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Haley Patterson

University of North Georgia, hfp009@gmail.com

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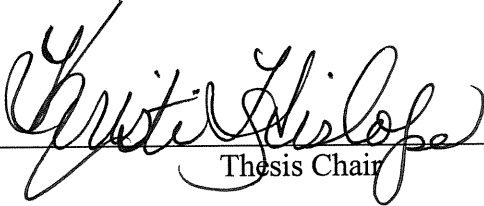
A Sociolinguistic Survey of “Latinx”


Haley F. Patterson


University of North Georgia

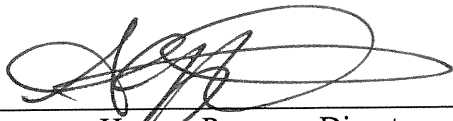
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Abstract

This overview examines the usage of the term “Latinx” from its coinage to its inclusion in the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s top ten candidates for “Word of the Year” in 2016. The study evaluates the term’s future based on its projected use in certain geographical areas and its adoption by certain professions and niche social groups. The most common motives for usage include a desire to disrupt the social normative of a binary gender system, to acknowledge the intersectionality between the LGBTQ and Latino communities, and to battle the subjugation of non-gender conforming Hispanics. This work analyzes which professional arenas endorse “Latinx,” including journalism and academia, as well as which writing mediums espouse it most often. Those who advocate against “Latinx” cite the imposition of English onto Spanish, which does not morphologically accommodate a word-final “x.” This study analyzes whether the term more effectively addresses a social issue or delays the solution to one, as well as whether its goal is to take away majority privilege or to belabor an indiscriminate equality of all.

Rise in Popularity

While most Americans are familiar with the term “Latino,” few currently recognize the variation “Latinx.” This word, though, is quickly gaining popularity, and has begun to be endorsed by certain institutions of higher education and publishing houses. The same ethnic group is represented by both terms; the discrepancy lies in the inclusion of formerly alienated genders. In the online *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for “Latinx,” created in July of 2016, the website explains that the label is “used as a gender-neutral or non-binary alternative to Latino or Latina.” It also recognizes that the official pronunciation is “/la'ti:nɛks/” and that it originated in the “early 21st century” from “American Spanish.” The *OED* cites that one of its influences is the growth of the title “Mx.” to replace former gender-specific titles such as “Mr.” and “Ms.” (“Latinx,” 2016).

Google officially recognizes that “Latinx” was first searched seven times in February of 2004, and the term’s popularity remained minimal until 2016, when June marked an unprecedented one hundred searches. While still that may seem small, the number is bound to increase rapidly, as endorsements of “Latinx” continue to rise (Ramírez & Blay, 2016). While not widely searched on Google until 2016, an article in *Las Americas Quarterly* asserts that Latino academicians accepted “Latinx” as early as 2014 (Gómez-Barris & Fiol-Matta, 2014). Intellectuals coined the term in the United States and its usage has largely been limited to that sphere. Therefore, the word, which was created to include all people of Latin American heritage, has not gained popularity in Latin American countries themselves. Students at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, then, ask a relevant question: “If the term has no chance of taking hold in Latin America, what is its purpose?” (Hernández & Torres, 2015).

In an email to NBC News on September, 29, 2016, a spokeswoman for the Oxford University Press, Sarah Russo, released a statement saying, “We don't yet have Latinx in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It is currently on the watchlist, and as usage continues to increase we will gather more data about how it is being used and when and where” (Reyes, 2016). Even though the term had not yet been included in the official print or online versions of the dictionary, the word did have an entry in a blogsite sponsored by the *OED*. By November 15, only a month and a half after Russo's statement, the *Oxford English Dictionary* published its annual “Word of the Year” article, in which the top ten neologisms (as judged by the *OED*) appear as honorable mentions. One of these terms was “Latinx.” Therefore, long after beginning research for this study in July 2016, use and acceptance of “Latinx” grew exponentially.

Though there exists some dispute over the geographical reaches of the term, “Latinx” both originated in the United States and continues to be used most widely in this nation (Guerra & Orbea, 2015). Even though “Latinx” has not reached a massive audience yet, academicians, like Miami University (Ohio) Creative Writing Professor Daisy Hernández, are “slowly being won over” by the term. This professor told NBC that while she does not predict that Latinx will come to replace the already common identifiers of Latino and Hispanic, she does predict that usage will increase to the point that Latinx will become an acceptable third option (Reyes, 2016). Those who choose to use the term are aware that it has not reached the lexicons of most, but they largely feel that their motivations justify constantly having to explain the term to non-users.

Contrary to Hernández at Miami University, José Moreno, an instructor in Chicano and Latino Studies at California State University Long Beach, does indeed think that the public will trend toward the term “Latinx,” perhaps even accepting it over Latino, but he notes that if this is to be true, Latinos themselves must be the initiators and drivers behind the change. He asserts

that Latinx can only replace Latino if it is endorsed wholeheartedly by the community it represents. For the use to become standardized and widely accepted, it must also, though, be acknowledged by authoritative organizations of language use. A positive correlation does exist between the term’s growth and the number of Latinos who take advantage of higher education. Moreno predicts that use of Latinx will also become widespread due to the increasing number of LGBTQ people who self-identify with the term at younger and younger ages. As society deems LGBTQ sexualities more acceptable over time, more people feel comfortable identifying with terms that either label them as such, or that include that population (Reyes, 2016).

