

# “Señora, boys just cannot speak Spanish”: Negotiating Masculine Identities in a Foreign Language Classroom

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Studies of gender and classroom foreign language learning in Anglophone countries have documented the prevalence of ideologies that posit females as superior FL learners and FL learning as a fundamentally “girlish” pursuit in secondary school settings. The present paper extends this work, examining how this ideology gets constructed and negotiated in the course of doing FL learning in a college context. Specifically, it describes how two male learners in an advanced Spanish conversation course positioned themselves and were positioned in ways that both reproduced and challenged the associations between being female and being a good foreign language student that circulated within and through their classroom. Moreover, it considers the implications of these acts of positioning for both these learners’ classroom identities and our overall understanding of the role of gender in classroom FL learning.

## Introduction

In the United States and other Anglophone countries, foreign language (FL) study has long been relegated to the margins of secondary school and university curricula (Pavlenko, 2002, 2003). While numerous explanations have been advanced to account for why students choose or do not choose to engage in FL study beyond the compulsory level (e.g., Byrnes, Bruce, Schrier, Sandrock, Webb, & Gori, 2002; Hedderich, 2003; Maxwell & Garrett, 2002; Stewart-Strobelt & Chen, 2003), one recent finding is particularly striking. Namely, why is classroom FL learning, at least in Anglophone countries, overwhelmingly viewed as a female endeavor? As Carr and Pauwels (2006) report, research undertaken in both Australia and England on attitudes of secondary school students toward FL study reveals one widely held assumption, as indicated by the subtitle of their book: “real boys don’t do languages.” What implications does this have for male learners who wish to engage in advanced FL study at the college-level?

In this paper, I take up the gendering of classroom FL learning again, but with a focus on two male students at a U.S. university who have voluntarily chosen to study Spanish at the advanced level. That is, this paper offers a close look at two male learners who embrace normative gender identities, while simultaneously expressing favorable attitudes toward FL learning. While previous work has documented and questioned the prevalence of ideologies that posit females as superior FL learners and FL learning as a fundamentally “girlish” pursuit in secondary school settings (e.g., Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Chavez, 2001; Schmenk, 2004; Sunderland, 1995, 2000a, 2000b, 2004), the present paper seeks to complicate and extend this line of research. Specifically, I describe how two male learners in an advanced Spanish conversation course positioned themselves and were positioned by others in ways that both reproduced and challenged the associations between being female and being a good foreign language user / good foreign language student that circulated within and through their classroom. In other words, I examine the ways in which gender intersected with other relevant identities to both enable and constrain the kinds of positions that were available to male students in the Spanish classroom under consideration.

In the sections which follow, I lay out the key concepts which guide my analysis, review contemporary scholarship on gender and classroom FL learning, provide an overview of the study and the participants, describe my analytic approach, discuss the focal students, and consider the implications of this work for classroom practice.

### Key Terms and Concepts

#### *Good Language Learners vs. Good Language Students*

Throughout the paper, I make a distinction between “good foreign language users” and “good foreign language students” in order to highlight the kinds of identities that tend to circulate in FL classrooms (Norton & Toohey, 2001; Pomerantz, forthcoming; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007). Briefly, I argue that being a “good” (i.e., competent and creative) language user is not the same as being a “good” (i.e., competent and conformist) language student. The former implies expertise in range of linguistic practices that may or may not be validated in school settings, the latter refers only to expertise in school-sanctioned linguistic practices (cf. Norton & Toohey, 2001). For example, language play is generally frowned upon in FL classrooms, even though numerous scholars have suggested that it may index advanced proficiency (Belz, 2002; Belz & Reinhardt, 2004; Broner & Tarone, 2001; G. Cook, 2000; Pomerantz & Bell, 2007). As such, learners who repeatedly engage in language play may

be positioned as “bad language students” for talking in ways that do not conform to classroom norms, despite the metalinguistic awareness and verbal acumen such acts may entail. As my discussion of the data illustrate below, this effort to evaluate language learners in binary terms resonates both with the research on classroom identities (see Norton & Toohey, 2001; Pomerantz, forthcoming for review), as well as the identity categories in use in the classroom under consideration.

### *A Focus on Positioning*

A second important concept guiding the subsequent analysis involves a dual understanding of the notion of positioning. Throughout this paper, I employ the term *positioning* in both an ideological sense and an interactional one. From an ideological standpoint, I explore how shared assumptions about gender and being a good language user/good language student made certain classroom identities both available and desirable, while simultaneously limiting or devaluing others. That is, I explore how the participants’ conception of gender as a binary (male/female) system interacted with their understanding of linguistic ability and a scholastic ability in this context to enable and constrain the range of possible subject positions they could take up in this classroom. From an interactional standpoint, I examine how learners mobilized specific linguistic resources to appropriate, resist, and at times even challenge these positions. This focus on interactional positioning highlights how the focal students drew on local ways of making meaning through language to fashion particular social identities in their classroom, offering a situated account of their overall linguistic competence.

