Multilingual
San Diego

Portraits of Language Loss
and Revitalization

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Chapter 7: Spanish and English Masses at Christ the King Catholic Church in San Diego

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Christ the King is a bilingual church located near downtown San Diego, in a neighborhood where 89 percent of its inhabitants speak Spanish as their primary language. Established with a Black congregation in 1932, now the Church's Spanish ministry helps maintain Spanish bilingualism, provides an outlet where Mexican immigrants
who are new to the U.S. can affirm their Mexican Catholic identity, and serves as an advocate for immigrant rights. Interviews with the priests, both of whom were African American, reveal that many of the parishioners are new immigrants from Mexico and the CTK is one of their first and primary social supports in the U.S. The majority of Spanish speakers attend masses that are held in Spanish, and Spanish speaking parishioners spend a good deal of their time involved in church activities; overall they are passionate about faith. Observations of the Spanish and English services indicate that while Christ the King's institutional policies ultimately are overwhelmingly positive—there seems to be one thing missing, i.e., more interaction between the Spanish and English speaking communities.

There is a statue of Jesus Christ outside Christ the King Catholic Church in San Diego (hereafter referred to as CTK). The statue's hands are missing, and the inscription below it reads: "I have no hands but yours." At the church's founding, the statue did have hands, but someone cut them off, leaving the parish to decide how to respond. The choice to add the inscription rather than to repair the figure shows the resilience and tenacity of the worshippers that attend CTK. Instead of dwelling on the vandalism and spending the church's money to fix the defect, CTK's parish decided to turn an attack on the church into an affirmation of this religious community's strength.

CTK occupies a unique position among churches whose congregations are largely made up of Spanish speakers because it began as a Black Church in San Diego in 1932, and because Deacon Harry and Pastor Jennings are African Americans who speak Spanish. With the passage of time it has become a place where Catholics of all ethnicities feel welcome to worship, but Spanish-speaking Catholics are central to the parish. The Modern Language Association's language data regarding the particular zip code in which CTK is located (92102) indicates that 88.6% of residents in this area speak Spanish at home, although most of them are bilingual (www.mla.org). Masses at CTK are in English during the work week, but on Saturday mornings in Spanish. Additionally, on Sundays, two English and two Spanish masses are offered. The church also accommodates the needs of Spanish monolinguals in a number of additional ways, including the printing of the weekly bulletin and other church materials in Spanish, the availability of Spanish-speaking clergy, and by providing religious instruction in Spanish. Because, as Pastor Jennings explained, most of those who attend the Spanish church services are Mexican immigrants, CTK includes the cultural traditions of its Mexican parishioners in its practices, for example, by celebrating the Quinceañera (a mass in honor of a girl's fifteenth birthday) and by incorporating Mariachi music in the Spanish services.

CTK's location in a border city that receives a large influx of Spanish speakers from Mexico on a daily basis has influenced the policies and perspectives of the church's leaders positively; not all religious institutions react in the same way to similar circumstances. CTK embraces linguistic tolerance as an example of its religious mission to serve its people but, as a non Christian and a non Spanish speaker, I wondered whether its efforts were facilitating
or retarding the assimilation of Spanish speaking Catholics into the larger English speaking society.

My conclusions are based on observations of both the English and Spanish language masses at CT, and on reading the church bulletins and other materials. I also spoke with a number of churchgoers as well as with church leaders about their perceptions of the vitality of Spanish in the community and the possible impact of the parish’s language policies and practices, especially on the younger generations who are losing Spanish so rapidly. I found that the success of CTK’s bilingual policies demonstrates what can be achieved when church leaders make a concerted effort to include Spanish speakers in the Catholic community. Due in large part to the cultural sensitivity of the parish clergy and staff, attending church services in Spanish enhances pride in the Spanish language for many Spanish-speaking members of CTK and fosters the continued use of Spanish language among this group. The support that CTK’s Spanish-speaking members receive from the church’s leadership, as well as the recent-immigrant status of many of CTK’s Spanish-speaking members, distinguish CTK from other historically Spanish-English bilingual churches that have been studied in the past. As a result, I argue that CTK’s institutional policy and demographics will ultimately have positive results for the maintenance of Spanish and the solidarity of the church’s Spanish-speaking community, at least among its first generation members. However, the church’s policies have resulted in some potential problems as well, the most noticeable being the development of two separate parishes at CTK, one English speaking and one Spanish speaking.