The process of adding a word to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary* involves language tracking—editors whose job it is to sift through both online and print material from a variety of sources (not simply academic) and pull out new, trending terms. According to *Merriam Webster’s* website article on this practice (2016), “By relying on citational evidence, we hope to keep our publications grounded in the details of current usage so they can calmly and dispassionately offer information about modern English. That way, our references can speak with authority without being authoritative.” Searching “Latinx” on *Merriam Webster’s* online dictionary, though, turns up no definition, and instead suggests that an orthographical error has occurred.

Therefore, while the *Oxford English Dictionary*, whose process of word addition is equally meticulous, has come to accept the term, *Merriam Webster* has not. This should signify that the ongoing debate over “Latinx” is not purely a passing squabble. Reputable dictionaries who pledge to evaluate data “calmly and dispassionately” hold differing opinions. However, the dispute is not so calm and dispassionate on the personal level, where the choice to use or not use Latinx can evoke anger and confusion.

Motives for Usage

Those who use “Latinx” wish to bring to the collective conscience issues of the gender spectrum not being properly recognized in favor of a binary (Armus, 2015). They note that Latin Americans who do not subscribe to the gender binary system have trouble expressing their heritage because of being forced to self-identify as either Latino or Latina, while Latinx alleviates that tension. In Spanish, a group of people including at least one male uses the male morpheme “-os.” Thus, “latinos” represents a group of both males and females or a group of only males. This has been a point of contention for decades with those who claim that a group of majority females deserves to be recognized as feminine. A new question has recently arisen. If a group of Latin Americans is labelled Latino or Latina based on the gender identifications of the members, what is the proper term for a group whose members do not include people who identify as male or female? Most Latin Americans claim that Latino indicates at least one male presence, and therefore a group of non-binary gender-identifying Hispanics should not be labelled Latinos (Hernández & Torres, 2015).

One of the more notable early endorsements of “Latinx” is in a document produced at an American Studies Association conference in Puerto Rico in 2014. The academicians who wrote the article realized that Latin America does not wholeheartedly embrace the term, but their use of Latinx intended to disrupt the norm. According to the authors, “The ‘x’ in Latinx marks that potentiality” for progress (Gómez-Barris & Fiol-Matta, 2014). Thus, some academicians are switching to Latinx to intentionally disrupt the idea of a dual gender system. They admit that this term is an experiment—perhaps it is not the final answer but to them it is the next step in the process of acknowledging that morphological systems once wholeheartedly accepted are no longer adequate.

To understand the reasoning behind Latinx is to understand those who self-identify with the term. Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, PhD., acknowledges that “Latinx helps me remember my commitment to being disruptive in my gender expression” (Reichard, 2015). Dr. Henderson-Espinoza, who lives in California, uses the term to validate Chicano heritage while maintaining ties to the LGBTQ community. For Em Alves, a St. Louis resident with Puerto Rican lineage, “Being Latinx is to be somewhere on the spectrum but still feel a solid place in it. Being Latinx is to feel solid in two or more places. For me, it's embracing the rich and beautiful culture of our people, while rejecting the gender restrictions of the generations before us” (Reichard, 2015). Like Henderson-Espinoza, Alves seeks to remind others of the intersectionality of the Hispanic and LGBTQ populations. To Skye, a Spanish-American resident of Arizona, Latinx “reminds people that other races such as people of Latin American descent do not always fit into the gender binary, and it is important to recognize people of color for being outside that binary, too” (Reichard, 2015). Nik Angel Moreno, a Chicano from Pennsylvania, brings together the sentiments of the previous interviewees: “Being Latinx means fighting oppression and building comunidad” (Reichard, 2015). The use of Latinx validates gender self-determination and battles subjugation.

In an article from Swarthmore College’s newspaper which sparked controversy all across the nation, Guerra and Orbea (2015) justified their conscious objection to using the term Latinx. As a response, Scharrón del Río and Aja (2015) wrote “The Case FOR ‘Latinx’: Why Intersectionality Is Not a Choice.” In it, they beg the question: “Can we really be comfortable implying that we should continue to marginalize sections of our people while we figure out a way to stop doing it in a manner that is ‘really’ meaningful?” (Scharrón del Río & Aja, 2015). The purpose of those who use the term is not primarily to cause upheaval in Spanish grammar,

but to give voice to what they consider an underrepresented portion of the Hispanic community. Their goal is “not to focus on pronunciation or grammar, but to respect an identity” (Hernández & Torres, 2015). To proponents of Latinx, its drawbacks should not override its advantages.

Gabe Gonzalez, Latinx writer, states that the binary came from Spaniards, whose relentless inhumanity marred Native American lifestyles and decimated the languages Quechua, Nahuatl, Guaraní, and so forth. He wishes to tweak the word of the oppressor and reclaim it. For some, like writer and academician Jack Qu’emi Gutiérrez, the term is a way to make the Latino community be mindful of its misfits (Ramírez & Blay, 2016). Gutiérrez uses Latinx to argue that Spanish is inherently flawed and the gender system should be totally overhauled. Scharrón del Río and Aja (2015), in their response to the Swarthmore article, note that Guerra and Orbea’s claim of linguistic imperialism is short-sighted, harkening back to indigenous and even African slave languages which were destroyed by the imposition and mandatory use of Spanish.