### *Gender as a Subject Position*

This dual understanding of positioning figures prominently in feminist poststructuralist accounts of gender. From such a perspective, gender, like other social identities, is conceptualized as an ideologically-driven subject position that must be continuously negotiated in practice (e.g., Bucholtz, Liang, & Sutton, 1999; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, 1998; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 1999). As Judith Butler (1990) has put it, gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a rigid regulatory frame which congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a ‘natural’ kind of being” (p. 33). In other words, Butler’s “rigid regulatory frame” refers to the ideological (as opposed to natural) basis of gender as a social position, while her focus on “repeated acts” captures the ongoing work individuals must do to position themselves in ways that are consonant with dominant conceptions. While some scholars prefer a more flexible understanding of Butler’s “rigid regulatory frame,” highlighting the ways in which ideologies of gender can be

transgressed and refashioned (e.g., Bucholtz et al., 1999), nevertheless the notion of positioning remains central. Gender is not something people *have*, but rather something they must continually *do* through both the privileging of particular ideologies and the careful deployment of semi-otic resources like language, gesture, dress, etc. (Cameron, 1998).

Moreover, contemporary theorists add that gender is intricately intertwined with other social identities like race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and (dis)ability and cannot be neatly extracted (e.g., Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, 1998; Morgan, 1999; Pavlenko, Blackledge, Piller, & Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001; Rampton, 1995). As Barrett (1999) has noted,

identities based on categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity are often enmeshed in very complex ways... speakers may heighten or diminish linguistic displays that index various aspects of their identities according to the context of an utterance and the specific goals they are trying to achieve (p. 318).

Indeed, Ochs (1992) has observed that few linguistic features directly or uniquely index gender. The present focus on positioning reminds us that social identities like gender are never unitary or stable. They are always created at the juncture of multiple, and sometimes competing, ideologies of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, social class, and – in the case of foreign language classrooms – linguistic and scholastic ability (i.e., classroom identities). Moreover, they rarely “translate” seamlessly across time and space. What counts as an affirmation of masculinity in one place, for example, may take on an entirely different meaning or value in another. As such, language learners must be continuously attuned to the tension between the array of potential interpretations indexed by any act of positioning (as conditioned by dominant ideologies) and their desired social identities.

### *Gender, Positioning and Additional Language Learning*

In recent years, many applied linguists have begun to question how gender, understood from this perspective, might mediate additional language learning (see Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004; Langman, 2004; Pavlenko, 2004; Pavlenko & Piller, 2001; Sunderland, 2000a, 2000b for recent reviews). From studies of gender as a factor in enabling or constraining one’s access to language learning opportunities (Goldstein, 1997; Heller, 1999; Norton, 2000; Peirce, 1995; Norton & Pavlenko, 2004; Polanyi, 1995; Talburt & Stuart, 1999; Willett, 1995), to detailed accounts of how learners construct and negotiate gendered identities in new communities of practice (Ohara, 2001; Pavlenko, 2001a, 2001b; Piller, 2001; Siegal, 1996; Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001), such work has foregrounded the many ways in which gender is implicated in second language (L2) learning both in and out of the classroom. The majority of this work, however, has focused on

the construction and negotiation of female identities. Far less attention has been paid to the relationship between masculinities and L2 learning (see, however, Goldstein, 1997; Menard-Warwick, 2006; Teutsch-Dwyer, 2001; Vitanova, 2004; Willett, 1995; for some exceptions). On the one hand, this absence of scholarship on the experiences of male learners is odd, in that it seems to presuppose (albeit erroneously) that gender is only a salient factor when it pertains to female language learners. On the other, it seems rather mundane, in that it mirrors general trends within the field of language and gender, which only recently has begun to interrogate the meaning of masculinity (e.g., Bucholtz, 1999; Johnson & Meinhof, 1997).

### *Gender and Classroom FL Learning*

Studies conducted in educational settings, however, suggest that ideologies of both femininity and masculinity mediate classroom FL learning in particular ways (e.g., Carr & Pauwels, 2006; Heller, 1999; Julé, 2004; Sunderland, 1995, 2000a, 2000b). For example, Sunderland, 1996 (as cited in Sunderland, 2000b) noted that in the German FL classroom she investigated, female students were consistently positioned by the teacher as more academically capable than their male classmates. Focusing primarily on teacher-student interactional patterns, she observed that while boys received more attention from the teacher in terms of overall quantity of solicits, girls were asked to produce longer and more complex responses in German. From this, she concluded that over time such interactional exchanges served to both construct the female students as superior FL learners and to normalize / privilege a view of femininity that links it to academic prowess. While Sunderland herself claims that such generalizations should be read with caution (2000b), nevertheless they point to some tendencies in FL classrooms to both posit and position female students as innately more talented.

