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# LINGUISTIC SOCIALIZATION IN THE REFUGEE ASSIMILATION PROCESS

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Transmitting Cultural Capital for Self-Sufficiency

Stephanie O'Connor

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**INTRODUCTION**

Tens of thousands of refugees from around the world arrive in the United States each year, bringing with them varying degrees of knowledge about the language and culture of the society they enter. The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), among other government agencies, is charged with ensuring that these refugees have access to the necessary resources to maintain a standard of living at or above the poverty line. The social services provided by the ORR and its affiliates aim to promote cultural assimilation and language proficiency as a means of achieving early self-sufficiency.

Often unfamiliar with American customs, refugees undergo an intensive re-socialization process upon arrival, as they learn strategies and practices for survival in the United States. Many aspects of the refugee socialization process are facilitated by the ORR and partnering organizations. Orientation programs based on guidelines set forth on a national level by the ORR and an international stage by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) often serve the dual-purpose of simultaneously promoting assimilation and language skills. Aimed at teaching baseline self-sufficiency, refugee orientation and assimilation programs are a medium for acquiring the cultural capital necessary for working class existence. Because of their underlying assumptions about refugees' capacity for social mobility and the diversity of the population they target, the methods of capital transmission employed to assimilate refugees contribute to social reproduction – the continuation of an established class hierarchy through social institutions, especially education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

Although many refugees arrive in the United States with the expectation of achieving social mobility, no such promise is explicitly made by the ORR. However, the office's stated mission implies that mobility is accessible to those willing to work for it. According to the ORR

website, the agency exists to “[provide] new populations with the opportunity to maximize their potential in the United States.” The mission statement goes on to explain that, “Our programs provide people in need with critical resources to assist them in becoming integrated members of American society” (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2014). The phrase “maximizing potential” suggests that refugees will be able to access employment opportunities that apply their full spectrum of skills and abilities. In reality, job placement is linked strongly to English proficiency, and many refugees with little English-language experience are forced to work in low-end jobs because of language barriers. The mission statement also identifies provision of “critical resources” as a way of promoting integration. These resources are a basic means of survival – access to housing, entry-level job placement, referral to welfare programs – reflecting the ORR’s emphasis on promoting assimilation through self-sufficiency.

#### **BACKGROUND – ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND OPERATIONS**

As part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the ORR works in collaboration with other state and federal agencies to achieve its stated goals. While it does operate some of its own refugee resettlement programs, the agency also allocates orientation and assimilation responsibilities through public/private partnerships. The ORR works with nine voluntary agencies, including the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (Office of Refugee Resettlement 2014). These agencies, in turn, allocate refugee populations to their affiliates – which in the case of USCCB would be organizations like Catholic Charities USA and its local branches. When using federal funding, these local organizations operate on instructions from the ORR and other government agencies regarding procedures and objectives for orientation and assimilation programs. Catholic Charities USA receives over 60 percent of its

funding from the federal government (Catholic Charities USA 2014), so its interests are strongly tied to upholding the standards put forth by the ORR.

Catholic Charities facilitates a variety of social service programs for underprivileged populations in the United States. Its refugee resettlement department focuses on core values established by the ORR – language proficiency, cultural assimilation, and early self-sufficiency. Catholic Charities, Archdiocese of San Antonio (CCAOSA) assists with initial housing, job placement, English language, and cultural orientation for refugees under the mandate of the Department of State's Reception and Placement Program (Catholic Charities Archdiocese of San Antonio 2014). Case management, as well as English as a Second Language (ESL), orientation, and assimilation classes are available through CCAOSA for refugees' first six months in the United States. Each year, the organization serves around 500 refugees in San Antonio and the surrounding area.