There have been other attempts to assuage the tension between masculine and feminine morphology in Spanish. One notable example is “Latin@.” The fundamental flaw with Latin@ is that it cannot be spoken efficiently. The same is true for “Latino/a” (Van Horne, 2016). These buzzwords are not verbally conducive, whereas Latinx is. Though Latin@ and Latino/a admit a gender binary, Latinx encompasses the entire gender spectrum. Furthermore, the “a” being circumscribed by the “o” in “Latin@” connotes the superiority of the male over the female. In an effort to combat these issues in terminology, Chris Woods, assistant director of multicultural affairs and LGBTQ outreach at Columbia University, uses “Latinao” in order to orally represent gender inclusivity, claiming that the diphthong produced by pronouncing both “a” and “o” sufficiently captures his message. However, when “a” and “o” follow each other in Spanish, they

do not form a diphthong, but a hiatus. There is still a separation which does not encompass the middle area between male and female (Armus, 2015).

For these reasons, Latinx supporters claim the term provides the most logical alternative to Latino. In the words of Reyes (2016), Latinx “does make sense, because our community is changing. We are talking about gender issues, we are talking about LGBT issues, and we are looking for terms that explain and help us understand our experience in this country.” Latinx validates the recent “sexual liberation” of millions of Latin Americans who do not classify themselves as fully masculine or fully feminine (“Latinx?”, 2016). El Centro Comunal health projects coordinator Jane Walter uses Latinx simply because it “captures that sense of everybody” (Carlton, 2016). The switch from Latino to Latinx, for Walter and for the majority of supporters, is rooted in inclusivity.

Counter to the aforementioned reasons, some who use Latinx do so because they fear being excluded if they continue using Latino. The term whose goal is inclusivity, therefore, threatens to exclude holdouts. Victoria Voelkel, president of the Latino Student Union at Ball State University, commented on the association’s vote that it was mainly a matter of appearances, whether or not she intended for her statement to sound so jaded. According to Voelkel, “We want to stay relevant... We want to make sure that we know what's happening in our community, and we want to address it. We don't want people, maybe people who identify as Latinx, to think that this is just something we're ignoring.” (Barker, 2016). Clearly, Voelkel wants the LGBTQ Latin American community to know that they belong in her organization, and that their cause matters to the student union. Her justification for using Latinx, though, is based on others’ perception of her organization. Though Voelkel and Jack Qu’emi Gutiérrez both use

Latinx, Voelkel does so as a way to “stay relevant,” while Gutiérrez does so to argue against the foundation of Spanish morphology.

Who is Using “Latinx”

Use of Latinx is increasing, but the controversy surrounding the term is intense. Stipulations for who can self-identify as Latinx, as well as who can label others as Latinx, prevent some people from being comfortable with the term. Gutiérrez, a “Florida writer who endorses the term and identifies as Afro-Latinx, queer, and non-binary” (Van Horne, 2016), admits that the term is not mainly for those outside Latinidad to use (Ramírez & Blay, 2016). He worries that misuse by those who do not understand the term will negate any positive social gains from acceptance of the term itself. Though he only promotes use of the term from those who would identify as such, Latinx is “embraced by academicians in honor of those such as Jose Esteban Munoz who devoted his life to the field of queer theory but passed before the use of this word took off” (Gómez-Barris & Fiol-Matta, 2014). Latinx pays homage to formerly alienated segments of Latin American society, even as it embraces the possibility of future progress.

Students staged a sit-in at Amherst College (Massachusetts) in which they “addressed trustees, extolling them to release a formal letter of apology for the institution’s historic racism to the Latinx community” (Johnson, 2016). These students were not exclusively Latin American, but they pushed for inclusion nonetheless. According to Gutiérrez, these students should not even be using the term let alone fighting for their university to adopt it, simply because they do not auto-identify as “Latinx.” Nelly Chavez, senior Spanish major at Ball State University, agrees with her student union changing its name to Latinx, and wishes that her university administration would formally make the switch in terminology (Barker, 2016). Some promote

the widespread use of Latinx, others advocate that only those who would self-identify with the term should be able to use it, and still others oppose any usage of Latinx.

Journalists are also beginning to incorporate Latinx into their publications (Ramírez and Blay, 2016). Swarthmore College’s newspaper that first published the Guerra and Orbea article against Latinx received so many letters to the editor in favor of the term that it has officially endorsed use of Latinx instead of Latino in all its articles (Reyes, 2016). *Huffington Post*’s “Latino Voices” has started to use the term sporadically, but it has not taken over as the standard in all *Huffington* periodicals (Ramírez and Blay, 2016). Latinx is also becoming more prevalent in online social media sites, particularly Twitter and Tumblr (“Latinx: Un término”, 2016).

El Centro Comunal director of health projects Jane Walter is a rare example of a non-activist, non-academician who promotes the use of Latinx (Carlton, 2016). Walter lives in Bloomington, Indiana. While Latinx is not widely used by the public, especially in the Midwestern region of the country, Bloomington does house Indiana University. Use of Latinx is most pervasive in areas with high percentages of Latin American residents and areas with access to higher education. The term is gaining the most ground with those between thirteen and thirty-four years of age (Abarca, 2016). This affirms the previous two assertions, as the average age of a Latin American in the United States is twenty-seven (Heimlich, 2012), and the average age of a university student in the United States falls within the eighteen to twenty-four year range (MarketingCharts staff, 2013). Therefore, the few non-activist, non-academicians for whom Latinx is part of their lexicon most likely acquired the term through contact with those younger than themselves, specifically university students and Latin Americans.

