Communication Media and Mexican Social Issues*

A Focus on English-language and U.S.-origin Communication Media

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the association between English-language and U.S.-origin communication media and the perceptions of Mexican social issues held by Mexican border and interior residents. The findings presented in this paper show that: (1) utilization patterns for communication media are associated with a person's place of residence in Mexico—border vs. interior; (2) communication media are not associated with a Mexican person's perception of Mexican social issues; and (3) language of communication media has slight differential effects on the perceptions of border and interior residents for the Mexican government's treatment of national problems.

THE SPREAD OF the English language into Mexican national territory and its impact on the national culture of Mexico has been an important concern for the Mexican government (Heath, 1972). According to Monsivais (1978), throughout the twentieth century the Mexican government was concerned with the cultural infiltration from its northern neighbor—the United States. The Mexican cinema was often employed as a tool for sensitizing the Mexican population regarding the effects of the English language and U.S. culture on Mexican society. For example, many films of the 1940s and 1950s

A review of the image of the Chicano in Mexican film should properly begin with the career of Tin-Tan ... Tin-Tan's speciality in the 1940s was the stereotypical pachuco and zoot-suitier ... The pachuco was the symbol of the Mexican American's first social clashes ... the pachuco of 1942 and beyond reflected not mere eccentricity but a baroque search of identity ... for the

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Mexican population the pachuco was an exotic form of pocho, intoxicated by the American way of life, imitating American language and manners.

provided pejorative portrayals of Mexicans who became Americanized and who used English words in their conversation (Mora, 1983; Saragoza, 1980). In his analysis of Mexican cinema, Keller (1985: 14) notes that the image of the Mexican American—the archetype of U.S. acculturation—in Mexican cinema was best actualized in Tin-Tan’s stereotypical depiction of the pachuco and zoot-suiters:

The concern with cultural infringement from the U.S. also mobilized Mexican scholars to advocate for the reinforcement of the Spanish language as an integral component of Mexican culture and identity. Paz (1961) cautioned against losing the Spanish language and Mexican culture by referring to Mexican Americans as an example of what could happen if Mexicans lost their language and culture. Similarly, Ramos (1962) stressed the need to reinforce the Spanish language in public instruction in order to counteract Mexico’s vulnerability to the United States. The “frontera” became for some Mexican scholars the “other” Mexico whose inhabitants were assimilated to the culture and language of the United States. From the Mexican government’s perspective, Mexican residents in the front area were regarded as denationalized (Martinez, 1979). For example, in order to reaffirm their nationalism, Mexican border residents in Juarez involved themselves in campaigns on behalf of the national heritage, including the enhancement of loyalty to the Spanish language (Hidalgo, 1986).

Metatheoretical Context

Habermas (1979, 1986) has proposed that language permits the coordination of social activities among social members by creating a set of communicative structures. The set of communicative structures is aligned with a set of normative structures that facilitates the formation of a national culture and national identity. For example, the sharing of communicative structures enables social members to participate in discourse that reflects collective membership—that is, a national identity and national culture. Within this context, the attempt to shield Mexican national culture and identity from intrusions by the English language and U.S. culture is an overt form of cultural and language policy to preserve conformity to the cultural and ideological fabric of Mexican society (Gramsci, 1983). As a result, the formulation of language policy against English reflects a fear that the English language will alter a social reality shared by members of Mexican society (Eastman, 1983; Fishman, 1972).

Secondly, it is a commonly shared belief among researchers that the mass media are a tremendous factor in socialization (Christol, 1984; Gandy and Matabane, 1989). As Heidt (1984: 1) has noted:

While most people believe that the media have a direct effect on the attitudes and behavior of the individual, the experts have become more careful. They define the role of mass media as