Institutional Support for Spanish in Church Settings

CTK occupies a unique position among churches whose congregations are made up largely of Spanish speakers. A number of studies have been conducted regarding the importance of the use of Spanish in church for the maintenance of Spanish by immigrant groups, but most settings differ from CTK in critical ways. Both Lucila Ek and Patricia Baquedano-López have found that church policies regarding the use of Spanish in a religious context play an important role in Spanish-language maintenance, with particular relevance for adolescent church members. Ek studied a Pentecostal church in Los Angeles whose native Central American and Mexican pastors and elders stress the Spanish language in order to instill Pentecostal values in the church’s youth, which they view as in conflict with those of the English speaking world that surrounds them. As Ek explains, “Linguistic interactions at their Sunday school and services during the week socialize the adolescents to a Christian Pentecostal identity that seeks to position them on el camino (the path) and away from el mundo (the world) or the larger society” (Ek 2005: 77). The Pentecostal church’s efforts to protect its members from what they consider the negative aspects of American culture are not always well received; some teens rebel against the church’s doctrine because they cannot help but be influenced by the music, dance, and activities of the non Pentecostal world. It is not clear if those rebels end up rejecting Spanish as well, but the youth who continue to participate in the weekly religious instruction classes receive lots of practice in speaking and reading Spanish.
CTK differs from the bilingual church model presented in Ek's study because the leadership of CTK is not all Hispanic and, more importantly, because CTK engages actively with the community around it, encouraging its members to practice their religious principles within the larger community, not in isolation from it. Unlike the Pentecostal church's repeated distinction between a life lived on *el camino* and one lived in *el mundo* (Ek 2005: 81), which includes forbidding the youth to attend school dances, participate in school plays, or join in community unity parades, CTK's leadership emphasizes remembering *el camino* while living in *el mundo*. The Pentecostal church discussed by Ek plays an important role in Spanish language maintenance by creating a community of Pentecostal religious speakers with strong literacy skills in Spanish, but the church leadership's insistence on isolation from the broader society makes it difficult for the youngest church members to navigate their lives outside of the church setting. In contrast, Pastor Jennings takes an active role in American/Southern Californian society and he encourages all church members to do the same, for instance, by inviting his congregation to consider signing various petitions after mass. Isolation from the broader San Diego community is never suggested, and lessons during the sermons at CTK focus on living a religious life after the mass is over, including participation in efforts on behalf of the community. The activism of church leaders on behalf of the immigrants that constitute a large part of the parish creates a strong religious community at CTK, one that makes Spanish speakers feel welcome, and encouraged to participate.

Patricia Baquedano-López's study of a Catholic parish in Los Angeles allows for a closer comparison to CTK because both churches are Catholic, and both have Spanish speaking and English speaking parishioners, but the comparison also serves to highlight contrasts with CTK. In the church that Baquedano-López studied, the religious and lay leadership is composed of Anglo English speaking monolinguals, some of whom express hostility toward religious education in Spanish. Ultimately, they imposed rules against the use of Spanish in religious classes. This policy reflects a misunderstanding of bilingualism and mirrors the hostility of many Californians towards languages other than English, as evidenced in the arguments in favor of the legislation that declared English the only official language of California in 1986, and against bilingual education in 1998 (Crawford 2002). Similarly, language can be the source of a rift between church leaders and Spanish-speaking congregations. In the Los Angeles Catholic parish studied by Baquedano-López, the Spanish language is stigmatized, and Spanish-speaking teachers and students are forced to circumvent official demands that religious education be conducted in English only. In sharp contrast, CTK's leadership is very sensitive to Mexican culture and the need for Spanish. CTK welcomes the Spanish-speaking community by making its language an integral part of the church's activities, including religious instruction and masses.

