

**Borderland Language Conflicts:  
A Study of Cross-National Interactions and Cultural Resolutions**

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*Abstract*

**Purpose of the Present Research**

This study was designed to examine border language conflicts that arise when an individual interacts with another individual from a different culture. We analyzed conflicts that undergraduate college students, who are preparing to teach, have experienced and that may be useful in explaining identity and language. This research is intended to help future educators understand language conflicts, how to relate to individuals from other cultures, and how to better resolve communication conflicts. This paper considers two types of borders, A) we look at the language used nearby and at physical borders, B) we consider borders that are not physical, but conceptual: where there is a psychological-cultural divide. Along such borders, students are faced with numerous obstacles when communicating with “an-other”<sup>1</sup> from a different culture.

There are different meanings associated with the terms “border” and “border conflicts” depending upon a speaker or writer. When we refer to a physical border, we mean geographical area between the two countries or cultures. On the other hand, a conceptual border is not a literal place, rather it is an abstract view of a metaphorical “wall” preventing individuals from understanding one another because of their limited language and cultural knowledge and/or differences. While there is a vast literature on language and culture, this literature has not examined borderland language conflicts. Given increasing mobility and globalization, teachers must provide students with communication skills so they can better relate to and resolve language struggles and their discourse conflicts. The internal and/or external frictions which occur are often unavoidable in natural contexts. With this study of several border language conflicts, it is noted that one does not have to be bilingual or at a physical border to encounter a misunderstanding with an individual from a different culture.

### **Theoretical Case/Background**

Russian social-psychologist Lev Vygotsky has introduced the theory that we use “inner speech” to understand situations and “external speech” that is adjusted as suitable for an environment (1968). According to Anzaldúa’s *How to Tame a Wild Tongue* (1987, p.43), a discussion of life on the Texas-Mexico border, identity alienation is a common result of differences, “This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for

psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity-we don't identify the Anglo-American culture values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values." What we can take from this is that when students move to a new country, inevitably language, customs, values, and traditions follow them. When immigrating to a new country, one does not only face "assimilation" with the new language and culture. If a new country meets an immigrants' expectations, they are more likely to settle down and have children who are placed into the school system. These children create their own culture and dialect based on everything learned from their native community and often fuse it with the existing culture in a country that is now theirs. People who grow up in cross-cultural regions can be disassociated from their native culture. Some culture conflicts stem from the belief that one party's culture is the "correct" or "only" way. For example, Anzaldúa (1987, p.35) writes: "...[you] cultural traitor, you're speaking the oppressor's language by speaking English...." causing the students to question their identity and where they truly belong. In *The Narrative Study of Lives*, Josselson and Lieblich note that "Swann (1985, p. 100) has written that the 'Self [is the] architect of [it's own] reality" (p.133). Trying to find one's own identity, when they cannot fully connect to either American or Mexican culture not only results in internal conflicts but will unquestionably produce conflicts when interacting with two or more cultures as one seeks cross-national harmony.

As reported in Valenzuela's *Subtractive Schooling* (1999), while many first-generation students at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), travel to and from border towns, it has been noted that they face an imposed reality that their Spanish is forever "inferior" and "average" when compared to the tongue of their native country. In *The Narrative Study of Lives*, the authors also refer to Erikson's (1968) identity concept, "...one cannot shift one's sense of belonging without a parallel internal development." Unfortunately, many of the students who move to other countries do exhibit this internal development, however, paired with loss of both confidence and cultural familiarity students often become more sensitive to their peers' perceptions of them. Anzaldúa comments, "Chicanos who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish" (Anzaldúa, 1987). This can cause the student to have low self-esteem and possibly resentment towards those from the native country creating a negative idea of an entire group of people before one even meets them. There is also a perception that, "If a person, Chicana or Latino, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me" (Anzaldúa, 1987). This outlook leaves much to interpret, which continues to contribute to an existing tension the present research seeks to better understand. While cases of language research, such as foreign languages and dialects are growing, Texas-Mexico borderlands pose unique conflicts that need to be studied and compared to other borderlands across the globe.

## **Subjects**

Ten undergraduate students from The University of Texas at San Antonio's Writing Development and Processes (LTED 3803) course were encouraged to volunteer to write about a language conflict that they experienced on a border or other cultural situational-context. All the students were seeking teacher certification and enrolled in either the Fall 2018, grades K-6 course or Spring 2019, grades 4-8 course. The directions were: Describe in writing a language conflict that you have experienced on the Texas-Mexico Border or another context.

## **Procedures**

Our team reviewed research methods used in Content Analysis of communication and created a chart based on categories presented in 10 student writing protocols that we collected. We categorized elements of the writing found in the 10 student texts that represented borderland language conflicts. We looked for: language and conceptualization patterns --commonalities, differences, and resolutions as described in the writing protocols.

