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# 1

## Fieldwork in the Los Angeles Chicano Community

### 1.1 History of Mexican immigration to Los Angeles

It needs to be strongly emphasized that as long as metropolitan Los Angeles (LA) has existed, there have been native speakers of dozens of different languages there; a large number of these are, of course, native speakers of Mexican Spanish. California was a part of Mexico until 1848; before and since that time there has been significant population movement between southern California and all parts of Mexico, particularly after World War II. At any given time, then, there are many recent arrivals from Mexico, especially in the Latino neighborhoods, and still more who came to LA years ago. Many Californians of Latino ethnicity have lived in Southern California their whole lives, and so have their parents, and so on, for varying numbers of generations. As a result, some Chicano English speakers come from families that have been in America as long as or longer than the Italian Americans on the Eastern seaboard, or the Polish Americans in the Midwest.

#### **The Latino population of the United States**

Latinos make up the fastest growing minority in the United States, and are now or soon will be the largest as well. Between 1990 and 2000, census figures show that the US Latino population (the census uses the term 'Hispanic') increased by more than 50 percent, from 22.4 million to 35.3 million. This represents 12.5 percent of the national population. The largest segment of this minority, people of Mexican origin, increased by 52.9 percent, from 13.5 million to 20.6 million. Because census questions relating to Latinos have changed over the decades, it is not easy to trace the long-term growth of this population in detail. The Latino population also has a distinctive demographic profile: it is

**Table 1.1** Latino population by birthplace

<b>Year</b>	<b>Native born (million)</b>	<b>Foreign born (million) (%)</b>	<b>Total</b>
1990	14.0	7.8 (35.8)	21.9
1980	10.4	4.2 (28.6)	14.6
1970	7.3	1.8 (19.9)	9.1
1940	1.4	0.4 (23.0)	1.8

younger than other groups. Its median age in 2000 was 25.9 years, compared with 35.3 years for the entire population.

In recent decades, legal immigration from Mexico has been limited, averaging less than 100,000 per year during most of this period. There was a spike in the four years from 1989 to 1992, however, with about 2.24 million immigrants arriving during that period. Illegal, undocumented immigration also occurs across the Mexican border, but numbers are naturally not known. Table 1.1 gives a breakdown of the Latino population by birthplace: native (US) born versus foreign born, based on available immigration and census enumerations.

As can be seen from the figures in Table 1.1, native born Latinos have outnumbered immigrants historically by a large margin, a fact that would appear to have many social and linguistic implications. In 2000, 76.1 percent of Latinos in America (27.1 million) lived in seven states: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona and New Jersey. Just over half of them lived in either California (11.0 million, 31.1 percent) or Texas (6.7 million, 18.9 percent) combined. Moreover, much of this population is concentrated in counties on or near the Mexican border, although there are also important enclaves in metropolitan areas elsewhere in the country.

### **Greater Los Angeles**

The census reports 4.2 million Latinos living in Los Angeles County in 2000, of whom 3 million are of Mexican origin. The main portion of metropolitan Los Angeles forms a rough parallelogram measuring about 50 miles (80 km) NW–SE from San Fernando to Santa Ana and about 40 miles (65 km) SW–NE from Long Beach to Pomona. Los Angeles County includes the city of Los Angeles and a number of other cities, some quite well known in their own right, such as Beverly Hills, Burbank, Glendale, Long Beach, Pasadena, Pomona, Santa Monica and Torrance. These areas vary in their ethnic compositions. The city of Los Angeles itself,

for example, is 46.5 percent Latino, while East Los Angeles, an unincorporated place within the city, is 96.8 percent Latino, the highest proportion of Latinos in any American city outside Puerto Rico.

### Culver City

Culver City, the main location for my fieldwork, was developed by Harry H. Culver, a real-estate entrepreneur, between 1913 and its official founding in 1917, when it had a population of 550 and an area of 1.2 square miles. The area around it was then still grazing and agricultural land, traversed by streetcar lines linking Los Angeles and the newly developed seaside resort of Venice. It was already used by the rapidly growing motion picture industry for location shooting. With Culver's cooperation, industry pioneer Thomas H. Ince located his studio in Culver City in 1918; after his death in 1924 it became the DeMille studio. The film *King of Kings* was produced there. Hal Roach purchased land and built a studio in 1919. This studio, through business alliances, became RKO Pathe and then Selznick International. Many films associated with 'Hollywood' were actually made in Culver City, such as *King Kong*, *Gone with the Wind*, and, more recently, *ET*. It remains a center of the film and television industries, as the headquarters of Sony Pictures and many other companies are located there.

