities. Attention to the sequential organization of talk as part of a broader ethnographic analysis of these examples of bilingual wordplay has revealed the richness and complexity of these students' transgressive language practices. This analysis has also framed their wordplay as the emergent product of dynamic processes of language socialization. The micro-details of interaction highlighted above provide glimpses of this socialization in action. Again, these details also reveal students' linguistic agency—their active and innovative *performance* of transgressive language.

We have suggested that transgressive bilingual wordplay might serve as a pedagogical resource in the classroom. This is consistent with the current emphasis on encouraging teachers to take into account the cultural practices, knowledge, and understandings that students bring to school settings (Lee 2007; Orellana and Reynolds 2008). Indeed, the need to build on non-dominant students' everyday language practices becomes increasingly urgent with the growing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse students in classrooms across the United States (Brisk 2008), especially given the fact that the majority of classroom teachers are still monolingual English speakers who have received little preparation to work with diverse students (Clayton et al. 2008). Recognizing the creativity, skill, and communicative competence involved

in bilingual wordplay is one concrete way to begin valuing and validating the practices students bring with them to school, rather than simply dismiss them as unrelated to academic ways of speaking. We invite teachers and researchers to take an inquisitive stance towards Latin@ students' transgressive forms of bilingual wordplay, as further exploration of these and similar language practices might well reveal other functions and meanings that are obscured when such practices are simply dismissed as inappropriate.

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Notes

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ⁱ Throughout this article, we use the terms Latin@ and Chican@ (instead of Latina/o and Chicana/o) as a way of deliberately including both feminine and masculine genders.

ⁱⁱ The corpus of data consisted of approximately 400 pages of fieldnotes, over 220 hours of video-recordings, and nearly 350 hours of video-recorded interviews.

ⁱⁱⁱ A pseudonym.

^{iv} This and all other participant names are self-selected pseudonyms.

^v See Duranti (2005) for a discussion of the limitations inherent in an exclusive reliance on conversation analysis.

^{vi} The conversational data presented in this section were transcribed using conventions based on the system developed by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974).

^{vii} The supposed double bind here, of course, is that by answering affirmatively, one admits to being a lesbian, while by answering negatively, one admits to being semi-literate.

^{viii} First author explains his initial hesitation by noting that he was caught off guard by this particular *albur* and at a loss for how exactly to respond to the heteronormative sentiments being expressed by these sixth-graders.

^{ix} Although this practice has been attested among Chicana youth (Mendoza-Denton 2008), it is widely recognized—in both scholarship and folk theory—as a male-dominated practice.

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