More recently, Carr and Pauwels (2006), in examining interview data from over 200 boys in Australian secondary schools (with additional accounts from girls and teachers), argued that strong investments in normative gender identities by students and teachers alike shape everything from an individual's decision to pursue FL study beyond the compulsory level and the choice of specific languages, to the material taught and actual classroom performance. As the majority of the boys in their study made clear, studying foreign languages "is not something that boys do; not something that boys are good at; it is very much a 'girl thing'" (p. 45). Yet, they also note that such ideologies of gender were also shot through with social class implications. Whereas working class boys at state schools were adamant in their negative stance toward FL study, middle and upper class boys at private institutions saw it as a more gender-appropriate and appealing option. Carr and Pauwels speculate that

Many boys whose lives include access to positive other cultural experiences need little convincing of the usefulness or relevance of foreign language study in general personal development terms... For many boys from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, there are few such points of connection (p. 170).

### *Navigating Complex Ideological Landscapes*

Indeed, the relationship among masculinity, social class and classroom identity merits particular attention with respect to the present study, as it considers the experiences of two upper-middle class males who have chosen to major/minor in Spanish in college. While Carr and Pauwels' work demonstrates that males from higher socio-economic groups may be more favorably disposed to FL study, discussions of gender in classrooms in general have suggested that normative male identities are often characterized by a lack of interest or investment in being a good student (e.g., Eckert, 1989; Wortham, 2006). That is, part of assuming a normative male identity in a classroom involves taking an anti-school stance and engaging in disruptive practices, regardless of one's social class background and/or investment in particular areas of study. As such, a tension emerges among being male, seeing FL study as a worthy endeavor, and being perceived as a docile, rule-abiding pupil. Indeed, as one of the boys in Carr and Pauwels' study observed with regard to his behavior at school, "Mucking up's what we do! You have to muck up if you're a boy!" (p. 62). To do anything less, is to risk being labeled a girl.<sup>1</sup>

### Context and Methods

The data in this paper comes from a qualitative, discourse-analytic study of identity and FL learning at a U.S. university. They were collected over the course of a 15-week semester in an advanced Spanish conversation course and include ethnographic observations in both the classroom and the department, tape-recordings of approximately 45 hours of classroom interaction, and interviews with individual study participants. There were 16 learners in the classroom under consideration, of which seven identified themselves as male and nine as female.<sup>2</sup> The teacher, a bilingual Cuban-American, also identified as female and was in her third year as an instructor at this university. While I had worked in the department as an instructor for four years prior to undertaking this study, I had not worked with any of the learners previously and was known to them only as a graduate student/teaching assistant.

The study itself was undertaken at a private university, with strict admissions criteria, a strong emphasis on academic excellence, an eye

1 As numerous gender scholars have noted, modern western society privileges a view of two and only two gender categories: male and female. These categories, despite evidence to the contrary, are constructed as natural and mutually exclusive. To be male is to be not female and vice versa (e.g., Bucholtz et al., 1999).

2 This nearly even ratio of male to female students was typical of Spanish courses at the university.

toward internationalism and hefty tuition fees. The participants mainly came from middle- and upper-class backgrounds and were well-versed in being “good students.” They had all engaged extensively in school-based literacy practices and had a history of successful academic experiences. Moreover, as a pre-requisite for enrollment in the course, all had fulfilled the university’s foreign language proficiency requirement which, at the time, correlated with a score of intermediate-mid on the ACTFL scale.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the class itself, “Advanced Spanish Conversation” formed part of a trio of required courses that constituted the basis of a major in Spanish. Thus, to a certain extent, by virtue of their enrollment in the course, all the participants could legitimately position themselves as both good language students and good language users.

Before moving on to a discussion of the data, it is important to note that the original study focused on the range of identities available in this classroom and the ways in which learners drew on particular linguistic resources to position themselves and others relative to this local identity landscape. This analysis revealed “good language user” and “good language student” to be categories that the participants themselves used to construct and negotiate their classroom identities (Pomerantz, forthcoming). My interest in the intersection of gender and good language user/good language student identity emerged from my initial analysis of the data. That is, I did not begin my examination with the assumption that gender would be either a salient social category or intertwined with other classroom identities. Indeed, based on my prior experiences at this university, I had assumed that “real boys” did study and often excelled at foreign languages. As such, the procedure I outline below took place after I had observed that gender – and more importantly masculinity – did indeed seem to matter in the FL classroom under consideration.

My understanding of the present data is informed by Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) sociocultural linguistic approach to studying identity. Central to their analytic framework is the recognition that “identities encompass a) macro-level demographic categories; b) local ethnographically specific cultural positions; and c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles” (p. 592). As such, my analysis attempts to reconcile larger, more pervasive ideologies about masculinity and FL study (e.g., Carr & Pauwels, 2006), with more local understandings of how gender might connect to being a good foreign language user/good foreign language student. To this end, I followed a two-sided approach to data analysis. On the one hand, I scanned my field notes, interview transcripts, and classroom recordings for places in which participants made reference to **their underlying theories about the relationship between gender and linguistic/scholastic ability**. Here, I was particularly interested in how labeling, implicature, and presupposition were used

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3 It should be observed, however, that the participants’ expertise in Spanish varied quite a bit and some had achieved levels more representative of advanced speakers.

to create and police the boundaries of gender identities in participants talk about and within this FL classroom (see work by Liang, 1999 and Ehrlich, 1999 for more detailed discussions of how these indexical processes are manipulated with respect to the construction and negotiation of gender identities in interaction). On the other, I turned my attention to the kinds of interactions in which male students habitually engaged over the course of the semester to see how they positioned themselves and were positioned in terms of gender and linguistic/scholastic ability. Here, I was more concerned with identifying the repertoire of linguistic devices each student used to negotiate his classroom identity and what implications this had for our overall understanding of how gender might mediate classroom FL learning. The subsequent discussion focuses primarily on the linguistic practices of two male students in particular, Jim and Ravi, in order to illustrate both the differences and the consequences of doing gender in particular ways in this FL classroom. I have chosen to highlight these two students, as together they provide the most striking account of how gender mediated FL learning in the classroom under consideration.