The streetcar lines are long gone, but Culver City is near the intersection of two major freeways, the 10 or Santa Monica Freeway (to the North) and the 405 (to the West). By 1940 its population had grown only to 8,976 (in an area of 3.2 square miles). Its population in 1980 was 38,189; this has changed little since then, reaching 38,816 in 2000. The demographic breakdown reported by the city is shown in Table 1.2.

The advantage of using Culver City, which is above the median of LA County in income, as a main location for fieldwork is that it includes Latino residents from a larger range of socio-economic categories, from very low income to middle class. This makes the area more representative in some ways of the Latino population as a whole.

**Table 1.2** Population of Culver City, 2000

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>%</b>
White	52
Latino	23
Asian	13
African American	11
Other	1

## 1.2 The history of Chicano English

As was noted above, Latinos in the USA are concentrated along the border with Mexico, in territory that was first explored and colonized by Spain, and was ceded to the USA by Mexico after the war of 1848. Thus, from the beginning of Anglo-American settlement in this region, the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking populations have been in close contact. Both groups have continued to grow since then by both natural increase and migration. For a very long time, then, like other cities near the Mexican border and having a substantial Latino population, Los Angeles has had native speakers of English of Latino ethnicity, as well as foreign-born Latinos in various stages of learning English. The history of settlement within the urban area is such that Latino native speakers of English have been in close contact with native Spanish speakers, and with Anglo speakers of English as well.

Chicano English, therefore, is an important dialect to study because it is a contact dialect, one that emerged from the setting described above in which two languages, English and Spanish, were present. The early Mexican immigrants who arrived in Los Angeles (and in other parts of the southwest) learned English as a second language. Like adult learners of any language, they spoke a non-native variety which included phonological, syntactic and semantic patterns from their first language, in this case Spanish. But the children of these immigrants generally grew up using both Spanish and English (possibly in different settings or with different people). As the community began to stabilize, so did a new dialect of English.

This type of setting, involving languages in contact, is similar in certain ways to the types of settings in which pidgin and creole languages develop (as first discussed by Wald 1984:21). Generally, a pidgin is the second language of a group of adult speakers, exhibiting a great deal of interspeaker variability, simplification and so on. However, when the succeeding generations of children grow up speaking the pidgin as their first language, it quickly becomes more elaborated and grammaticized, as well as more stable, so that a fully developed creole is linguistically indistinguishable from languages that developed in other types of settings. Similarly, the non-native interlanguage of adult Mexican immigrants, which is still a very common variety in the Chicano community of Los Angeles, exhibits great individual variation and the presence of somewhat idiosyncratic 'errors'. This interlanguage provided the historical basis for the more stable and consistent dialect which developed among the younger generations, namely Chicano English.

Chicano English itself is not truly a creole, of course, since among other things, a creole generally emerges from a setting where multiple languages are involved, and pidgins and learner varieties are not the same thing. However, particularly within the phonological component, the various non-native English patterns of the immigrants were inherited by their children, modified somewhat, and can still be seen in the new (native) dialect. To a lesser degree, there may be syntactic and semantic elements that also reflect the influence of Spanish. Chicano English now has independent phonological and syntactic norms of its own, which will be discussed later. It is important to reiterate the inaccuracy of the idea that Chicano English is simply English influenced by Spanish.

An interesting issue in tracing the history of Chicano English is the role of other dialects in its development, including African-American English (AAE) and local Anglo varieties. As will be seen in Chapter 4, many of the syntactic patterns that distinguish Chicano English have possible origins in AAE. It has been suggested that regional dialects associated with the local Anglo culture have not influenced Chicano English as much as national norms (Peñalosa 1980:28). This is another intriguing question which I will address later in the book. Finally, one might ask whether Chicano English may be exerting an influence on other dialects with which it is in contact, and what this might mean for the future development of dialects in the LA area.

### **The speakers in this study**

As mentioned in the introduction, my goal is to use a single community of CE speakers, studied in detail, to illustrate patterns typical of this dialect. The research presented here was conducted in Los Angeles in 1994. The speakers participated in individual (and occasionally group) sociolinguistic interviews, which I conducted myself. The study focuses on young Mexican-American adults between 15 and 32 years of age, many of whom are bilingual. Most of them live in Culver City, although a few live in other parts of LA, such as Echo Park. A large percentage of them attended Westside Park,<sup>1</sup> the local continuation school for kids who have had learning or disciplinary problems at the regular high school (Culver High, where I also conducted some interviews). Others came from a network of families of people with disabilities, accessed through their acquaintance with my family.