Opposition

The majority of Americans, though, do not use Latinx. Moreover, the majority of them have never been exposed to the word in any capacity. This is not to say that everyone who has exposure to Latinx endorses the term. Many feel that it is not adequate and consciously refuse to incorporate it into their vocabulary. Some do so because they believe the term is not grassroots in that it does not originate from Spanish-speakers, and therefore holds less validity. Even further, use of the term can alienate native Spanish speakers uncomfortable with the concept of a gender spectrum or with the pronunciation of a word-final “x” (Hernández & Torres, 2015). These Spanish-speakers claim that the word represents “the forcing of U.S. ideals upon a language in a way that does not grammatically or orally correspond with it” (Guerra & Orbea, 2015). The “x” itself is a source of controversy, with some noting that Spanish utilizes the letter “x,” and thus pronunciation of it causes no problem for native speakers. In the words of Hernández and Torres (2015), “the pronunciation of the letter x is not a new concept to Latin countries. It is not a foreign, American concept by any stretch of the imagination. So, if they can pronounce other words with x's, why can't they pronounce this one?”

Others contend that simply because the letter “x” is a facet of Spanish orthography does not mean that the letter carries the same pronunciation in the two languages. In fact, those who will correctly pronounce the term not only need to know phonemes of both Spanish and English, but have a working understanding of that middle ground referred to as Spanglish. That is the linguistic origin of this term. Orthographically, an “x” will never follow an “n” in Spanish, and certainly an “x” will never comprise an entire syllable without the addition of a vowel. This is a descriptive phonotactic rule of the Spanish language. The pitfall of this logic is assuming that

one letter corresponds to one sound, a theory which any introductory linguistics class will quickly debunk.

Guerra maintains that Latinx is imposed “from the top down. Besides, if you want to make Spanish gender neutral, the x is not a practical way to go about it” (Reyes, 2016). If changing the “o” in Latino to an “x” does not make the language more inclusive, it does have other effects. Some state that the question raised by Scharrón del Río and Aja (2015), “Can we really be comfortable implying that we should continue to marginalize sections of our people while we figure out a way to stop doing it in a manner that is ‘really’ meaningful?”, is intentionally loaded. More than not focusing on the morphological bounds of Spanish, users of the term are derelict in their willful ignorance of these parameters.

Those who advocate for “Latinx” cite the imposition of Spanish onto indigenous languages as one reason to revise Spanish to be more gender-inclusive. They believe that the gender binary is a European social construct. In order to modify Spanish to meet this gender-inclusive criteria, though, Latinx is an amalgam of an English morpheme ending with a Spanish stem. Thus, the solution to negating Spanish’s influence on indigenous languages is, for advocates of “Latinx,” imposing an “x” on the end of the end of “latino,” a Spanish word. This does not negate the encroachment of superstratum languages onto substratum ones; it simply adds another layer of linguistic imperialism to the word “latino” which “Latinx” supporters already cite as being tainted by prestigious European languages. This incongruence in thought cannot be ignored. Therefore, is adoption of “Latinx” a step towards decolonization in the Americas, or does it more closely resemble the recolonization of them by English-speakers? (Scharrón del Río & Aja, 2015).

There exists controversy over use of the term “latino” because of its obvious connection to Europe in describing a people whose origins are not solely European. Even as some resist being labelled “latino,” many more resist the label “Latinx.” A large portion of the Spanish-speaking community feels that the new label misrepresents them (Barker, 2016). Those who argue against the term have often cited that it “excludes more people than it includes,” and thus is counterintuitive if the goal truly is inclusivity (Reyes, 2016). These people argue that “latino” is already gender inclusive, making “Latinx” superfluous and needlessly specific (Hernández & Torres, 2015). Professor Frances Negrón-Muntaner from Columbia University notes that the term “Latin”, without “o” or “a,” is a simpler substitute for those who do not wish to make a gender distinction (Armus, 2015). To advocates, though, this dismisses the intentionally inclusive stance that the “x” provides.

Additionally, those who advocate against the term state that it cannot be valid, because it is invented (Reyes, 2016). Such a stance which disqualifies the coinage of new terms into the lexicon is simply unsustainable. As civilizations progress, they require neologisms in order to describe new social phenomena and technological developments. These neologisms help to economize speech. Efficiency is sacrificed when neologisms are rejected. Whereas a new term could encapsulate a whole concept, negating the validity of neologisms forces repeated detailed explanations to be given whenever the concept is evoked. Still, skeptics state that “Latinx” is a “made-up” word, and thus holds no validity (Mastin, 2011). Furthermore, Guerra and Orbea contest that “Latinx” is a buzzword with no staying power. They assert that “Latinx,” along with other terms geared towards inclusivity such as “Latino/a” and “Latin@,” represent nothing more than a fad (Guerra & Orbea, 2015).