The team is comprised of two authors fluent in Spanish and grew up with the teachings of Mexican culture in their households. One author went to the capital of Mexico (Mexico City) every summer and vacation to visit with family that resided in

Mexico. Another author is an ESL (English as a Second Language) learner and lived in a border town their entire life also spending every weekend, holiday and vacation with family in Coahuila and Nuevo Leon. The third author has an adopted sister from Mexico who brought the culture to their household as well, although they are learning to become a Spanish speaker. All three authors are fluent in English and currently living in San Antonio attending the University of Texas at San Antonio.

After reading the writing protocols the students submitted which described their borderland or related language conflicts, the research team identified six categories of elements characteristic of content evident in the writing protocols for analysis. The categories include: a. nature of conflict, b. Persona presented, c. spatial/situational context, d. linguistic terms, and e. conflict resolution. Listed below is a brief description of each of these categories:

- a) The impetus/cause and type of the conflict involving culture and language.
- b) Persona presented in the narration of the situation.
- c) Spatial/situational context e.g. the location or the circumstances reported in the account documented.
- d) Significant linguistic terms the specific terms the author used in the conflict i.e. "Fake Mexican", "Talk White", and "Stupid Americans."

- e) The resolution records the impact the situation had on the author externally or internally.

Examples noted are direct quotes of the writing protocols.

## **Findings**

3 of the 10 reported conflicts ended in “No Resolution” (No objective was achieved.) For example, one of the subjects couldn’t prevent the language conflict she wrote about, but she did try to prevent future language conflicts.

1 of the 10 conflicts ended in an escape from the situation. (subject abandoned their objective/ the spatial/situational context). In this protocol, the subject stopped reading, an activity previously enjoyed, altogether due to the frustration of “boring textbooks” and the writer “couldn’t comprehend the story.”

5 of the 10 conflicts ended in a “Positive Resolution” (objective was achieved/peace was made). In one protocol, the subject wrote of another person who achieved mastery of English through hard work and self-discipline.

1 of the 10 conflicts ended in a “Negative Resolution” (all parties left feeling abject failure). In this protocol, the subject reported that a bridal appointment fell to shambles due to a language barrier, the writer “ended up flustered and crying and so did the future bride.”

There are also writing samples that are not directly associated with a border experience, but describe an experience of a cultural conflict. We included these samples to let the

reader of this study relate and empathize with the authors of the sample writing about their conflicts that occur on the physical border and as a result of borderland culture.

Below is a sample of the analysis of the written protocols of three subjects included in our **Content Analysis Chart**. Names were altered for the sake of privacy of the subjects.

	<u>Elements of Content</u>	<u>N.</u>	<u>A.</u>	<u>E.</u>
1	<b>Nature of Conflict</b>	-Different beliefs -bullying / harassment for not knowing Spanish	-Dialect Barrier -Rejection of elevated diction as "white" code-switching	-School norms of stigmatizing ESL and inability to read Spanish became disheartening
2	<b>Persona Presented</b>	-American with minimal Spanish Roots	- "Black American"	-Not Reported
3	<b>Spatial - Situational Context</b>	-South Texas -3 hours from Border	-Sugarland, TX	-At home -At school ECISD (San Antonio, TX)
4	<b>Linguistic Terms that Separate / Combine Cultures</b>	-writer called "Fake Mexican"	- "Talk white"	- "Self-conscious of my new label [ESL]"

5	<b>Conflict Resolution</b>	-Writer decided to take Spanish Classes	- "I can't help but wonder whether it's harmed my social development"	-Speaker stopped reading altogether
6	<b>Result</b>	POS RESOL	NO RESOL	ESCAPE

## Conclusion

Much more research is needed in order to fully understand how these language conflicts arise, how to resolve, and how to shape them into a practical educational form that can be used to teach students/children to resolve conflicts with respect and effectiveness. As supported in Patton Tabors's *One Child, Two Languages* (1997), gathering information about the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of culturally diverse students can be useful in supporting these learners. Future educators need examples of how to effectively work through discourse conflicts when they arise in certain situations. We need more research, but we also need to provide more examples similar or different to the conflicts we found and provide students the opportunity to roleplay conflict resolution. We hope this research will help educators better connect to and empathize with the authentic language and cultural conflicts in their students' lives.

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<sup>1</sup> “Othering occurs when one automatically and conclusively determines that someone else is fundamentally different than oneself (Said, 1979). The other person or groups of persons are mentally categorized as ‘not like me’ or ‘not like us’. The humanity of the ‘them’ group is lessened.” (Disney, 2017)

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