## Discussion

### *Ideologies of Gender and Possibilities for Classroom Identity*

Upon scouring the data for explicit and implied references to gender, I observed that the participants favored a binary understanding, one that divided people into two, naturally occurring and mutually exclusive categories – male and female (cf. Bing & Bergval, 1998). At first glance this observation struck me as somewhat trivial, but I then noted that the adherence to an ideology of gender that posited the existence of two and only two opposing categories had important implications when it intersected with other ideologies of identity, like those that constructed what it meant to be a good language user or a good language student in this FL classroom.

For example, through observations and interviews it became apparent that many of the males in the classroom thought that their female peers were both better at using Spanish and better students in general. When it came time to select groups for the final course project, for instance, the teacher choose them at random. One group happened to consist of all males and they complained repeatedly – to each other, to the teacher, and to me – about the injustice of not having a female in their group. In fact, they went as far as to ask the teacher if I could join their group because “boys just cannot speak Spanish.” Certain girls, they told me, are “efficient in their work habits” and “get stuff done.” Boys, on the other hand, are fun to work with “for the wrong reasons” because the group just does not “get anything accomplished” (field notes, 3/24/00).

Indeed, during private interviews, I asked each study participant to name which peers were easy or hard to work with and to explain why. As this was a conversation course aimed at improving the students' verbal skills in Spanish, learners spent the majority of their time engaging in small-group discussions with one another. They were graded each day on their participation in these discussions and were acutely aware of how the evaluation of their own performances depended, to a large extent, on what their classmates did during the discussion. Over and over again, females were cited as preferred partners because of their expertise in Spanish and willingness to participate in classroom activities. Males were positioned as less linguistically competent and unwilling to contribute. For example:

**Hannah:** I feel like Neela is really good and (pause) what's her name, Margaret, has a really bad accent but I think she's really good in terms like she knows a lot of words and a lot of tenses. Fatima is very good. She was really good yesterday at the presentation – that made me really nervous. I was like, 'oh god we have to figure ours out still'... then um Paula. Oh she's really good too...

**Rob:** Rachel is just like really like active and like diligent and like gets stuff done, you know. And she's got like, never lets it be quiet and just kind of like is always the one who keeps it going fast. So, um, that's good. And then like certain people, like a lot of the girls, like um Hannah and (pause) I can't think of her, Fatima. Like they just kind of (pause) they just like, they really like talk a lot. And so I mean that that's really good too. I just think that people that like talk a lot, they keep active.

**Anne:** Who do you like to work with?

**Kevin:** I like uh (pause) well I like Ravi for like kind of the like wrong reasons. Cause we'll always like talk about something that has like no relation to it and go off on like a long tangent. So I guess he's someone that I shouldn't work with frequently but uh I do like working with him. I do like working with (pause) Paula and uh Addison uh (pause). I always forget this girl's name she's uh got dark hair kind of like olive skin real skinny. Neela. She's cool to work with just because they're like they say interesting stuff and it's like funny you know. It's just not like, 'here's what I think' just kind of like you know you can joke around and kind of have it be like fun uh (pause) .... oh uh Hannah she's fun

**Anne:** Who's hard to work with?

**Kevin:** Jim. I was in his group today. I don't know his last name uh (pause). He's kind of like uh he puts his input in and then like sits back and like watches you know instead of like going back and forth and like getting really involved. Rob, he's kind of like the same way, you know. Like he'll think about things and have like short responses and then he doesn't like really like get involved in the conversation you know and like make it really interesting and like fun. I guess Jamel's kind of like that too. She's ok though. I like working with uh (pause) Fatima. She's usually pretty good.

Looking closely at these extracts, several recurring themes bear mentioning. First, linguistic expertise seems to be conflated with expertise in classroom practices. That is, what it means to be a "good language user" in this classroom seems to be as much about competence in Spanish (e.g., having a strong vocabulary and good command of the tense system) as it is competence in the norms of foreign language classroom behavior (e.g., participating actively in small-group discussions, staying on task). People are cast as "good" if they display any of these forms of knowledge or engage in any of these practices. Second, being "good" is constructed as something positive and desirable. Kevin likes to work with Ravi even though Ravi frequently wanders off task and thus concludes that he should not partner with him frequently. Hannah notes her anxiety about an upcoming presentation, as Fatima's fine performance has made her question her own group's level of preparation. Third, being a good language user/good language student seems, at least on the surface, to be connected to gender. My interview question asked participants to name those students with whom they liked to work and to identify those with whom they had difficulty working. Rob explicitly cites gender as a salient category in making such distinctions. Likewise, Kevin's comment positions specific female students as good language users/good language students and specific male students as, at the very least, not such good language students. Yet, he also positions Addison, a male student, as someone he likes working with.<sup>4</sup> What can we make of this?