Language and Mindset

The debate over “Latinx” is heated precisely because it forces speakers to both recognize their biases and reconcile them in their language (Scharrón del Río & Aja, 2015). Proponents of the term assert that the use of “Latinx” promotes social change, while detractors argue that the term is a superficial and oversimplified “solution” to a complicated issue. Some dissenters disagree with the social movement championed by “Latinx,” while others note that the cause behind the term is worthwhile, but the implementation of one new term is not the answer. They state that incorporating one new word into the lexicon does not solve any social issues or change any attitudes, even though it may seem that way to some. In this regard, it might even delay a solution to the reconciliation of the LGBTQ community with the Latino community by giving the appearance of acceptance without a change in attitude. The reason is because it does not actually delve into the psychology of Spanish-speakers to alter the mindset. This is rather like putting a bandage on a wound which demands stitches. In this way, some argue that “Latinx” does not properly address the social issues it is trying to change, and is therefore a means of delaying the finding of a solution (Guerra & Orbea, 2015).

According to Van Horne, South American movements are presently taking place to find a term that encompasses both male and female genders. The goal of “Latinx,” however, is not to include both genders, but to negate the gender binary, thus incorporating every human (Van Horne, 2016). Meanwhile, Latin@ is insufficient because it reinforces gender roles of women as inferior to men, as the “a” is encapsulated by a larger, superimposed “o.” Therefore, some view this term to be subconsciously chauvinist (“Latinx?,” 2016). Whether or not speakers realize the tacit implications of their word choice, activists are obliged to uncover them and educate others. Simply stated, language, with all its subtleties, matters. It matters to those who form a part of the

community described, and it especially matters to those who feel alienated from it, whether they are non-gender conforming individuals uncomfortable with “Latino” or elder members of the monolingual Spanish community uncomfortable with “Latinx.”

In an *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* article titled “‘They don't know anything!’: Latinx immigrant students appropriating the oppressor's voice,” the author, Monzo, elects to use “Latinx” when referring to groups and “Latino” or “Latina” when referring to individuals. This is because the author recognizes that gender roles touch everyone’s personal lives, and thus treats individuals more delicately than groups (Monzo, 2016). Why does Monzo make this differentiation? What is the author positing?

This could be the same phenomenon which causes some native English-speakers to refer to one female as a “lady,” while they would refer to a group of females as “women.” Speakers are more likely to use a term deemed “polite” or “considerate” when speaking to or about one person than when speaking to or about a group of people. With crowds comes anonymity, and with anonymity comes less reverence.

Conversely, Jadelis Muñoz, Women’s Studies major at San Diego State University, claims that she auto-identifies as Latina, but will switch to Latinx when she is in a group setting. She sees this term as the natural next step in a language which does not have adequate terminology to express the burgeoning acceptability of the non-gender binary population (“Latinx: Un término con controversia,” 2016). Why do some people who deem a group as Latinx not self-identify with the term? Furthermore, why do Muñoz and Monzo both make a differentiation in their use of the term? What do they have in common?

The truth about “Latinx” is both self-evident and covert. In the few cases in which the word has been added to reference books, there exists only one definition per entry, but in

contemporary usage, the word evokes different meanings based on context. In academia, “Latinx” is used to incorporate all those of Latin heritage, while the LGBTQ community utilizes the term to describe specifically non-gender conforming people of Latin American origin. Monzo and Muñoz both utilize “Latinx” in an academic sense, as referring to groups as “Latinx” extends a feeling of inclusivity. All the while, those in the LGBTQ community sometimes resent gender binary Latinos and Latinas using a moniker they feel should solely represent non-binary individuals. Therefore, the two uses are extraordinarily distinct in their scope, the one aiming at inclusivity and the other at specificity.

At California State University Long Beach, an instructor in Chicano and Latino studies, Jose Moreno, places the term in a historical context. He asserts that every generation of Latinos comes up with a new term that is at least initially resisted by the older generation. This phenomenon can be seen in the resistance of the older generation to adopt the term Chicano in the mid-twentieth century, and even before that with the term Latino itself. Change can be especially difficult when it deals with identity, and the struggle can be felt between the older and younger members of a community. "Even in a context where I know that some people use Latinx, I'll still say Latino and Latina, for those who have not grasped what Latinx means. Just as Latinx strives to be inclusive, we have to recognize and include those who may not identify as such too" (Reyes, 2016).

Nelly Chavez, senior Spanish major at Ball State University, asserts that in her experience, Latino men are less willing to embrace the new term. "I think that sometimes when those who have privilege have that privilege taken away from them, they feel oppressed. So for them, it's like, 'you're taking away my label.' But for me, it's like, 'yes, I'm finally getting rid of this label'" (Barker, 2016).

There are many languages whose morphology encompasses male, female, and neuter genders, including Asturian, which is native to Spain, and even Latin itself from which both Spanish and Asturian are derived. Old English utilized three genders, as it derived from German which shares that morphological feature, but morphological gender is less dominant a feature in Modern English. The process of “losing gender” was not instantaneous, and if Spanish undergoes this phenomenon, that will also be a slow development. It is natural for language to evolve, but important to note that those languages which have more than two genders do not always reflect in their cultures an open-mindedness to gender fluidity. This could simply be a facet of the grammar of a language, unlinked to ideas of gender distinction which are most common in progressive Western countries. For example, other languages of this sort include Yiddish, Swahili, and Tamil. The cultures represented in these languages do not herald the idea of gender fluidity any more than English-speakers with their sparse grammatical gender usage or Spanish-speakers with their binary gender distinctions (Hernández & Torres, 2015).