#### **DEFINING AND APPLYING LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION**

The United States receives many types of immigrants, among them refugees, who integrate in different ways based on choices they make and the types of actors involved in the assimilation process (Baquedano-Lopez and Mangual Figueroa 2012). Of the numerous assimilation pedagogies in existence, the specific methods and orientation content used by those charged with refugee integration reflect the unique needs and characteristics of this population. The salient feature of Reception and Placement classes offered at Catholic Charities is that they are taught in English, although interpreters are available in many cases. These programs focused on cultural assimilation are a form of linguistic socialization, or the process of teaching an individual norms and customs through the use of language (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986). Teaching orientation classes in English serves as both a means and an end, as it is a tool for

socialization and facilitates development of mainstream language skills. Language socialization is a lifelong process that is primarily targeted at children but also impacts “novices” (Schieffelin and Ochs 1986), which is a term that can be applied to adult refugees arriving in the United States with little knowledge of the local customs. More precisely, the type of social learning that occurs through orientation and assimilation classes could be classified as *second language* socialization, which takes place when a person seeks some level of proficiency in a language other than their mother tongue in order to engage in the activities of a group that speaks the second language (Duff 2012). Because most refugees are not native speakers of English, the characteristics of second language socialization more closely match their experience.

During one ESL class at Catholic Charities, students learned to recognize the name and value of different U.S. coins and bills. In addition to explaining basic information about American currency, the teacher also inserted side notes in the lesson that gave the students indications of cultural norms about how money is used in the United States. For example, when listing the denominations of bills, she stopped after the \$100 bill, commenting, “That’s really all you’ll see. No one uses cash.” Although this information is not found in the official curriculum, practitioners like this ESL teacher at CCAOSA use language class as an opportunity to instill in refugees norms of behavior. This particular comment may be interpreted as a reference to the fact that debit and credit card use is now standard in the upper- and middle-classes, or alternatively that using cash for a purchase over \$100 would be considered unusual behavior. In either case, it is this commentary accompanying language acquisition that classifies assimilation courses taught in English as a form of linguistic socialization.

Although the term “language socialization” is generally not used in ORR literature, the concept is openly promoted and practiced by the ORR and other refugee resettlement agencies.

The following is an excerpt from a handbook compiled by the UNHCR (later referred to as

Excerpt A):

In most countries post arrival language training programs emphasize language learning for social and communicative competence, rather than for achieving technical proficiency. Typically programs combine language training with learning about practical resettlement tasks and the laws, customs and practices of the receiving society. [Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2002]

As this quotation indicates, social learning is strongly linked to language learning in the context of refugee resettlement. Because adult refugees are assumed to arrive with minimal knowledge, and perhaps even misinformation, about U.S. language and culture, organizations tasked with facilitating resettlement combine the two processes into one.

#### **LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION FOR SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

The type of learning promoted by organizations like the UNHCR and the ORR through language socialization is distinct from social learning that takes place more organically for a child born in the United States, because it emphasizes self-sufficiency. While the linguistic socialization to one's home culture that begins in infancy generally aims for higher aspirations than maintaining baseline survival, social learning for adult refugees is designed to raise its subjects only to the poverty line. Two clear signs of this objective are found in Excerpt A. The first is the distinction between "communicative competence" and "technical proficiency." "Competence" is a term used to refer to understanding the use of language *in situ*, implying a focus on situational language skills rather than academic study of grammar and style (Baquedano-Lopez and Mangual Figueroa 2012). In order to thrive in the upper or middle class, a person must have the level of "technical proficiency" that the UNHCR handbook explicitly states is not a priority for resettlement agencies. While it may be possible to navigate the welfare system and maintain a blue-collar job with basic English skills, a more complete knowledge of

the language is necessary to access higher positions in the social hierarchy and employment in the service sector. By advising resettlement organizations to aim for baseline communication skills, the UNHCR sends a clear message that their obligation is to assimilate refugees to the working class.

The second sign in Excerpt A of self-sufficiency as the primary objective of resettlement agencies' language socialization programs is the reference to "practical resettlement tasks." These tasks may include procuring housing, employment, social services, and healthcare, as well as maneuvering within the welfare and medical systems. Consistent with the argument that orientation and assimilation programs are aimed at achieving baseline self-sufficiency, the handbook acknowledges that resettlement orientation concentrates on teaching imminently necessary tasks for refugee families. Equipping refugees with only the language skills necessary for survival and lawful existence signifies a focus on self-sufficiency rather than social mobility in their new communities.