While the majority of the students' comments seem to echo the popularly held stereotype that females are better additional language learners than males (Schmenk, 2004; Sunderland, 2000a, 2000b, 2004), the reference to a male student as a good language user/good language student seems somewhat out of place. It seems, at least at first, to challenge the ideology of female superiority. Yet, I would argue that this is

<sup>4</sup> Addison was the only student in the class who asked not to form part of the study. As such, I was unable to examine his linguistic practices in detail.

not so much a challenge to dominant ideologies of gender, but rather an effect of the repetition of the rigid male/female dichotomy played out on a different plane. In other words, just as people must be divided into two gendered categories, so too must they be divided into two classroom categories: good language user/good language student or bad language user/bad language student. It is this understanding of identity as a system of opposites that seems to be driving the range of positions available to the participants in this classroom, making some more available and desirable than others. Put simply, people in this classroom could position themselves or be positioned in any number of ways, but the combinations of female – good language user/good language student and male – bad language user/bad language student seemed to be the most common or “normal” possibilities against which all other identities were understood. To be female and a bad language user/bad language student was to be “unusual” and perhaps less feminine. Likewise, to be male and a good language user/good language student was also out of the ordinary and posed some risks to one’s gender identity. One could enact this identity, but it might come at some cost.

### *Constructing and Negotiating Classroom Identities*

While this array of possible positions created few problems for female students who wished to assert a normative gender identity and a privileged academic/scholastic one, male students faced some challenges. How could those who wished to “succeed” in class and assert a normative male identity navigate this ideological landscape? What linguistic resources did they draw on in constructing their classroom identities?

### *Jim: Reproducing Dominant Ideologies of Gender and Linguistic/Scholastic Ability*

One possibility, as evidenced repeatedly through Jim’s performance over the course of the semester, was to position oneself as a bad language user/bad language student by actively resisting classroom norms. In this way, a male student could avoid any threats to his gender identity. Jim had attended an elite private high school and was in his second year of study at the university. In stark contrast to his punctual and well-prepared classmates, Jim often arrived late and his contributions to class discussion varied tremendously from day to day. Some days he would spend the entire class period writing, preparing his piece for a small-group presentation. Other days he would offer a remark or two, and then sit back and watch the conversation unfold. Indeed, at times Jim would speak entirely in English or not at all.

A look at Jim’s linguistic practices over the course of the semester revealed that silence and code-switching were perhaps the most salient characteristics. For example, in a discussion regarding cults, Hannah explicitly reminded Jim to express his ideas in Spanish, even though she herself had code-switched repeatedly throughout the conversation.

- 1 **Leah:** like *no sé como el gobierno regul regis*  
(‘like I don’t know how the govern-  
ment *regul regis*’)
- 2 **Jim:** *Regulaciones*  
(‘regulations’)
- 3 you can do whatever the cult says but  
you can’t
- 4 **Hannah:** *en ESPAÑOL por favor*  
(‘in Spanish please’)
- 5 **Ravi:** *Sí*  
(‘yes’)

This kind of interaction was typical of Jim’s performance in class. Over and over again he positioned himself and was positioned as both an incompetent user of Spanish and an active resister of classroom norms.

While one might argue that Jim was just disinterested in studying Spanish, ethnographic observations and private interviews presented a more complex picture. First, Jim planned to double major in Spanish and history. The rest of his classmates, on the other hand, were only interested in taking a minor in Spanish. They claimed that FL study was not important enough to warrant such a strong official investment. For example, Margaret noted,

I don’t know how many job opportunities I’ll have coming out of college with a Spanish major... I could possibly double major in Spanish and something else, but I don’t think that I want Spanish to be my specific area of expertise.

Second, Jim was the only student in the class who intended to pursue a year-long study abroad program. Others were more interested six to 15-week options (the norm at this university). Third, Jim expressed very positive evaluations of Spanish and Spanish speakers. For example, when I asked Jim in a private interview why he had chosen to study Spanish and not another language, he told me that “it sounds cool” and “it’s a useful language.” He then went on to recount how he had spent a summer in Laredo, Texas working on a ranch with some Spanish speaking Americans and that the experience was “pretty awesome.” Finally, Jim was quite negative in his evaluation of his classmates, deriding them for always working harder than necessary to earn an A and accusing them of “kissing up” to the teacher. At one point he told me, “I think there are a lot of freshman in the class... they’re like they have to impress the teacher... I think I still can get on the teacher’s good side and not kiss up or anything.” That is, he scorned his classmates’

efforts to engage in good language student behavior and positioned himself as too cool and sophisticated to act like this in class.