In addition to the core group of young adult speakers, I included some older speakers who came from Mexico as adults, in order to use them as a reference group for the Spanish spoken in the area. (A few of my younger speakers were themselves born in Mexico, though most of

them came to the USA at an early age.) One or two of the young adults are from Latino backgrounds other than Mexican, but integrated completely into the Mexican-American community in terms of peer networks, and so on. There are also a few non-Latino speakers whom I interviewed to get a sample of the English spoken by Anglos of the same peer group. In reporting the results of the study, I have assigned pseudonyms to all of my speakers, as well as to the school.

After the study had been completed, and in fact after this book had already entered the preparation stages, some colleagues suggested to me that it would be interesting to know about a slightly older generation of native Chicano English speakers, Mexican-Americans in their 40s and 50s, and how their dialect might compare. So in 2001 I arranged for a research assistant to collect some additional interviews with older speakers in the community, through her personal contacts. Though these speakers were not included in the sociolinguistic analyses of Chapters 5 and 6, they provide an interesting perspective on the evolution of Chicano English, as well as a different perspective on cultural and linguistic issues in the community.

Not everyone in this community speaks Chicano English. As I mentioned in the Introduction, I will use 'Chicano English' only to refer to the distinct dialect spoken by native speakers, excluding varieties identical to those of local Anglos, and varieties spoken by adult second language learners of English. Even so, this leaves a wide range of styles that can fall under this dialect label, as is the case with any dialect, including standard ones. Some middle-class speakers in a Mexican-American community may speak a variety that is grammatically fairly similar to more standard dialects, but retains a special phonology or sound system (other middle-class speakers might not speak Chicano English at all). I found that among the older speakers in my study, most of whom were professionals, this grammatically standard, phonologically distinct variety was very common.

It is an interesting question whether someone who does not use any non-standard grammatical features at all can be said to speak 'Chicano English', assuming that their phonology includes at least a few of the elements which will be described later as characteristic of CE. The same question of a 'standard' variety arises with respect to AAE. If a speaker clearly 'sounds black' but does not use any of the grammatical variables associated with AAE, is it still AAE? This question cannot be answered in an objective, technical way. Like many other issues of language, this one is mostly a matter of attitude. We might, for example, attempt to answer it in some sense by playing tapes of speakers whose grammar is

standard but whose phonology includes features of a dialect associated with a particular ethnic group and see if they are judged by listeners to be 'non-standard.'

There is little research on the roles played by non-standard phonology vs. non-standard syntax in folklinguistic perceptions of 'dialect.' Judgments of 'accent' (that is, phonology) can often be made very quickly, long before particular grammatical features turn up in conversation, so we might expect the relative importance of these components to differ. In any case, all dialects encompass varieties that are farther from or closer to the standard. In this book, I will treat those speakers in this study who did not use any marked syntactic features, but who can be clearly identified as Mexican-American from their phonology, as speakers of Chicano English. Nonetheless, the question of what counts as 'standard' or what counts as 'Chicano English' remains an open and intriguing one, worthy of more explanation.

### **Terms for ethnic self-identification**

I have been using the terms 'Mexican-American' 'Chicano' and 'Latino' in this study. It is my intent to use ethnic terms that are viewed positively by the members of the ethnic community in question. In asking individual speakers about the meanings and connotations of the various terms, I have found a surprisingly wide range of opinions. The vast majority of my US-born young adults identify themselves as simply 'Mexican.' Since my study includes people actually born in Mexico, I felt that using this term to apply to the entire group, including those born here, might confuse readers not familiar with the community. I will use 'Mexican' with this broader meaning only in the context of reproducing closely something said by an informant where this was the term the speaker used, for example, 'says she only dates Mexicans.'

The main term about which some speakers expressed dislike was 'Hispanic,' which was often described by the speakers as a 'white person's word.' A few speakers also had mixed feelings about 'Chicano,' which was sometimes associated with radical politics, or surprisingly even with gang members. Others thought 'Chicano' was a neutral term, and to some it had an important and positive ethnic significance. Both 'Mexican-American' and 'Latino' were viewed positively, although almost nobody mentioned the former term unless I asked about it. There was a great deal of disagreement about what these words actually meant. Some people felt that 'Latino' could refer to people of any Spanish-speaking background, while others thought that it referred specifically to people of Mexican background. Having established that

a majority of my speakers are in fact of Mexican background, I will continue to use the terms 'Mexican-American' and 'Latino' to refer to the ethnicity of my speakers, more or less interchangeably. I will use 'Chicano' mainly in particular contexts, such as when a speaker was emphasizing US-born ethnicity.