Monzo notes that discrimination within the Latin American community is abundant and focuses on discrepancies of skin color, sexual orientation, and language choice. This raises questions of self-worth for those that are judged as acculturating, and for those who have not acculturated “enough.” Older Latin Americans who fail to conform are judged by younger generations, and this is yet another way for Latinos to divide themselves (Monzo, 2016). Passion is undoubtedly a major factor in the Latinx debate, and those that oppose it for any reason are subject to pushback. Guerra, co-author of the Swarthmore article arguing against “Latinx,” said that he was threatened to be “thrown down a flight of stairs.” This term is emotionally-charged because opposing it can be seen as opposing the group of people who espouse it, and conversely, those who identify as Latinx often feel it validates their existence (Reyes, 2016).

Some proponents of “Latinx” do not admire or accept the response of their community to those who choose not to use it. Ironically, some accuse non-users of being “insensitive” and then make personal attacks which are anything but sensitive. To evaluate “Latinx,” one must evaluate not only his or her hidden prejudices, but also his or her final objectives (Reyes, 2016). Daisy Hernández of Miami University says, “I need to hear it, see it, sound it out for a while. I do think that it is incredibly important to experiment with language as we change as a country” (Reyes, 2016).

Scharrón del Río & Aja, in their response to Guerra & Orbea, discount the notion that the Spanish language is the only bond between those they identify as Latinx. They also note that many already dislike the term Latino because of the emphasis placed on European influence. A number of indigenous communities survive in “Latin America,” never having succumbed to European lifestyles or ideology. Others claim that their indigenous ancestors were slaughtered by the thousands, their natural resources exploited, and their ways of life decimated by the self-righteous conquistadores who are now honored in the title “Latin America.” Not all who live in the region identify with Europe, speak Latinate languages, or subscribe to Roman Catholicism.

In a Knox College publication, student Carly Taylor describes “Latinx” as a culture. Most refer to “Latinx” as an identity instead of a culture (Taylor, 2016). The distinction is not arbitrary, as culture and identity are two connected but disparate realities. Culture is lifestyle-what people do and why they do it. Culture is learned, fluid, and communal. Identity cannot be so clearly defined. It incorporates not only one’s perception of self, but also others’ view of them. In this way, the concept of identity is twofold, as it encompasses introspection and speculation: “The identity that an individual wants to assert and which they may wish others to see them having may not be the one that others accept or recognize” (Browne, 2008). Therefore,

identity is subjective while culture is objective. Culture is based on fact while identity is based on intuition and delusion. While they are indeed different concepts, both have in common that they are learned through socialization and are constantly evolving.

If “Latinx” is a culture, it is a solid and indisputable manifestation of the human spirit which can be pinpointed through cultural artifacts such as music, art, literature, and so on. If, on the other hand, it is an identity, those outside the community must acknowledge those inside it in a tangible way. Culture cannot be squelched, but identity can. Most publications about the Latinx community indeed hinge on the fact that those outside the community are beginning to accept it, and thus the term identity is appropriate. Taylor, however, speaks in terms of culture. She acknowledges the cultural and historical contributions of the community. She even notes the “push for the creation of a Latinx Studies major and minor at Knox” (Taylor, 2016). According to Teresa Gonzales, Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at Knox College (Illinois), “The need for representation of all historically marginalized groups in academia is an ongoing discussion, and one of the most significant arguments for the creation of a Latinx Studies major” (Taylor, 2016).

Adoption of the term “Latinx” has freed those who formally have felt uncomfortable with Latino or Latina to express their self-identity with more confidence and precision than ever before. The beauty of language is that such a small, one-letter change allows a group of people to feel absolutely comfortable with expressing their heritage perhaps for the first time ever (“Latinx?,” 2016). According to Miranda Cruz Blancas, a Chicago resident of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent, “Identifying as Latinx takes away from the fetishizing that people tend to associate with Latina or Latino, the 'sexy Latina mami' stereotype” (Reichard, 2016). Blancas acknowledges that “Latinx,” therefore, is not only beneficial for those who do not fit gender

norms, but also for those who wish to negate stereotypes about the Latino community. Whatever the reasoning behind a person’s decision to employ “Latinx” or not, coining new identity markers remains an integral part of self-expression and progress. As a Cornell University professor of both Latino/a Studies and English, Ella María Díaz notes that “The process of self-determination is one part of a liberal society; it is part of the ongoing quest for visibility and recognition” (Reyes, 2016).

Practical Implications

The decision to adopt “Latinx” has left many asking what is at stake and what is important about their own identities (Scharrón del Río & Aja, 2015). Just as pinpointing a unified definition for the term can be difficult, explaining the term’s aim is equally challenging. This is because those who identify as “Latinx” do not all do so for one reason. According to Ken Eby-Gomez, a San Francisco-based activist and graduate student, “It would be a mistake to essentialize any meaning or characteristics of Latinx.” While the fact that the term is intentionally vague leads some to conclude that must be meaningless (Padilla, 2016), others relish the specificity with which “Latinx” incorporates historically underrepresented segments of the Latin American community.

