
LANGUAGE

Spanish speaking diminishes in Valley



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ANTONITO — The day before Thanksgiving, a group of women gathered around a table at the Antonito Senior Center, telling jokes, exchanging news about grandchildren and catching up on the latest gossip.

The topics were hardly unusual.

But the language used by the women, who were speaking in the Spanish dialect native to northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado, is unique.

Once the common language of both public life and the kitchen table for Hispanics, the connection to the mother tongue has frayed for younger generations even if it still holds strong at the senior center.

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"We speak Spanish all the time," said Margie Jiron before sitting down for turkey and stuffing at the center. "To me, that's my culture and I love it."

The Spanish spoken by Jiron and her friends at the senior center evolved over four centuries, dating back to the Spanish colonization of New Mexico.

Beginning in [the](#) 1850s, the migration of Hispanics from northern New Mexico would spread the language into the San Luis Valley and on to areas around present-day Trinidad and Walsenburg.

Dennis Lopez, who taught Spanish and French at Alamosa High School, grew up speaking the local dialect with his parents and grandparents in Capulin in the southwestern corner of the valley.

His discovery of the contrast between the local version and the academic version he encountered at Adams State College would launch him on a study of the differences for the rest of his adult life.

In describing what those differences might sound like to a Spanish speaker from another place, Lopez likens it to what English in Australia or Great Britain might sound like to someone from the U.S.

Each version represents a dialect with its own influences and history.

"It's where you go, what region you're in and what influences impact the language in that region that [create](#) a mixture that is unique unto itself," he said.

One of the differences that make the local dialect different is its retention of a number of traits from the language that made the trip from Spain to the New World in the 15th century.

As Lopez takes a visitor through his lecture notes, he points to common words in the dialect that can be found in the pages of Cervantes' "Don Quixote."

Words such as *mesmo* , which in English means "the same," persisted in the local dialect but would later shift slightly in standard Spanish to become *mismo* .

Other examples include *vide* ("I saw," in English), which would become *vi* in the standard version of the language and *contoy* ("with") which would become *con* .

"These are very archaic forms that remained here when the rest of the Spanish-speaking world changed," he said.

In part, these holdovers in the dialect stem from the geographic isolation of northern New Mexico.

For a portion of the Spanish colonial period, the provincial capital of Santa Fe sat roughly 750 miles north of the closest Spanish-speaking communities in Mexico.

But Lopez delights in pointing out that the local dialect also includes roots in Aztec language of Nahuatl, the French brought by fur trappers to the region in the 19th century, English and a 20th century version of slang called Calo.

"Around here we tend to mix all of those and we understand each other and we can code switch rapidly from one language root to another language root," he said.

The dialect was once thought to be an unassailable trait of the Hispanics in northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado.

One researcher at the beginning of the 20th century called it a "Spanish linguistic monument, which no influence or power can ever destroy."

But [history](#), especially in the decades after World War II, proved otherwise.

Garland Bills and Neddy Vigil interviewed 366 Spanish speakers for their 2008 study "The Spanish Language of New Mexico and Southern Colorado: A Linguistic Atlas."

They found that social inequality and the myth of the dialect's inferiority when posed against both standard Spanish and English have contributed to the dialect's rapid loss from one generation to the next.

"The rapidity with which Southwest Hispanics over the past half-century are shifting to English and abandoning Spanish rivals the loss of the ethnic mother tongue by practically any ethnic group in documented history," they wrote.

While not put in such sweeping terms, Lopez and the women at the Antonito Senior Center also see the decline.

Jiron, who taught bilingual education in Center and later taught in Antonito before retiring, puts it simply:

"The majority of these kids don't know Spanish," she said.

The most recent data from the U.S. Census estimated there were roughly 2,500 people who spoke Spanish at home in Conejos County, which represents over a quarter of the county's

population.

In Costilla County, roughly 1,600 of the county's 3,500 people spoke the language at home.

That data takes in a wide range of fluency among the respondents.

Lopez estimated that probably half of the respondents who speak Spanish at home were raised with the language as their primary one and have a high level of fluency.

The remainder might include people who understand Spanish well but don't speak it while others might just know bits and pieces of the language, he said.

In trying to put a finger on how the decline happened, the women in Antonito point to their education growing up and the punishment they received for speaking Spanish, whether it came from lay teachers or nuns.

Jiron remembers threats of spankings and, after being caught, having to write repeatedly the phrase, "I will not speak Spanish."

Lopez recalled a similar experience when he was growing up that made kids feel negatively about both themselves and the language.

"It becomes an acculturation and assimilation process that in order to be successful in this country, you speak English," he said. "The Spanish, then, is lost."

Lopez said when he ran his own classroom, he would teach both the dialect and standard Spanish to the students who came to school with a background in the former.

"I didn't want the local kids to feel like the language they spoke at home with their grandparents was a negative or pejorative form of language," he said.

But regaining a connection to the language is not easy.

Lopez said his own children understand a good deal of Spanish but hesitate to speak it because they're afraid to make mistakes.

"You make mistakes and you learn from the mistakes — that's the way it is with language," he said.

Mary Ellen Fleming would be an exception to the anecdotes at the Antonito Senior Center and the data gathered by social scientists.

She is a generation behind the women she teaches exercise classes to at the center.

And growing up in Espanola, N.M., she didn't speak Spanish at home with her parents but because it was the primary language for both sets of her grandparents, she became intent on learning to speak it.

She and her mother would take turns translating bedtime stories into Spanish and then reading them back to each other.

Decades later, the chance to teach the class in Antonito and interact with elder women in Spanish has become both a respite and a touchstone to remind her of her grandmother.

"The language is right here," she said, pointing to her heart. "It's beautiful. I love it."

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