For the white speakers that I included, and in referring to other studies of the majority communities of California, I use the term 'Anglo.' The speakers of this group referred to themselves as 'white,' but I wanted to use a term that emphasized ethnicity rather than race, since it is the social construct (ethnicity) that might be expected to correlate with linguistic variables. The term used most often by my Latino speakers for this group was, to my surprise, 'American.' This term was used as often as the term 'white' in English, and in Spanish the comparable term (*americano*) was even more frequent. However, I find this usage somewhat disappointing in its suggestion that my Latino speakers, most of whom were born here, may subconsciously accept that others have a greater right to call themselves American than they do. I have chosen to use 'Anglo,' the term most often found in current linguistic literature, even though the speakers I interviewed do not generally use it.

### **Bilingualism across the city**

As noted above, Los Angeles county has a Latino population of more than 4 million according to the 2000 census. I am myself a native of Los Angeles, and have my own recollections of what it is like to grow up there to draw on. Nonetheless, when I returned to LA from Philadelphia to conduct my fieldwork, I attempted to make more systematic observations of the use of Spanish and English in the larger community, trying to view it as an outsider might. Los Angeles is a city where the Spanish language and Latino culture permeate the environment. It is impossible to live and work there without at least occasionally hearing Spanish spoken. Many of my speakers are bilingual, speaking Spanish in varying degrees and fluent English. For most of them, the dialect of English they speak is Chicano English.

I overheard numerous instances of the use of Spanish around Culver City, the area where I was living (and where most of my speakers live). The first time that I went to the bank, I saw a man walk up to the teller window and speak in Spanish. The teller asked him in English to wait, and came back with a Spanish-speaking co-worker who handled the rest of the transaction in Spanish. I observed one other interaction in Spanish in the 20 minutes or so that I was waiting in line. On a trip to the supermarket, the man working at the fish counter helped me in

accented (non-native) but perfectly understandable English. The woman after me in line began by saying to the man, 'Speak Spanish?' He replied, 'Sí', and the transaction continued in Spanish. I saw many interactions like this every day. At no time did I witness a case where someone asked for Spanish-speaking assistance and did not receive it. Many of my Spanish-dominant informants have also confirmed this pattern. Mercedes, for example, who knows some English, says she tries to ask for what she needs in English at the store, and so on, and if she is unsuccessful in her communication, resorts to Spanish.

Local television, as is so often the case, provided an excellent mirror for the community. With reference to English, I noted that the local newscast included many reporters with Spanish surnames, who pronounced the Spanish place names in their stories with accurate Spanish phonology. There was also a Latina newscaster who had distinctly non-standard phonology in her English, though it was difficult to determine whether it was due to non-native acquisition of English or to native use of Chicano English. Incidentally, the preferred ethnic term in the media seems to be the one I have used here: 'Latino.' For example, one newscaster interviewed an individual who was identified with the caption 'Latino activist.'

There are numerous local commercials that use Spanish phrases or play on bilingual themes as well. My favorite was for a fast food place called *La Pizza Loca* ('The Crazy Pizza'). Their special of the month was billed via a rap-style jingle as 'DOUBLE! . . . DOBLE!' (two cokes and two pizzas for a low price). The ending slogan was something along the lines of 'No matter how you say it, it's a great deal.' This ad struck me as different from other ads where the producers include food terms or a few stock phrases in Spanish. It used Spanish, not as a colorful garnish aimed at non-speakers to add 'ethnic charm,' but rather as an integral part of the entire pitch. The slogan seems to target an audience of bilingual speakers who *could* actually say it either way. It might even be concluded that the use of a rap theme suggests they are targeting a community of *young* bilingual speakers. There was also a bilingual promotional spot for a special report segment on the local news program. The theme was traditional Mexican medicines and cures, and how impoverished Latinos are turning more and more to *curanderos* (folk healers) rather than expensive doctors. The segment was titled 'Home Remedios' (= 'Home Remedies'). Many special programs of this type revolve around issues that concern Latinos.

My own exposure to Latino culture was extended by the speakers I interviewed. One shared with me a home-made drink called *tejuino* made from fermented corn. It has a sweet-and-sour taste completely

unlike any other beverage that I am familiar with. I was also lucky to have my fieldwork coincide with Cinco de Mayo (Mexican Independence Day). I attended a holiday assembly at the local elementary school, where the daughter of one of my Latino contacts was a student. All the announcements were made twice, in English and Spanish, and children of every ethnicity participated. Many songs were performed entirely in Spanish by classes of children of mixed ethnicities. I also overheard the kids in the audience whispering to each other as they often do, and both English and Spanish could be heard in this context. In addition, the teachers used both English and Spanish to shut them up ('¡A callar!' 'Shh! Be quiet!'). In sum, Los Angeles provides numerous opportunities for the use of Spanish, and takes for granted that a large number of its residents are at least partially bilingual.