Perhaps the most important of these resettlement tasks is gaining employment, which is a clear priority in orientation and assimilation practices. The UNHCR handbook states, "Resettled refugees who are able to communicate in the language of the receiving country have better prospects for achieving self-sufficiency. They have access to a wider range of employment opportunities and are better equipped to participate in further education and training" (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2002). This passage emphasizes language as an asset that increases employability, which is considered a core ingredient for self-sufficiency. Although the second sentence indicates the possibility of social mobility, the handbook's previous stance on the necessary level of language competence makes "further



education and training” seem like an unlikely option giving the general six-month timeline for refugee resettlement set by the U.S government.

The UNHCR’s emphasis on language socialization for self-sufficiency through early employment is seen on even the most localized levels of the organizational resettlement hierarchy. CCAOSA boasts that 98 percent of refugees it serves gain employment within six months of arriving in the United States (Catholic Charities Archdiocese of San Antonio 2014). One orientation class based on curriculum objectives put forth by the Center for Applied Linguistics taught refugees about entering the workforce in their new community. In terms of gaining employment, the class covered general norms, such as being on time for an interview, wearing professional attire, and shaking hands firmly with the employer. Cognizant that her students would likely be applying for low-level jobs, the teacher made a point of mentioning that they needed to wear business clothing to an interview, “even if you are applying at McDonald’s.” With this comment, the teacher began to familiarize her students with the hierarchy that exists within low-wage employment. By emphasizing that even entry-level jobs at the bottom of that hierarchy could only be accessed by following customs of dress, she taught her students in a manner indicating that they would be applying for that type of job. Given the limited timeframe allocated to refugee orientation, the fact that an entire class was dedicated to discussing employment shows that it is a priority in assimilation programs.

#### **TRANSMITTING CULTURAL CAPITAL THROUGH LANGUAGE SOCIALIZATION**

While the link to self-sufficiency through employment is openly acknowledged by resettlement agencies, linguistic socialization also facilitates acquisition of a less easily-recognized social asset – cultural capital. Developed by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the concept of cultural capital seeks to explain class standing and social mobility as a function of the

accumulation of cultural currency. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as preferences, behaviors, values, attitudes, and other activities of the mind and body that are linked to social class. In Bourdieu's model, there are three types of capital – economic, cultural and social. Cultural capital can be exchanged for other types of capital, including economic, which means that acquiring cultural capital can allow a person to reach higher positions in society at a later point in time (Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital* 1986). Levels of cultural capital are reflected in preferences and participation in cultural activities (Yaish and Katz-Gerro 2012), indicating that it affects both a person's practices and his or her concept of the value and meaning of those practices. While adult refugees may have possessed large amount of cultural capital in their home countries, these assets do not necessarily translate in the U.S. And those who had little cultural capital to begin with are at an even more severe disadvantage. The situation is further complicated since "refugee" is not merely a label – it is an experience. A refugee's cultural capital may be diminished, augmented, or altered by living in a refugee camp or enduring traumatizing experiences (Weine, Ware and Klebic 2004).

Cultural capital can be embodied, objectified, or institutionalized. Embodied cultural capital, which is perhaps the most deeply entrenched, encompasses what Bourdieu terms "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital* 1986). A relevant example in the refugee context is language – a higher level of language proficiency is a more valuable form of cultural capital, and certain accents and vocabularies are also regarded more highly. Objectified cultural capital is any item with cultural meaning that adds value in society, such as a piece of art or a scientific instrument. Using objectified capital involves not only possessing the item, but also understanding its cultural meaning and knowing how to appreciate and employ it properly (Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital* 1986). At Catholic Charities, one way

that objectified cultural capital is transmitted is through the HEB Healthy Living class, a family literacy program focused on nutrition that is funded by HEB. Parents in the class are given children's books, which are a form of cultural capital that promotes early reading skills and may convey cultural norms and values simultaneously. It is not simply possession of these books that transfers cultural capital to refugee parents; the process of learning how to consume these goods is equally vital. Through the class, parents are supposed to learn the importance of spending time with their children, reading with them, teaching them about books – all of which are activities that reflect cultural values and parenting norms. The third type of cultural capital is institutionalized, which generally refers to educational qualifications (Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital* 1986). This form of capital is least significant in the context of Catholic Charities, since the organization does not confer diplomas or similar certifications.