While Jim's description of his classmates as "freshman kiss asses" is not gendered, per se, it does resonate with the ideologies of gender identified by Carr and Pauwels (2006). That is, in highlighting his classmates' obsequious behavior, Jim conjures up one widely circulating ideology of gender: the distinction between docile girls and rebellious boys.<sup>5</sup> As the students in Carr and Pauwels' study noted over and over again, boys are expected to act out at school; girls are not. In a binary gender system that posits two and only two oppositional categories, boys who engage in good student practices may risk positioning themselves and being positioned as girls.

The following extract illustrates how Jim, despite his investment in learning Spanish, typically positioned himself and was positioned as both male and a bad language student/bad language user. In this exchange, Jim had been charged with directing a discussion among Fatima, Rob, and Paula with respect to the death penalty. As part of his job, he was responsible for asking questions and keeping the conversation flowing. One question regarding the issue of race in death penalty cases, however, was met by a challenge from Fatima.

- 1 **Fatima:** *pero cómo puedes (.) explique explicar[lo]?*  
(‘but how can you explain it?’) (3)
- 2 **Jim:** well (1) uh (4)  
3 that was just a question  
4 I'm the director  
5 I was just (.) asking questions [Rob  
laughs]
- 6 **Paula:** o:k? [exaggerated rising intonation]  
7 *está: bien?* (3)  
(‘is it ok’)

In line 1, Fatima asks Jim to answer the question he has just posed and at first her request is met only with silence (there is a three second pause). Then, rather than expanding on the racialized nature of capital punishment in Spanish (which would be the expected move in this conversational class and momentarily position Jim as a good language user/good language student), Jim switches to English and says “that was just a question/ I’m the director/I was just asking questions.” Of particular interest in this exchange is how Jim’s comments are taken up by his classmates. Rob immediately laughs at Jim’s remark, perhaps

<sup>5</sup> As Betsy Rymes has pointed out (personal communication), the popularity of the Harry Potter books speaks to the prevalence and acceptance of this ideology. This best selling series stars the intrepid Harry Potter, and his studious counterpart, Hermione Granger.

suggesting that he interpreted it as a wise crack. In so doing, he seems to position Jim as someone who is making fun of the artificial nature of classroom discourse, an identity generally associated with rebellious, anti-school boys. Paula, on the other hand, utters an incredulous “*ok/ está bien*” (with exaggerated rising intonation) implying that she interpreted this comment as an aggressive move by Jim – one directed at casting Fatima’s question as a challenge and not an attempt to elicit his perspective on the issue at hand. Here, it is important to note that although the course topics were intended to be provocative and incite disagreement, the students rarely entered into heated debate. As such, Jim’s comments also stand in contrast to the general tenor of the class and seem to position him, once again, as someone who operates outside school-sanctioned norms.

For Jim, then, code-switching became, in many senses, a linguistic resource, as it allowed him to position himself and be positioned in a way that overtly resisted the association between being a good language user / good language student and being female. Yet, in so doing, he actively reinforced the very ideologies that created this identity landscape and embraced a position that had some serious consequences for an academic plan that included a major in Spanish and an application to a competitive, study-abroad program in Argentina.

#### *Ravi: Challenging Dominant Ideologies*

Ravi, on the other hand, often used particular linguistic resources to critique local associations between gender and being a good language user / good language student. Like Jim, he too had attended an elite private high school and was a sophomore at the university. His commitment to studying Spanish, however, was more tenuous, as he was only considering a minor and had no plans to study abroad. Moreover, unlike Jim who positioned himself as too cool to engage in classroom discourse, Ravi devoted much of his energy to drawing his classmates together and making them laugh through his artful use of language.

Two examples of Ravi’s performance in class serve to illustrate how he accomplished this linguistically. The first episode occurred midway through the semester. The teacher had asked each small group to select the best form of government and to provide a rationale for its decision. In the excerpt that follows, Ravi, Prajesh, Rob and Fatima are trying to reach a consensus, but have yet to come up with an argument for why one form of government might be superior to the rest. They have strayed off task numerous times during the class period and their conversation is marked by failed attempts to sustain topics, long pauses, and frequent switches to English. It should also be noted that this discussion took place the Monday after spring break and many of the students seemed tired and reticent to participate. Moreover, several mentioned to me in

subsequent interviews that this topic was the least interesting of the semester because many students knew little about different forms of government. In the following exchange, Ravi tries to lighten the mood by injecting some humor into the discussion.