### 1.3 Field methods

This section will serve as an introduction to the field methods I used for collecting the interviews in Los Angeles. The many ways in which this community differed from nearby Anglo communities – in its social structure, in its status as part of a language contact area, and so forth – affected both the field methods and the subsequent methods of analysis. Having completed the data collection, and I imagine this may be true for other researchers, I now know a great deal about the dynamics of the community that would have been helpful at the beginning of the process. I made a number of adjustments in response to my early interviews, though, and kept the general approach flexible and responsive.

#### **Making contact with the networks**

As was mentioned above, a majority of my speakers came from two basic social networks within the area of Los Angeles.<sup>2</sup> (The only speakers who do not fall into one of these two categories are a small number of students I spoke with at the main Culver City high school, and the older speakers interviewed later.) The first network is that of parents of people with disabilities (mainly Down's Syndrome) in the Los Angeles area. The other (much larger) group of speakers came from Westside Park school. Westside Park is small enough that all the people I interviewed there know each other at least vaguely, and in this sense it forms a group for which the term 'network' is appropriate, more so than might be expected at a larger high school.

The Latino parents have their own parents' organization which meets separately from the larger and more general Los Angeles Down's

Syndrome Parents' Group. The parents I contacted were friends or acquaintances of my mother, most of whom I had met on one or two occasions, with a few that I knew quite well. Some are officers in the parents' group, while others participate only occasionally. Since the main focus of the study is on young adults, however, I spent more time interviewing the children of these contacts than the parents themselves. I had not met any of these younger speakers previously, except for one that I had last seen when he was a small child. While I did not set out specifically to interview any of the children with Down's Syndrome, they participated in short segments of interviews with their parents and siblings, and always added a note of energy and humor to the interview. In addition, though I did not interview any speakers under the age of 15 individually, I have several speakers in this age range who participated peripherally in interviews with others.

I contacted the members of the parent group directly, and they introduced me to their young adult children if they had any. I generally interviewed these speakers at their homes. The young adults were interviewed individually, although some of them also participated in group interviews with parents and/or other siblings present. A few parents were interviewed as couples in addition to individually. All of these interviews lasted at least one hour; some lasted quite a bit longer. While at these homes, I often participated in activities other than interviewing. In one case, the parents put on records of traditional Mexican singers, so that I could hear their Down's Syndrome son do his very showy imitation of them. Another family brought take-out food and treated me to lunch. I have referred previously to the informant who took me to a Cinco de Mayo assembly. It is appropriate here to mention (again) the tremendous generosity of all these families towards me. It is difficult to imagine a more welcoming situation for an ethnographic fieldworker.

The data collected from Westside Park required a different approach. The school will be discussed at greater length below, but I will provide here the information most relevant to field methods. I became a participant-observer at the school, with the help of the principal and the main administrative assistant, both of whom I knew from when I lived in Los Angeles. I spent many hours in the school office, helping with any tasks that came up, particularly with translations for school-parent conferences where the parent was monolingual in Spanish. The school office is located in such a way that the students are constantly passing through. Some of them work in the office during a designated period. Another common office activity is using the telephone to call friends,

for which permission is usually granted by the administrative assistant in exchange for a quarter.

I did not attempt to select specific students for interviews in any way except by ethnicity (Latino).<sup>3</sup> In the first days of my fieldwork, when a Latino student came through the office, or was standing around waiting for a class period to begin, or had just finished meeting with someone, one of the staff would introduce me to the student. The introduction could be made by the principal, the counselor or the administrative assistant. It followed a general pattern in which they usually asked me 'Have you met . . . ?' filling in the name of the student (since I had already talked to some students informally in the office). They would then introduce me and say that I was doing a project in which I was talking to people about what it was like to live in LA. I would ask the student if he or she had some time to talk to me right then. Only in a single instance did someone say that he had to attend a class but would be willing to talk to me later (which he did). Once the student indicated a willingness to talk with me, we would go somewhere on the campus, often some picnic tables outside, or a lounge area with sofas that was used at certain times for job training classes but was otherwise empty. The teachers knew that I was conducting a research project on campus, and if a student agreed to talk to me during all or part of a class period, the instructors excused them with a note from me on their attendance slip.

After I had been at the school a week or two and conducted some interviews, I began to look for students who had been mentioned specifically by other students, especially in answer to the question, 'Who around here might have some interesting stuff to tell me? Who do you think I should talk to?' Usually the administrative assistant would help me by pointing these people out. (It quickly became evident that just about every student would wander through the office sooner or later.) I would then introduce myself to the student, give the brief explanation about studying life in Los Angeles, particularly among Latinos, and so on, and say that I had heard they might be an interesting person to talk to. I also continued to talk to any students who happened to be hanging around, and after the first week or two, I usually introduced myself rather than going through a staff person, since by then everyone in this small school had heard that I was around and knew what I was doing. After a certain point in my time at the school, students I did not recognize began saying, 'Hey! Don't you want to interview me?' (Needless to say, I generously granted an interview to everyone who asked.)