While possessing cultural capital would undoubtedly facilitate cultural assimilation and social mobility for refugees, several of its intrinsic characteristics make transmission a complex task. The first is that under normal circumstances, cultural capital is transmitted through the socialization process, which is concentrated in the period from infancy through young adulthood (Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital* 1986). Twenty years is a much more significant period than the six months generally allotted for refugee resettlement programs, so resettlement agencies may only be capable of beginning the process within their limited timeframe. Embodied capital is particularly viscous, as it involves internalization of values and preferences. Cultural capital cannot be transmitted instantaneously (Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital* 1986), which means that even assimilation classes that contain relevant information are only a small step in a long-term socialization process.

While significant transmission of cultural capital can take place through language socialization facilitated by resettlement organizations, conversion of capital places more agency in the hands of the subject because they are more likely to pursue it intentionally. According to psychiatrists Stevan Weine, Norma Ware, and Alma Klebic, “Converting cultural capital refers to processes of adapting and applying meanings, knowledge, customs, achievements, and outlooks of teen refugees and their families so as to enhance their cultural vitality and social incorporation” (Weine, Ware and Klebic 2004). Adult refugees arrive possessing at least some level of cultural capital that can be adapted for local viability. Receiving transmitted cultural capital is often an unconscious and unintentional activity (Bourdieu, *The Forms of Capital* 1986), but the onus is primarily on the individual to convert existing capital into a more relevant form. However, orientation and assimilation programs play a role in facilitating recognition of the need for conversion. In an orientation class about employment at Catholic Charities, refugees were taught that eye contact is important in American society. One client interrupted to tell the teacher (via the interpreter) that in his culture, men and women did not look each other in the eye. He said that men were “shy” (perhaps more accurately translated as “unwilling”) to look women in the eye. The teacher replied firmly, “But here, you have to.” Another client made a similar comment later to point out cultural differences regarding eye contact. In this case, the students were clearly identifying a difference between behaviors that were culturally appropriate in their country of origin and their new communities. By maintaining that eye contact is an important part of body language in the United States, the teacher facilitated the conversion of existing cultural capital regarding eye contact. This example highlights the nature of resettlement programs as a venue for second language socialization, which often results in contradictory understandings of social acceptability (Duff 2012). Because adult refugees have already been

socialized in a context outside the United States, conversion of cultural capital and re-socialization are necessary adaptations requiring them to evaluate their existing canon of norms and values.

### **CULTURAL CAPITAL FOR THE WORKING CLASS**

Although cultural capital is transmitted throughout the language socialization process refugees undergo upon arrival, the type of capital acquired through resettlement programs is not sufficient for higher positions in society. The HEB Healthy Living class operated in partnership with Catholic Charities bears clear signs of its connection to the sponsoring supermarket, which is geared toward a lower income bracket than others like its sister store, Central Market. During the classes, teachers contribute to a preference for HEB goods by making explicit references to the store's products. In a session on hydration and choosing healthy beverages, a teacher suggested that parents buy mini water bottles "available at HEB" for their children. While students were learning about nutrition labeling on packaged foods, a teacher held up a box of Ritz crackers and a similar HEB-brand product. She explained that the HEB crackers were the healthier choice because the box was marked as "reduced fat." Teachers continually used language indicating that their students should be shopping at HEB, a clear reminder that HEB sponsors the program financially. Instead of saying "when you go shopping..." or "you can find this at the grocery store..." they specified "when you go to HEB..." or "you can find this at HEB..." This subtle distinction allowed the class to serve a third purpose in addition to the two stated objectives of promoting family literacy and nutrition – building a clientele for HEB among the refugee community.