**Language at CTK's Masses**

Observations of masses and interviews with Pastor Jennings confirm that, with few exceptions, the majority of CTK's Spanish speaking parishioners attend the masses that are held in Spanish. The mass is conducted entirely in Spanish by the pastor, and the
congregation responds in Spanish whenever it is their turn to speak. At the start of the service, the pastor asks the parishioners to greet one another, and everyone rises to do so in Spanish; the same thing occurs in English at the beginning of the English mass. I attended two Spanish masses and barely heard a word of English spoken during them; those few individuals who did speak English were Anglo Americans who had overslept and missed the morning service.

The Pastor's Spanish during the service revealed very little English influence, which helps ensure the Spanish speaking parishioners' comfort with CTK's church services. Since many members are recent immigrants, a more Americanized form of Spanish may have left them feeling excluded by cultural references or slang they were not yet familiar with. Although the Pastor used a few English words during the service (most notably "Super Bowl"), they were a rarity and not representative of his overall use of Spanish. I understand very little of the language, but by speaking to members of the Spanish-speaking congregation, I was able to ascertain that a good deal of the church's congregation feel that the mass is conducted in an authentically Mexican way and that the Pastor's command of the Spanish language is impeccable. The availability of a Mass that does not compromise the Spanish language may be a partial explanation for the strength of Spanish in this community, and may bode well for the retention of Spanish by the parish's youth, since most of them accompany their parents to church every Sunday.

In contrast to the widespread loss of Spanish in the second and third generations in San Diego documented by Portes and Rumbaut (2002), intergenerational differences in language usage were barely noticeable at CTK. The children I observed at the Spanish service spoke in Spanish both to one another and to their parents, suggesting that language attrition is not a significant issue within the churchgoing community at CTK. Because many of the parents attending services at CTK are new immigrants with limited education and literacy skills, their reliance on Spanish as a medium of oral communication is understandable. CTK's attempts to include Spanish speakers in the Church's activities are clearly working. More Spanish speakers than English speakers attend mass at CTK (more than double the number at morning mass in English), and many are involved in the ministries and religious education.

Both the English and Spanish services follow the exact same format, as do masses all over the world. Both are conducted entirely in the language advertised; neither is bilingual. When I attended the Sunday morning English mass, I observed only three Spanish speakers in the time leading up to the service, during mass, and after it. They were one mother with a child who asked for something in Spanish (the mother replied in Spanish), and one woman who spoke in fluent English but later told me that Spanish is her first language and that she is an immigrant from Mexico. When I approached Marina (pseudonym), the woman who was with her child, she explained that she often attended the English mass because she worked in the afternoons so that she had to attend mass in the morning. In broken English, Marina told me that most of her friends attend the Spanish services and that every time she has been able to attend them she has enjoyed herself more than she does at the English services. Practical reasons forced her to attend mass in English, but she experienced greater feelings of spiritual renewal when the mass was in her native tongue.
The other woman, Alejandra (a pseudonym) said she chose to attend the English service even though Spanish is her native language because, "We're in America now, we need to do things in English." Alejandra was accompanied by a black man named David (pseudonym), who agreed with her assessment of the situation. He expressed concern for the ability of Mexican immigrants to learn English quickly, explaining that "the more people do in the language they want to learn, the better they'll know that language." David and Alejandra made clear that they were not as concerned with the maintenance of Spanish by Mexican immigrants as with their attainment of English language skills, which they believe requires practice in all settings. But they were the only individuals interviewed who felt so strongly about learning English that they implied the exclusion of Spanish in religious services. However, it was unclear whether Alejandra chose to attend the English service because of her aptitude at speaking English, or if her decision had more to do with her desire to assimilate into American society and/or her friendship with David, a non-Spanish speaker.

It is worth noting that the African American presence at CTK is now very small; out of the nearly one hundred worshippers at one English mass, only about eight were Black. The gospel choir is predominantly Black and the morning English service is conducted in "gospel" style, but I heard no African American Vernacular English (AAVE) spoken during that mass by parishioners or priest. During the other English mass, the only instance of AAVE was a young girl's comment to her friend, "You so tall now," using the copula deletion that is part of the grammar of AAVE (Zentella 1997: 46). Standard English predominates in the English masses, just as standard Spanish is the norm in the Spanish masses.