In addition to these two main groups, I spoke with a small number of students at the main high school. This school setting was completely unlike that of Westside Park. While I obtained permission from the principal to talk to students, I did not make contact through the administration. Instead, I attended a meeting of *Alianza Latina*, one of the clubs for promoting activities of interest to Latino students. At the meeting I attended, for example, they showed a videotape of a school assembly at which a Zoot Suit-style dance was performed by members of the club. I had asked the teacher who serves as club sponsor if I could make an announcement about my project at the meeting. I explained briefly what I was doing, and asked any students who would be willing to talk to me to stay for a few minutes after class. I then made appointments to meet these students and interview them individually at various locations around the campus (a bench outside, a corner of the library, and so on).

In all cases, I began the interviews by explaining the presence of the tape recorder (to help me 'keep straight' who told me what stories), and by assuring speakers that their information would be kept private. This is important with all linguistic consultants, but some of the speakers I interviewed were gang members, for whom it could be a matter of life and death. I told the students that if I published something that included information from the interviews, I would change everybody's name. One woman said that the members of a rival gang also knew her as 'Frankie's [pseudonym] little sister,' and I assured her that I wouldn't use his name either. Despite my belief in the importance of anonymity, I also had a good number of students who said that they didn't care whether I used their names (presumably implying that they were not afraid of anybody). One student (a gang member) specifically wanted me to keep his name rather than assigning him a pseudonym. We agreed to the compromise that I would keep his first name the same, but assign him a fictitious last name, and that he was to promise not to tell anyone that I had done so.

### **Background data on Westside Park school**

Because of its large representation among my speakers, the Westside Park school merits some discussion. In general, it is the landing place for students who have had serious academic or personal trouble at the main high school, including repeated truancies, violence, failing grades, pregnancy and so on. One interesting detail is that some students from the main high school *request* transfer to Westside Park, usually because they know someone who is a student there, and feel that it would be

better for them. Transfer is sometimes requested by the parents as well. Generally speaking, if the principal of Westside Park gives her permission, these transfers are accepted. In some special cases, students may even transfer in from outside the district.

The school has a student body of about 110–20 and a staff of six teachers, plus the principal, counselor, administrative assistant and other support staff. The student body at the time I worked there was about 55 percent Latino, with about 25 percent African-American students, and the rest divided between Anglo students and those of other ethnicities (Korean, Vietnamese, Tongan and so on).<sup>4</sup> The two most important administrative figures are the principal, who assists students in setting up a plan to help them meet their goals and who monitors and guides their progress, and the counselor, who encourages the students to talk about the many problems they face, at home and at school, and also teaches independent study courses. Both individuals help students deal with academic and social problems. Incidentally, the counselor, though not a Latina herself, is fairly fluent in Spanish and very familiar with Latino culture.

Westside Park can be described as a tight-knit community. The teachers and staff generally have a friendly relationship with the students, knowing their individual histories very well. The students, in turn, treat them with respect, but also often with a familiar teasing that signals their trust. They talk to the staff about problems in their home life, even about very serious concerns like drug abuse by themselves or their parents. The counselor occasionally attends their social functions, and the school itself organizes certain functions, like the annual Thanksgiving meal, prepared entirely by the students.

Clearly the school fills a crucial role in the community. LA is a difficult and often dangerous place to live. While at school, the students are protected and find a group of supportive people with whom they can share their problems and concerns. Their presence or absence at the school is monitored very carefully, and at the time of enrollment, the parents are asked to be responsible for seeing that the child gets to school. In addition, the school's academic structure, which helps the students to set their own pace for completing assignments, has many benefits. Students with learning disabilities can take the time they need to complete a particular task. Students who have fallen behind have the opportunity to work harder and make up more course units in a shorter time. The responsibility is placed on the student, although the staff monitors each student's progress closely. Since the school's founding in 1979, the number of students graduating has increased almost

exponentially. Some years ago the principal fought for and won the right for Westside Park graduating seniors to participate in the general commencement ceremony with the students from the main high school. This is a place where the students are treated with dignity. Though not all of them graduate, a fair number of them have received high school diplomas after it seemed that they would never make it.