In addition to actively encouraging refugees to shop at HEB, the HEB Healthy Living class transmits working-class cultural capital by creating a conception of health that is tailored to

a lower income level. Notably absent in discussions were references to environmentally-friendly farming practices that produce more “natural” foods, such as organically-grown produce and free-range dairy products. While these products are considered by some to be healthier than their mainstream counterparts, they are also generally more expensive. Although several sessions included a segment on the importance of eating fruits and vegetables, no mention was made of organic options, indicating that preference for this pricier alternative was not considered relevant cultural capital for refugees. Socialization processes shaped by the target populations’ limited income is indicative of Catholic Charities’ awareness of economic constraints on their clients preferences. These financial limitations can minimize the potency of cultural capital by hindering participation in activities and practices associated with higher classes (Yaish and Katz-Gerro 2012). Beyond the price distinction and health considerations, purchasing organic and free-range products demonstrates that the consumer is concerned about environmental impact to some degree, which is a value associated with the upper social strata more so than the lower. The fact that orientation programs do not actively seek to impart the cultural capital associated with higher levels of the socioeconomic hierarchy indicates that they are focused on baseline self-sufficiency, not enabling social mobility. The lack of orientation to activities and preferences employed by the upper classes supports the hypothesis that assimilation programs in their current form facilitate social reproduction.

#### **EDUCATION AND CULTURAL CAPITAL**

A model of transmitting cultural capital tailored to the working class is a significant impediment to social mobility because organizations like Catholic Charities fill the vital role of educators for adult refugees, who do not enter the mainstream education system upon arrival. The structure of relations between social classes is maintained in part by the education system,

which Bourdieu saw as a mechanism for social reproduction operating under the guise of an institution that promotes equality. Educational institutions have the power to reinforce the existing class structure by controlling the quality and quantity of cultural capital imparted to members of each social class (Bourdieu, Chapter 18: Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction 2006). In the context of refugee resettlement, organizations like Catholic Charities serve as the education system responsible for orienting and re-socializing their clients for self-sufficiency in the United States. By focusing on transmitting cultural capital relevant to life in the working class, CCAOSA controls the type of capital refugees acquire in such a way that indicates social mobility is not expected.

The link between cultural capital and educational attainment, an important contributor to social mobility, has been confirmed by existing scholarship (DiMaggio 1982, Scherger and Savage 2010). Sociologist Paul DiMaggio tested the relationship between possession of cultural capital and education and found that students with more cultural capital did have higher grades than their counterparts who were less engaged in high culture activities (1982). This correlation indicates that a present lack of cultural capital may lead to decreased chances of social mobility, as educational success is a means of rising in the class hierarchy.

DiMaggio's analysis also revealed a strong correlation between engagement in different types of prestigious art forms (art, literature or music), indicating that those who participate in one form were more likely to either participate or be interested in all three (1982). This points to a comprehensive model of transmitting cultural capital, where strong division exists between those with large amount of cultural capital and those with very little. The relationship found between possession of cultural capital and school success indicates that refugees, whose cultural capital from their country of origin may be nearly useless in the United States, are at a severe

disadvantage in the education system, which is perceived as a primary tool for social mobility. The existence of a comprehensive transmission model would create even more barriers to social mobility because it widens the gap between social classes. Because adult refugees have missed the opportunity to acquire relevant cultural capital in the family environment by the time they arrive in the United States, orientation and assimilation organizations fill both the role of “parents” and an education system equipping them with the behaviors, preferences, and values necessary for success. This is the case for second language socialization in general, which tends to take place in a school environment, compared to primary language socialization that occurs in the home (Duff 2012).