The question at the heart of the debate is this: is the goal of Latinx to take majority privilege away, or to find a term which agrees with as many people as possible? Depending on the answer, is “Latinx” achieving its goal? (Barker, 2016). Is salvaging majority identity in favor of accepting minoring identity appropriate, given that the majority has historically enjoyed an institutionalized privilege? Should the goal be to swing to the point that the minority has the upper hand, or is the purpose to achieve total equality? In short, what is the aim of “Latinx” and is it realizing that objective? (Reyes, 2016).

Professor Negrón-Muntaner’s opinion is that “There is an inherent critique in the proposing of a new term to prior generations” (Armus, 2015). Therefore, he sees “Latinx” as an admonishment as well as a new means of expression, as a social movement towards a current ideal moving deliberately away from what was once accepted. Regardless, at this point, many Latinos still subscribe to conventional gender binary distinctions. Many are unaware of the “Latinx” movement altogether, which is one reason publishers give for not making the lexical change. *Huffington Post* “Latino Voices” has made the move from “Latino” to “Latinx” for ideological reasons, though they know several readers do not recognize the term. According to *HPLV*, letters to the news outlet often cite the term as a typo and complain about its repeated occurrence. These people feel alienated by the term. Therefore, one must consider whether or not the adoption of “Latinx” in print mediums before it reaches a broader audience is counterintuitive to the ultimate goal (Ramírez & Blay, 2016).

In a study in which 67% of those questioned identified as Latino/a/@/x, 96% indicated without hesitation that they fit perfectly in the gender binary, whether male or female (Abarca, 2016). Guerra, from the infamous Swarthmore article against the usage of “Latinx,” told NBC, “This is not something the ordinary Latino person in the U.S. cares about.” In stating this, Guerra tried to convince NBC that the term “Latinx” was not used enough to be so heavily contested (Reyes, 2016). In other words, the hype surrounding the word and the stigma that its opponents often are subjected to are disproportionate when taking into account how few people benefit from the term.

East Coast co-chair of the TransLatin@ Coalition Arianna Lint complained to *The Independent*, a British news outlet, that mainstream media should adopt the term “Latinx.” Lint specifically cites the Orlando night club shooting in summer of 2016 as an instance in which the

decision to not use “Latinx” was deliberate, due to the specificity of the group targeted in the attack and the group’s own identification with the term. In a tragic case such as this, as the Latino LGBTQ suffered a devastating loss of life, it seems appropriate to Lint that major broadcasting networks would adopt the term as a show of solidarity, if only temporarily. Also noteworthy is that most articles in which Lint is quoted about the aforementioned case do not endorse the use of “Latinx” themselves. The above interview with Lint is contained in García’s article “Among the Orlando Shooting Victims, Trans Latino Advocates Hope their Stories are Told.” This work, though sympathetic to the cause of LGBTQ Latin Americans, still utilizes “Latino” throughout the text, beginning with the title (García, 2016). Therefore, the assumption that all those who prefer “Latino” over “Latinx” are biased to the gender binary members of the Latin American community is simply false.

One reason why major news outlets are reticent to utilize “Latinx” is because it has not been endorsed by institutions such as the Associated Press or the Modern Language Association. Lack of standardization makes publishers uneasy about usage. Those who use “Latinx” do not agree among themselves as to where the emphasis is placed in the word. The article by Reyes (cited earlier in the essay) produces a pronunciation guide which asserts that the emphasis should fall on the first syllable, while others claim the middle syllable (where the emphasis is placed in “Latino”) is correct, and others assert that the last syllable is the stressed one (Reyes, 2016). Discrepancies exist because of a lack of standardization. Is it time for the prescriptive institutions of language usage to include “Latinx?” Is the word already used enough? How long does a word have to be used to be endorsed by these publications? How many people need to use it? These questions do not have definite answers, as the route to standardization is different for each new word.

Some detractors of “Latinx” argue that the word is not legitimate, as it was “made up.” Reyes addresses this concern by asking how words come into being if they are not invented (Reyes, 2016). There are, in fact, several ways in which neologisms are added to a certain language, and none is more or less valid than others. Mastin (2011), in the essay “The History of English - How New Words Are Created,” cites ten different processes, and it so happens that “starting from scratch” is the first method the article includes. Simply put, those who deprecate “Latinx” for its origin have not done their research, because several such “made-up” terms have fully integrated into our collective lexicon. The etymology of words including “dog,” “conundrum,” and “puzzle” have no prolonged histories to speak of. However, the same is not true for “Latinx.” Stating that this word is made-up is wholly incorrect. “Latinx” has simply changed the suffix of a pre-existing marker of identity. (Mastin, 2011).

The morphology of English is fairly straightforward when compared to Spanish, as the former language has not preserved the morphological gender it once utilized, even through the Middle English period. The letter “x” as being a neutral marker, though, is not a concept which stems from Spanish. In fact, “x” has never been used in this capacity in Spanish. Thus, monolingual Spanish-speakers would not immediately grasp the link between the concept of gender inclusivity and the letter “x.” English-speakers, however, do not usually employ grammatical gender, making the “x” needlessly specific for their purposes. Therefore, is the term “Latinx” English, Spanish, or both? (Mastin, 2011).

To even begin to investigate this question, one must understand the concept of linguistic imperialism, a term coined in the 1930’s which refers to the phenomenon of a dominant language asserting its influence on others. According to some, including Phillipson (2009), “Latinx” is a case of English linguistic dominance on Spanish, whose people are unwittingly being labelled

with a word which does not even fit into Spanish phonetic parameters, not to mention social normatives. While this view may seem radical, the tenets Phillipson uses to bolster his argument remain worthy of recognition and consideration.