### **Schools as sites for research**

In conducting sociolinguistic interviews, the researcher is constantly fighting the observer's paradox, trying to counter the effects of his or her own presence in order to obtain the most natural sample of vernacular speech possible. In a school setting it is often easiest to make contact with the students through a teacher or administrator. This type of contact, however, may put the interviewer in the category of an authority figure from the perspective of the student, and therefore lead to the use of a more formal speech style. It is the very essence of the observer's paradox that the interviewer can never be sure how casually an informant was speaking in an interview (without additional data of a very different type). However, I have reasons for believing that with respect to Westside Park my initial strategy of contact through the counselor and principal was a valid one. In addition, I attempted to further minimize the degree of formality of the situation in a number of respects.

Relationships between the staff and students at Westside Park are unlike those at most high schools. The school's small size and the fact that the students have all come there in order to deal with difficulties they had at other high schools make Westside Park less of an institutional setting than other schools. Presumably because of the special at-risk status of most students there, the staff members interact with the students in a way that falls between 'teacher' and 'friend.' While the nature of individual relationships varies, depending on the particular staff member and the particular student, my introduction as someone who was an old friend of the principal would not necessarily lead to my being perceived as an authority figure, and on the other hand would in some sense affirm my trustworthiness.

In addition, my visible participation in the office work, alongside several student helpers, allowed me to become familiar to the students in a general sense. Unlike the majority of high schools, the office at Westside Park is a place where the students feel comfortable 'hanging around' and often come for a variety of reasons (many of which are positive ones, in contrast to most high schools). My presence there allowed me to chat informally with several of the students, and it assured that, with the exception of a small number of cases at the beginning, the

students I interviewed had seen me around, rather than my being a total stranger.

As often as possible, I participated in other activities that involved 'hanging around' at the school. I ate lunch in the office with some of the student workers, and went to events such as a student softball game. One of my informants mentioned that her parents owned a Mexican restaurant, and encouraged me to come eat there. I went, along with the school counselor, and we had an excellent meal. The restaurant was fairly small and not too crowded, so the student, who was waiting tables, sat with us and talked to us for part of the dinner. This event also provides a good example of the friendlier than usual relationship between the staff and students, particularly since the student was talking about whether or not her mother was going to leave her abusive husband, the student's stepfather.

Finally, in the individual interviews I provided a considerable amount of background about myself in order to minimize the perception that I was a complete outsider. I mentioned that I was familiar with the school, and knew the staff, because my mother had worked in the office a number of years earlier. As part of presenting my interest in talking to people, I said that I had grown up in LA but had been living in Philadelphia for several years, and had just returned to Culver City. I commented that I had a sense of things having changed in LA over the years I was away, but that I wasn't sure exactly how, and then asked if the student thought things had changed recently. This was a topic on which almost everyone had an opinion. Some students asked more questions about my background, such as where exactly I grew up, did I attend Culver High, and so on, which allowed the interview to begin in a more bi-directional fashion than usual, and also indicated that I had generated some curiosity by my presence.

Among the factors that had to be considered in my fieldwork were those involving personal safety. It would not have been safe, for example, for a woman from outside the community to hang around alone at the Projects, no matter how tempting such a site might be as a focus for community activity.<sup>5</sup> In addition, obtaining access to gang members for an outsider is complex. My association with the school, a place where they felt safe and comfortable on the whole, provided them with the assurance that I was not a threat, and also allowed me to talk to them in a setting that was not dangerous for me in any way.

Although there is no simple way to assess how successful I was in obtaining casual speech, the methods I used seem to pay off in several respects. First of all, some of the students talked to each other about the

interviews, and I would hear comments like: 'I was over at my friend Patricia's house – you talked to Patricia, right? She told me she talked to you.' If the students had felt uncomfortable in the interviews, the friends they talked to might not have been willing to be interviewed, and at the very least, probably would not have mentioned the other speaker to me. As noted above, several students volunteered to be interviewed. In addition, I collected a large volume of personal narratives, including, as one might expect from a school that contains many gang members, a good number of danger-of-death stories. The students responded to and introduced topics of a very personal nature, talking about friends who had died, getting pregnant unexpectedly and, occasionally, using drugs. None of these topics seems consistent with a very formal level of speech, or a high level of self-consciousness regarding the interview.

A final factor that suggests casual speech in the interviews is the use of taboo ('four-letter') words. Although I did not do tabulations of this usage, my sense is that a majority of the students used four-letter words frequently in their interviews. This was true of students of both genders, although it was more common among the boys. Typically, the taboo words were used in English, although occasionally I had students who used them in the Spanish portion of the interview. Christian, for instance, used the word *jodido* ('fucked'). Ramon used *chingar* ('to fuck') and also switched into English, so that he could say, *pero si se porta como un asshole . . .* ('but if he acts like an asshole . . .'). In addition, the students used many local slang terms such as *homeboys* (members of the same gang), *bud* (marijuana), *jack* (assault or rob), and *g-ride* (ride in a stolen car), that referred to illegal activities. While the use of these various lexical items does not absolutely guarantee that the students were speaking casually, if they were treating the interview as formal, I would have expected them to edit their language somewhat.