- 1 **Prajesh:** [looking at researcher] she's like bored
- 2 **Ravi:** this [the class? the topic?] is the bane of my existence
- 3 **Fatima:** [laugh]
- 4 **Ravi:** [sarcastic] *me gusta esta clase*  
(‘I like this class’)
- 5 **Rob:** [laugh]
- 6 **Ravi:** [sarcastic] *muy interesante las discusiones*  
(‘very interesting discussions’)
- 7 does she [the researcher] have to write down everything we say?
- 8 **Prajesh:** *qué es la diferencia entre una república y una democracia?*  
(‘what is the difference between a republic and a democracy?’)
- 9 **Ravi:** [to Fatima] speak into it [the microphone] and say I like beans
- 10 **Fatima:** *frijoles* [laughs]  
(‘beans’)
- 11 **Ravi:** *me gusta frijoles* [laughs]  
(‘I like beans’)

The excerpt begins after a long pause, with Prajesh commenting in English that even the researcher observing the class seems to be bored with the day's discussion topic. Ravi then follows suit, ratifying the choice of topic with a thematically coherent utterance. His statement, punctuated by hyperbole, is met with a laugh from Fatima and this is followed by two additional sarcastic comments, “*me gusta esta clase*” (‘I like this class’) and “*muy interesante las discusiones*” (‘very interesting discussions’) that are also received humorously. The switch in this instance from English to Spanish is notable for a number of reasons. While no situational factors (Blom & Gumperz, 1972) condition the change in code (e.g., the teacher was out of earshot, the group had established a pattern of English use throughout the period), the choice

of language seems to highlight the irony of the situation. Here, Ravi has made two sarcastic remarks about the futility of the class and its activities in Spanish. From an identity perspective, this switch in code highlights the fact that he is using Spanish, something that both good language users and good language students do. But, unlike the good language student, he is not using Spanish to realize an institutionally sanctioned activity. From this perspective, then, he seems to be positioning himself as a good language user or one who can express himself in Spanish, while simultaneously distancing himself from good language student identity.

In fact, a similar pattern emerges in lines 9-11, where Ravi convinces Fatima to say something absurd and off task into the researcher's microphone. In line 9, Ravi tells Fatima to say "I like beans" into the microphone, but he does not specify which language she is to use. Fatima completes his directive by stating the word, "frijoles" ('beans'), in Spanish. Ravi then restates her utterance, offering a Spanish rendering of the entire phrase he had asked her to say, "me gusta frijoles" ('I like beans'). While Ravi's utterance is inaccurate in terms of subject verb agreement and is missing the definite article (it should read "me gustan los frijoles"), nevertheless it too performs some notable identity functions. First, the exchange as a whole seems to mimic a kind of interactional exchange common to many foreign language classrooms: initiation, response, evaluation. Ravi utters a directive, Fatima fulfills the command, and Ravi comments on the accuracy of her utterance. Second, in speaking through the voice of a teacher and illuminating Fatima's failure to render accurately the requested sentence in Spanish, Ravi positions himself as an expert user of Spanish. Third, in playing out a common classroom interactional pattern, Ravi also signals his awareness of what good language students are supposed to do. He corrects Fatima when her utterance does not conform linguistically to his request. As such, he again highlights the disjuncture between being a good language user and a good language student, positioning himself as the former but not the latter. In this way, he manages to distance himself from the feminine overtones associated with being a good student, using humor and mimicry to align himself with the image of rambunctious boys.

The second episode occurred toward the end of the semester. The students had been asked to discuss the pros and cons of their experiences at the university. One group (Paula, Rob, Kevin, and Jim), devoted much of their discussion time to bemoaning the problem of "Teaching Assistants who don't speak English" and complaining repeatedly about the difficulty they had had understanding course material and earning good grades with, in their opinion, linguistically incompetent instructors. At the end of the class period, the teacher asked each student to comment on his/her best experience at the university. While all of the female students offered earnest evaluations of their time at the university, several

of the male students took this opportunity to make jokes. When it came time for Kevin to make his comments, he announced “*me gustan los asistentes quien hablan inglés*” (‘I like teaching assistants who speak English’), provoking a round of laughter from his classmates. Moments later, when Ravi was granted the floor, he made reference to the issue of teaching assistants again, but in a slightly different fashion:

- 1 **Ravi:** *me gusta mi clase de cálculo porque um* (2)  
(‘I like my calculus class because um’)
- 2 *el profesor no habla inglés* [class laughs]  
(‘my professor doesn’t speak English’)
- 3 *y es como un idioma extraño*  
(‘and it is like a strange language’)
- 4 **Teacher:** *la matemática o el profesor?* [laughing]  
(‘math or the professor?’)

What is interesting about Ravi’s contribution, is that it again both reflects and critiques dominant ideologies of gender and linguistic/scholastic identity circulating in the classroom and university at large. While there are some errors in his command of gender agreement (line 3 – *un idioma extraño*), nevertheless his performance shows a high degree a linguistic competence and an adherence to classroom norms – both markers of good language user/good language student identity. Moreover, his use of humor aligns him with the other male students who have used this particular classroom activity as an opportunity to make jokes. The content of his utterances, however, again seems to call into question the association between being a good language user and a good language student. While his linguistic precision and use of humor position him as a competent male user of Spanish, his ironic commentary positions him as a critic of the university and how teaching and learning are organized in classrooms. That is, it positions him as someone who recognizes that expertise in a particular academic subject and expertise in the norms of classroom behavior are not one in the same. As such, he once more seems to be teasing apart this relationship by exposing its weaknesses. Moreover, in using humor to accomplish this, he both recognizes and distances himself from the notion of “diligent girls” (interview, 4/00, teacher) who never stray from the task at hand. His comments fulfill the teacher’s request to name one’s best experience at the university, but he does so in a way that seems to subvert, to a certain extent, the “seriousness” of classroom activities. That is, he both does the activity and makes fun of it at the same time by saying something ludicrous. What emerges, then, is an alternate understanding of the possibilities for identity available in this classroom.