#### **ESTABLISHING LEGITIMACY AND INFLUENCING MOBILITY**

The influence wielded by educational institutions, in this case organizations like Catholic Charities, is made all the more potent since both education and cultural activities are presented as widely accessible regardless of class standing. While participation in cultural activities such as attending the theatre or reading literature is officially open to the public at large, it “implicitly [requires] of those on whom it bears that they possess the conditions necessary to its full productivity” (Bourdieu, Chapter 18: Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction 2006). The perceived egalitarianism upheld by these organizations reinforces the notion that clients bear the burden of failure to achieve social mobility. (Bourdieu, Chapter 18: Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction 2006). In this way, the education system’s claim to nondiscrimination legitimizes inequality. Because everyone is supposedly given the same chance, an individual’s failure to break the cycle of social reproduction cannot be blamed on educational structures in place (Passeron 1986). Educational institutions engage in “standardization, the imposition of ready-made opinions and the claim to a monopoly of cultural legitimacy” (Passeron 1986),



giving students a largely single-perspective view of subjects being taught. By presenting a pre-packaged concept of America culture that is tailored to life in the working class, Catholic Charities meets these three characteristics attributed to the general education system.

Comparing resettlement agencies to the educational system is an important consideration in light of the fact that refugees undergo second language socialization specifically. Because it generally occurs in the school setting, the association between second-language learners and their instructors is more often a teacher/student relationship than parent/child. The nature of this relationship and its connection to the education environment both lend legitimacy to the process and confer a certain authority on the teacher (Duff 2012), providing further evidence that the norms, values, and practices taught in the process of linguistic socialization gain validity because of the manner in which they are transmitted.

The authority that organizations that take on an educational role in the resettlement process gives them control over the type and level of cultural capital transmitted during re-socialization. The type of capital acquired through programs like HEB Healthy Living is directed at the working class, which is cause for concern because of the link between cultural capital and social mobility. Activities such as visiting the library, playing sports, and reading outside of class improve a person's probability of upward mobility. Holding cultural capital increases a person's marketability by giving them points of connection with potential employers and helping them make a positive impression during interviews. Cultural capital is linked to higher confidence levels, which also contributes to positive impressions and drives people to apply for higher-status jobs. In this way, there is a direct link between cultural capital and social reproduction (Scherger and Savage 2010). This link indicates that equipping refugees with only the cultural capital

necessary for working class existence is a detriment to their chance of social mobility in the United States.

## CONCLUSION

Both refugees and those charged with their successful integration into American society face significant barriers to a model of assimilation that goes beyond self-sufficiency. The challenges encountered by those engaging in social and linguistic learning in a second-language environment is captured by Patricia Duff in the following description:

...for many learners it is a frustrating, complicated, and often unexpectedly protracted process that they have inadequate resources to assist them with: insufficient numbers of willing and competent experts to socialize and apprentice them effectively into the communities or networks of practice they seek membership and competence in; insufficient time to devote to additional linguistic and cultural challenges on top of other academic, vocational, or personal ones; and multiple, sometimes competing, roles and identities in society that preclude a greater investment in the process or greater parsimony across the activities and languages of their complex lives. [Duff 2012]

As reflected in Duff's statement, failure to meet the ORR's stated goal of maximizing potential may in part be due to the fact that refugees are primarily taught by overburdened social workers, as well as volunteers and other non-specialists who may be unaware of assimilation programs' long-term implications for social mobility. Learners themselves are limited by their own capacity to devote time and energy to understanding a more nuanced conception of the diversity of cultural norms and values within the United States, especially given the focus on early job placement. Refugees' previous socialization in their country of origin, and perhaps even in refugee camps, create further obstacles for successful second language socialization.

Because of these and other limitations, resettlement agencies fail to promote social mobility among refugee populations. By equipping refugees with only the cultural capital necessary for life in the working class, Catholic Charities operates on the assumption that its

responsibility is not to enable social mobility, but rather to promote baseline self-sufficiency. Orientation and assimilation classes facilitate social reproduction among refugees, because language socialization aimed at achieving baseline self-sufficiency results in controlled transmission of cultural capital. This model of operations is seen on even the highest organizational levels of refugee resettlement, as the UNHCR handbook serves to confirm that orientation programs engage in practices that prepare clients for life in the working class. This assumes a paradigm of social reproduction, rather than presenting a broader perspective on norms, practices and values in the United States that allows for social mobility.

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