While I did, as might be expected, have a few speakers who spoke less than others and seemed more hesitant, overall I believe the participant-observer approach through the school worked well.<sup>6</sup> I will end this section with an anecdote from my interview with Chuck. Toward the end of our conversation, Chuck told me that he was going to tell me something, but that I had to swear I would not tell anyone. Since I knew Chuck spent a good deal of time with the gang members, I assumed it would be something involving gang activities, possibly criminal in nature; I assured him that whatever he said to me would be kept in confidence. He lowered his voice and told me, 'I like to listen to

Phil Collins.<sup>7</sup> I consider this to be crucial evidence of my success in generating a situation of trust in the interviews.

### **The role of the interviewer**

One primary goal of the sociolinguistic interview is to generate a large sample of speech from the informant, so that the appropriate linguistic analyses can later be carried out. To this end, it is recommended in some sociolinguistic field methods courses that the interviewer speak as little as possible. In fact, a test recommended in such courses at the University of Pennsylvania is to fast forward through the tape of an interview stopping at random 10 times to listen briefly. The more times that one hears the informant talking (rather than the interviewer) the more successful the interview, at least in terms of volume of speech collected. While I certainly encouraged my speakers to talk at length, I probably also took more conversational turns of my own than some researchers might have done, not accidentally, but as part of a developed plan specific to the community.

The Latino community in Los Angeles, and particularly the young segment of the population that includes gang members, is one where *exchange* and *obligation* play a very important role, perhaps more than in most Anglo communities.<sup>8</sup> With the parent network, the informants began with a perceived obligation to provide me with help, through their loyalty to my mother. Among other things, I provided them with news of my mother and brother, as well as with small gifts such as a box of cookies for the younger children or something of this nature. As was mentioned earlier, many of them generously provided me with food, invitations or other non-interview-related favors. With the children of these parent contacts, I offered a specific kind of understanding through the fact that I was also the sibling of a person with Down's Syndrome. All of these interviews were long, covered a wide range of topics and included many personal narratives. In no case did I observe any signs that the people in question were treating the situation as that of a formal interview.

At Westside Park, I made a more deliberate effort to contribute my own experience to the interview. Among the gang members particularly, information is a key element in exchange and obligation, as they themselves explained.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, I tried to begin my interviews at Westside Park by offering some information about myself, as discussed above. If someone asked where I lived, or where I had grown up I told them. Occasionally they asked for more details about what I was doing beyond the brief description that I always gave at the beginning, and I expanded my explanation. I was careful to keep the main focus off language,

although sometimes I would mention that the fact that a lot of people in LA spoke two languages was interesting to me. I allowed the students to ask me as many questions as they wished, keeping my answers reasonably short, but without making any obvious attempt to turn the conversation back to questions about them.

Erica, for instance, asked in the middle of something else, 'What do you do, like, what do you work for, are you like a writer?' When I told her, among other things, that I lived in Philadelphia, she responded 'Nah-ah!' and asked, 'How is it over there?' and 'Do you like it better over there or over here?' I realized that the majority of these students had never been outside California, sometimes not even outside Los Angeles, and that they had a great deal of curiosity about other places. When these types of topics came up, I told them about Philadelphia or about other places I had visited, and I could see the interest it provoked in them. I tried to allow the interviews to be a source of information for them as well as for me.

At any point, if I had specific information that I felt could be helpful to them, I provided it. Amanda, for example, wished to apply for a driver's license but did not know what documents she needed, and I told her which ones I thought they were, and where she could call to check. Rita mentioned that she had allergies and asthma, and was encouraged when I told her that I had mainly outgrown my own allergies, and that a doctor had told me this was quite common. Sometimes if a student was trying to evaluate possible career choices, I gave them some idea of the type of schooling and skills that I thought would be required for each. To my surprise, several students expressed a strong interest in my own career, asking what I did on a daily basis, what kind of classes I had taken and so on, and I tried to convey some idea of what I did and why I liked it. Although this process generally may have led to my speaking more than is usual in a sociolinguistic interview, I had no difficulty stemming from this method in collecting a sufficiently large sample of speech. One part of the interview in which information exchange often played a crucial role was when the speaker was bilingual and I wished to switch the conversation to Spanish. I will discuss this aspect of the interviews in Chapter 8.

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