Ravi is able to construct for himself a position that allows him to assert both masculinity and good language user identity, while simultaneously distancing himself from good language student identity – a position he, and fellow participants, associate with what the teacher calls “that classic studious girl mold” (interview 4/00, teacher).

### Conclusions and Implications

As my analysis has illustrated, in the FL classroom under consideration a binary understanding of gender, coupled with a belief that females are, by nature, superior language learners and more docile pupils, made for an ideological landscape that conflated gender with linguistic/scholastic expertise. For some male learners, like Jim, this array of possible classroom identities proved fatal. Over the course of the semester, an overt lack of engagement in classroom practices, poor grades, and chronic tardiness, positioned this aspiring Spanish major as the object of much teacher concern and earned him a poor grade. For Ravi, however, this same ideological landscape proved somewhat empowering, as he was able to utilize a multilingual linguistic repertoire to reconfigure the identity options available to him in the classroom. Namely, he played with the distinction between good language users and good language students, positioning himself as the former but not the latter.

While one could read Ravi’s performance in less salutary terms, seeing his habitual use of English in classroom activities as evidence for a lack of competence in Spanish, I maintain that such a view fails to capture his agency and expertise as a language user. Unlike Jim, Ravi did not drop out of class mentally or physically; he remained an avid participator and a popular partner for group activities. Indeed, he talked openly in private interviews with the researcher about his history of getting in trouble at school, noting that in middle school he was also known for his antics and often sanctioned for them. Furthermore, he observed that male students run a particular risk in acting out in the classroom, as females are rarely chastised for similar breeches in conduct, “guys always get blamed [for making trouble], girls never get blamed for anything.” For him, being male seemed both constitutive of and constituted by a resistance to “good student” behavior, no matter what classroom he was in. While other males in the classroom, like Jim, saw being a good student as related to and perhaps inseparable from being a good language user, Ravi made numerous attempts to highlight and subvert this relationship. Much of his language use seemed to be directed at displaying his linguistic prowess in Spanish in ways that ran contrary to the expectations for good FL students. Consequently, I would argue that Ravi made use of all of the languages available to him in this multilingual environment in order to create for himself an identity that was outside the norm.

As Firth and Wagner (1997) have noted, both the second language acquisition literature and the literature on FL pedagogy often depict the learner as “a deficient communicator struggling to overcome underdeveloped L2 competence, striving to reach the ‘target’ competence of an idealized native speaker” (pp. 295-296). In an effort to redress this perspective, V. Cook (1991, 1992, 1999) has advanced the notion of “multicompetence” in order capture the richness of learners’ interactive and emergent multilingual repertoires. For V. Cook, a “monocompetent” individual has perfect (100%) knowledge of a particular language, while a “multicompetent” person is 100% in L1 plus whatever expertise he/she has gained in an additional language. Indeed, Belz (2002) has analyzed what she terms “multilingual learner utterances” in the FL classroom, arguing that they serve as evidence of sophisticated metalinguistic awareness. She criticizes the tendency in previous work to focus predominantly on the grammatical correctness or denotational content of learner utterances, while ignoring the other functions of language as a semiotic system (i.e., identity construction, play, etc.). Belz (2002) contends,

The use of multiple languages may depict the learner as a richly textured practitioner with a sophisticated ability to actualize linguistic and pragmatic meaning potentials often relegated to the marginal features of the linguistic system and which typically fall outside of the traditional purview of institutional correctness-oriented language instruction ( p. 77).

It is in this spirit that I understand Ravi’s use of both Spanish and English in the FL classroom as evidence of his emergent multicompetence as a language user. Indeed, as Hall, Cheng, and Carlson (2006) have argued, such a perspective highlights the dynamic and situated nature of language knowledge. To see Ravi’s code-switching as merely indicative of a lack of expertise in Spanish or a failure to conform to classroom norms is to miss the new possibilities for classroom identity that he creates through the use of a multilingual repertoire. Through the subtle manipulation of both Spanish and English, he refashions the identity landscape of his classroom, making room for males who are good language users, but not necessarily good language students.

In taking this perspective, it is my hope that we come away with a view of classroom identities as complex, socially-situated ideological and interactional productions. By focusing on the everyday acts of positioning that occur in foreign language classrooms, we can begin to see how linguistic expertise is both constitutive of and constituted by identity construction. While some learners may be able to marshal a wide range of linguistic resources to fashion desirable identities for themselves, others – for personal, institutional, and historical reasons – may not. The notion of some learners as emerging multicompetent language users allows

us to see moments of meaningful and innovative language use that often go unnoticed when utterances are judged merely in terms of their grammatical correctness or adherence to classroom communicative norms.

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