**Religious Ritual and Language Maintenance**

The role of Spanish in religious services at CTK deserves further discussion because Spanish is regarded as a medium of communication, not as a language that holds any sacred value of its own. This differs from the few languages other than English in the United States that have been maintained successfully across multiple generations because they are central to the practice of the religion of those who speak it. For instance, Alvin Schiff points out that Hebrew is the language of the Torah, and thus is the "medium of prayer" (Schiff: 224) for all Orthodox Jews, and for some Reform and Conservative rituals. Moreover, Hebrew's status as the language of the Jewish state, Israel, keeps it alive beyond the religious setting, even when most American Jews rarely, if ever, use Hebrew for their daily communication (see chapter by Edwards, this volume). The use of Hebrew by members of Jewish communities is in stark contrast to the role of Spanish for most of CTK's parishioners, who depend on Spanish in both their secular and religious lives, although Spanish is not the official language of Roman Catholicism.

Another community in the United States that has had success with multi-generational maintenance because of the language's relationship to religion is the Greek Orthodox community. According to Chrysie Constantakos and John Spiridakis, the strong presence of Greek religious institutions and a reliance on Greek language for devotional purposes aided...
the maintenance of Greek in many communities in the United States (Constantakos and Spiridakis 2002: 153). Greek was the official medium of prayer for many years, and this relationship to the primary religion of most Greeks gave Greek a higher status, sustaining intergenerational acquisition. Nevertheless, Greek language attrition has occurred over the years, after the Orthodox Church dropped its insistence on Greek-only rituals. As a result, Constantakos and Spiridakis found that the “younger generations favor preservation of religion and aspects of culture without necessarily using the Greek language to achieve it” (2002: 163). And when they do speak Greek, it is interspersed with English words and/or influenced by English grammar. In Lukia Koliussi’s opinion, the Greek Orthodox church’s adaptation to the linguistic needs of all its members led to the use of what Koliussi terms “Greeklish” by the church and its members (2004: 105–106). Still, “Greeklish” is not a sign of shift to English, but of the new Greek identity forming in the United States which blends English and Greek traditions, cultures, and languages.

Spanish in the context of Catholicism in San Diego has a very different role, and for this reason there is the possibility that it may survive in the second generation of CTK’s families. Although the Spanish language is not considered to have a higher status than other languages because it is used for prayer, as is the case with Hebrew and Greek, the community values Spanish, and not Spanglish, because it is the medium of communication in all aspects of daily life for most first generation Mexican Roman Catholics. As such, Spanish will only lose its importance when second generation Mexican Americans predominate at CTK, as is already the case in most communities in San Diego and the United States, i.e., U.S.-born Mexicans outnumber those born in Mexico (American Fact Finder 2004). But even first generation immigrants shift to English with the passage of time. Based on a large study in Chicago, Potowski found that “the longer respondents had been living in the U.S., the less Spanish they used” (2004: 14). This does not ring true for the Spanish-speaking community at CTK at this point, for several reasons. First, CTK is located in a largely Hispanic neighborhood where virtually everybody is able to speak at least some Spanish; and second, the constant inflow of new migrants from Mexico keeps Mexican culture, including the Spanish language, alive and well in the community. Thus, Potowski’s caveat that a continuous flow of immigrants from the home country aids in language maintenance and slows attrition (Potowski 2004: 15) is more relevant to CTK. As Pastor Jennings observed, many of his parishioners are new immigrants from Mexico and CTK provides them with some of their first social activities in the United States.

Further confirmation of the factors that may delay language shift for CTK’s parishioners appears in Margarita Hidalgo’s study of another Mexican American population in the San Diego area, Chula Vista, in the late 1980s, which proved that proximity to the Mexican border helps in language retention. Hidalgo also underscores the importance of the “size of the Mexican American community, its relative linguistic homogeneity, continued immigration from Mexico, relative social isolation, and intergenerational language maintenance” (1993: 49). All of these factors are present in the CTK community, suggesting that Spanish language retention is likely. But other factors related to the educational background of the parishioners may militate against this positive outcome.
Spanish Literacy and Language Maintenance