The Spanish language has a gendered morphology, and changing this would be a massive feat. Is “Latinx” simply a one-word addition to the lexicon, or will its influence spread to other adjectival inflections? (Hernández & Torres, 2015). The simple answer would be to acknowledge that there do exist cases in which certain speakers subtract the word-final “o” or “a” and add an “x” instead. However, while a very small portion of Spanish-speakers use the term “Latinx,” an exponentially smaller smattering of examples exist in which the notorious “x” influences other words. In one example, Jack Qu’emi, the writer from Florida discussed earlier, embraces semi-jokingly the professional title “Maestrx” (Van Horne, 2016).

In a Knox College student newspaper article, Taylor uses the term “Chicanx” in reference to a student event which the *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanx de Aztlán* (Chicanx Student Movement of Aztlan) hosted (Taylor, 2016). This organization was founded in the 1960’s. However, at its 2010 National Conference, the name was changed from “Chicano” to “Chican@,” and in 2016 from “Chican@” to “Chicanx.”

The organization titled “Princeton Latinos y Amigos” is now endorsing both “Latinx” and “amigx.” This appears to be an attempt at parallelism in the recognition of gender neutrality (“Latinx?”, 2016). Yesenia Padilla, a Southern California poet, identifies as Latinx and “Xicanx.” The word-final “x” represents gender inclusivity, while the word-initial “x” aims to reaffirm Padilla’s ties to the indigenous American people. The letter is reminiscent of the Mexica culture, and derives its “x” from the indigenous language of Nahuatl as opposed to adopting the European orthographic “ch,” i.e. “chicano” (Padilla 2016).

The question that this thesis hinges on is as follows: would the Spanish language survive the morphological change of the gendered system to “x?” Will Latin identities be sacrificed in the process, and if so, is it worth the upheaval? (Scharrón del Río & Aja, 2015). These are the questions that should be kept in mind when evaluating whether or not to endorse “Latinx,” and more broadly, whether or not to endorse a gender neutral shift in Spanish. There exists no easy solution. Therefore, any educated and circumspect position regarding use of the term “Latinx” and based on personal principle is valid. However, short of major upheaval, Spanish will retain gender in its morphology (Hernández & Torres, 2015).

Final Thoughts

After analyzing the myriad implications that stem specifically from use of the term “Latinx,” in order to situate the word in a sociolinguistic context, it is necessary to recall the fundamentals of the field and apply them in this particular case. Two of the most widely cited studies in sociolinguistics produced the “Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,” a concept which permeates many other fields because of its vast cultural and linguistic implications. In its simplest terms, this argument states that a society’s culture influences the artifacts that said culture produces. These artifacts include art, entertainment, government, and, of course, language. However, it is equally true that these artifacts reinforce the society’s culture.

While this train of thought may not be difficult to comprehend, its insinuations are much more troubling. If members of a society wish to change their culture, then they must change their language, but language must be a reflection of the culture. Therefore, it is extremely rare for a change in either to be produced artificially and actually have a long-lasting or meaningful impact. The change must occur naturally, perhaps even subconsciously, for it to perpetuate.

Peter Trudgill, in his introductory texts for students of sociolinguistics, explains:

Overt social movements to reduce sexual discrimination and gender-role stereotyping have also led to a number of conscious attempts to influence and change languages and linguistic behavior. These conscious attempts have not, however, for the most part focused on actual differences between the speech of men and women. Most attention has in fact been directed at the structure and vocabulary of languages themselves. (Trudgill, 1983)

This is certainly true in the case of “Latinx.” Instead of analyzing the speech patterns of Latin Americans who span the gender binary and judging the linguistic attitudes which stem from these in order to understand, explain, and combat them, the coinage of this term is simply a lexical addition to the language. The process can be explained in the following manner: some speakers wish to promote social change, and to achieve this, they created a new term to reflect the cause they champion socially. As Trudgill explains, “Linguistic changes follow social changes very readily, but it is not always a simple matter to make them *precede* social changes” (Trudgill, 1983).

The reason that the debate surrounding the ideology of “Latinx” is so pertinent and controversial at this moment is because the general public has, within the past few decades, embraced socially liberal concepts once thought outlandishly radical. However, on a global scale, the year 2016 marked a turning point both politically and socially for many nations and communities. Conservative rhetoric has triumphed in the polls during the past year, reflecting a turn back to more socially conservative practices. “Latinx” is so hotly debated because it evokes this ongoing struggle between right- and left-wing philosophies. There are several vocal supporters of the term who use it a political and social device, elevating “Latinx” to iconic proportions. They are also several vocal detractors who despise the social implications of

inclusion of the gender spectrum, denigrating “Latinx” mercilessly through whichever platform will allow them to illustrate their hatred.

It is, therefore, relevant to close with a quote from Trudgill on the necessity of sociolinguistic study:

It is important for those of us who have some insight into the nature of the relationship between society and language to make those insights available to the wider community in cases where these insights can be of some value (Trudgill, 1983).

Personal significance of the term “Latinx” is negotiable. What is nonnegotiable is that, regardless of which side of the debate a person supports, the decision to use or to not to use “Latinx” has significance.

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