Pastor Jennings noted that a large number of his congregation's Spanish speakers cannot read because their poverty in Mexico kept them from receiving even an elementary education. They have learned the prayers spoken out loud in church by heart, but they ask fellow church members to read the weekly bulletin to them. My own observations corroborate that while Spanish speaking church members all actively sing the songs led by the choir, many remain quiet or pretend to mouth the words when the congregation is supposed to read from the biblical text. There are abundant references to text during the mass, especially during the sermons, which the priest interprets for the congregation. In her discussion of the relationship between literacy and sermons, Beverly Moss explains that “because the sermon is an orally performed event, one is inclined to think of it only as an oral text, but the sermons are generally rooted in biblical scriptures—a modern-day written text” (2004: 157). The priest who is delivering the sermon expands on the teachings of the bible aloud, creating an oral discourse that links scripture to daily life and the world outside of the church as well. But worshippers at CTK are not required or trained to read the Bible and prayers, the way they are in the Pentecostal community that Ek studied. In that church, where reading and writing are essential to the weekly classes and religious practice at home, Ek found that “literacy is a primary tool for socializing the youth to a Christian Pentecostal identity and to the importance of religious texts, the Bible above all” (2005: 81). It appears that such literacy is not necessary for the socialization of CTK's community, but it may well hamper the maintenance and intergenerational transmission of Spanish.

CTK promotes education in its messages to the faithful, but it does not have its own school and does not provide classes for its members to become more literate in either Spanish or English. Deacon Harry explains that the church is too busy with the programs and ministries already in existence, and funds are simply lacking to start any new programs. Instead, the church leadership has made strides in responding to the illiteracy of some church members by announcing important information from the weekly bulletins during services and by speaking to members individually as often as possible. Unfortunately, reliable research on language maintenance emphasizes the significance of literacy, i.e., those who are literate in a language are more likely and able to pass on their language to their children and grandchildren. Illiterates can pass on oral skills, but family members who are literate sustain their first language across generations more effectively/successfully than illiterates. There is little opportunity for literacy support in Spanish or English during CTK masses. CTK does offer weekly catechism classes in preparation for communion and confirmation, which children attend from about the ages of six to fifteen, but the limited experiences with reading and writing in the classes are probably not enough to establish solid literacy skills.

Despite the obstacles resulting from illiteracy, Pastor Jennings explains that Spanish-speaking parishioners spend a good deal of their time involved in church activities, and are fervent believers. “They are some of the most spiritual people I know,” he says. In Pastor Jennings' estimation, both the Spanish speaking and English speaking communities at CTK are devoted to Catholicism and willing to participate in church events, but Spanish
speakers are more passionate about their faith. Pastor Jennings attributes this difference to the difficulties the Mexican worshippers experience during migration and the challenges they continue to face as immigrants in the United States. One of those challenges is their integration into the larger English speaking world, which some observers might insist should require immersion in English-only religious services. But the spiritual repercussions of this approach are severe, given the lack of renewal and direction that non English speakers suffer in English-only religious services and classes. CTK chooses to reach out to its worshippers in the language they can understand.

**Spanish and English Speaking Congregations**

Divisions between the English speaking and Spanish speaking congregations are undeniable, if only because they attend separate masses. Although CTK does offer a number of activities that bring the two congregations together, I could not help but notice the lack of interaction between the parishioners leaving the English mass and those entering the Spanish mass, and wondered if CTK's language policies make it more difficult for church leaders to create a single cohesive Catholic community. Other than a few quick "Hellos" in passing, no individuals from either group appeared to make an effort to communicate with the others. Of course, even when parishioners speak the same language they do not necessarily communicate with each other in any but perfunctory ways, and at CTK language barriers may account for a good deal of the social distance between the two groups. But upon closer observation I realized they differ in other ways that may be more distancing than language.

A majority of those who attend the English service are white and middle- to upper-middle class, as evidenced by the moderately expensive cars in the parking lot (a good number of Chevrolets, Fords, Toyotas, and Hondas in good condition) and the high priced purses worn by a number of the women (Dooney and Burke, Coach). Fewer cars graced the parking lot of CTK during the Spanish language services, and their well worn condition, as well as the simple clothing and lack of jewelry and expensive accessories of the Spanish speaking parishioners, indicated that the latter are worse off, economically, than their English-speaking counterparts. In other words, a clear class difference is evident between the two groups of parishioners. As noted before, many of the attendees at Spanish services are recent immigrants from Mexico and some are illiterate, which helps explain their socioeconomic status. Linguistic differences may be an easier target to blame than the socio-economic realities that separate the two congregations, but any successful attempt at unifying the groups must look beyond a linguistic solution. Indeed, Baquedano-López's research proves the short-sightedness of an English-only approach. The Catholic parish she studied in Los Angeles cited its concern that two languages would create two separate congregations as one of the reasons it eliminated Spanish religious education. The result, however, was greater schism, not unity, because Spanish speakers feel that their children are being denied meaningful religious instruction and adults are excluded [many churches require that parents attend catechism classes with their children]. Tensions surrounding the language policy caused unnecessary rifts. At CTK, language and religion inform and reinforce one another, allowing for the possibility of unity under a different banner, one of mutual linguistic and cultural tolerance.
The Cultural “Ball of Wax”

Joshua Fishman, one of the world's leading sociolinguists, argues that "race ... religion, ethnicity, and language are, generally speaking, co-occurrences ... a 'ball of wax’" (2002: 345) we see as culture. Eventually, in Fishman's view, the ball of wax unravels when immigrants come in contact with the dominant group, and language is usually the first part of a culture to be lost. Young people lead the way in this unraveling, as they adopt the language of the more powerful within one or two generations, often causing their immigrant parents to shift along with them. Governments around the world that have imposed language restrictions in a misguided attempt to ensure national unity cause the very linguistic strife and political schism that they intended to prevent. Cultural and linguistic diversity is not a precondition for disunity, but cultural and linguistic intolerance is. In the United States, immigrant groups have shifted from their language to English, with rare exceptions—usually linked to religious separatism. But Spanish-speakers are no exception to the general rule; in fact they seem to be loosening their language more rapidly than last century’s wave of immigrants (Crawford 2002). Religious institutions like CTK understand they play a role in the social and cultural integration of their parishioners, and take it seriously, but their primary mission is spiritual. Honoring the deep connection between language and faith, they offer some services in the two leading languages spoken by their parishioners. Perhaps, as a result, the Spanish speaking community at CTK will be able to maintain the ball of wax Fishman describes longer than other communities that do not have the resources CTK offers its Spanish-speaking parishioners. But what about their integration into the wider community? The Spanish speaking members of CTK are largely new immigrants to the United States who are primarily concerned with survival in the United States, which requires learning English. But their survival also depends on their spiritual nurturing in a language they can understand. Accordingly, CTK offers masses and religious instruction in Spanish, easing the way of the first generation immigrants and fostering family unity, but they offer most masses in English, which the second generation and members of the first generation may attend when their English improves.

This chapter has argued that CTK differs from other bilingual churches that have been studied in a number of critical ways, e.g. its African American pastor and deacon speak fluent Spanish. Most notable is the church leadership’s involvement with the Mexican community in San Diego, which creates a close-knit congregation, and its advocacy for immigrant rights, which places it at the center of the contemporary battles being waged in the United States. Commitment to community has been an important part of CTK’s tradition from the parish’s inception; its work against injustices in the broader society is rooted in African American religious traditions in the U.S. and at CTK. This serves to strengthen ties with the African American members of the congregation as well as other English speaking congregants, since the commitment to serve the poor is expected of all Catholics. This dynamic is radically different from other bilingual churches that have been studied, and illustrates the complex interplay between religion, culture, language, and society visible at CTK.

In sum, Christ the King Catholic Church’s language policies allow the use of Spanish to flourish among its members, possibly sustaining Spanish language retention in the future,
while providing moral and social connections with the English speaking parishioners. At this point only the Spanish speakers are expected to make the effort to learn the others' language, as is understandable, but the pastor's outspoken leadership and personal example may help some English speakers realize that the inscription on the base of the statue of Christ is equally powerful in Spanish: "No tengo más manos que las tuyas."