January 2011

Through the Linguistic Looking Glass: An Examination of a Newspaper as Negotiator of Hybrid Cultural and Linguistic Spaces

Anthony Spencer
West Texas A&M

Follow this and additional works at: http://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/speaker-gavel
Part of the Journalism Studies Commons, and the Mass Communication Commons

Recommended Citation
Through the Linguistic Looking Glass: An Examination of a Newspaper as Negotiator of Hybrid Cultural and Linguistic Spaces

Anthony Spencer

Abstract

I contend English-language media outlets could and should be viewed as minority-language media outlets as they are cultural negotiators for tourists, sojourners and other transnational migrants. To better understand the cultural and linguistic forces these English-language media outlets exert upon the host cultures and nations in which they exist, I performed three months of ethnographic observations at a newspaper in Costa Rica and conducted in-depth interviews with staffers. I particularly focus on the hybrid identities of the staffers as they in turn instruct their readers how to navigate this hybrid community. I identify and explain the themes, which emerged in this process of cultural negotiation. This study makes it possible to view media outlets as negotiators of hybrid linguistic and cultural spaces.

Introduction

This essay addresses the role played by an English-language newspaper as American expatriates navigate the framework of another culture, specifically a Spanish-speaking society. I examine the functions of the English-language newspaper *The Tico Times* in assisting English-speaking residents to integrate into Costa Rican society. The newspaper has been the most important “local” news source for this community of U.S. expatriates for fifty years, and thus it has been the primary method for English speakers to navigate their lives in their adopted country. This is evidenced in real estate transactions, hiring locals for expatriate businesses, and even making love connections with the native population. The advertisements, classifieds and articles published in *The Tico Times* illustrate these themes of intercultural negotiations; however, in this essay I mainly explore the ways in which journalists at the newspaper negotiate identity for themselves as well as their readers in a hybrid society.

In this research I specifically focus on how the newspaper’s staff members perceive their role as an intermediary in the process of cultural negotiation. The staffers literally explain to North American English-speakers how to navigate Costa Rican (Tico) culture. This important role assumed by bilingual staff members also illustrates, in varying degrees, the concept of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) in their own lives. The reporters and editorial staff inhabit this hybrid American-Costa Rican world just as their readers do.

First, I briefly explain the immigration of English-speaking Americans to Costa Rica. Next, I place into context the significance of the newspaper *The Tico Times* and how it enacts the role of cultural broker, and I explain the theoretical lens of hybridity employed in this study. Then I explain the method of
data collection and describe the participants. Finally, I detail the findings as they relate to hybridity and explore the implications for these findings.

Americans in Costa Rica

While many exotic locales have lured foreign tourists for decades, Costa Rica is unique because a large number of these tourists become enamored with the country and its people and do not want to leave. They often buy property either as an investment or as a home to raise their children and grandchildren. Essentially, these sojourners hope that by changing their latitude of existence they will inherently change their attitudes about life. These tourists cum settlers find a way of life that seems very pleasing to them (Van Rheenen, 2004). Many of these visitors settle in niche communities in Costa Rica’s heavily populated Central Valley while many others live along the Pacific coast (Calderón-Steck & Bonilla-Carrión, 2008). In fact, foreigners own eighty percent of all coastal property in Costa Rica (Miranda & Penland, 2004).

While the number of North Americans (and to a lesser extent Europeans) continues to increase, Costa Rica remains a small country in terms of population at just over four million. One report estimates there are approximately 70,000 U.S. citizens and Canadians residing in the country (Kimitch, 2006), while another (Wallerstein, 2006) places the number at nearly 80,000. The actual number is unclear because many of these English-speaking residents enter as tourists and then renew their 90-day tourist visa by spending 72 hours outside of the country. Other U.S. citizens obtain legal residency in Costa Rica through business investments, retirement, or marriage. Each type of residency permit carries with it certain privileges in the country as well as specific obligations regarding how much one must spend to keep the residency status current, or how much money and/or income is required to obtain the status (Van Rheenen, 2004). Thus, many people simply opt to live in the country as perpetual tourists.

The levels of Spanish-language ability and cultural integration for these immigrants vary as much as their legal status. Some members of this community speak Spanish fluently and have successfully integrated into the local culture. But many others speak little Spanish and live in high-end English-speaking enclaves. Those who have not integrated have greater need of assistance to help them broker local customs and deal with linguistic tasks, and they may turn to a trusted friend, neighbor or local business associate. However, often Americans in Costa Rica rely on the longstanding, local English-language newspaper The Tico Times to serve as an intermediary in brokering these interactions. This intercultural exchange takes place in cultural and linguistic space that is not uniquely North American nor is it solely Costa Rican. These interactions have linguistic and cultural elements of both groups as they create a hybrid space of existence in which Gringos (North Americans) and to a lesser extent Ticos (Costa Ricans) negotiate lifestyle based upon levels of language fluency and cultural integration.
The Tico Times

_The Tico Times_ was founded by American journalist Elizabeth Dyer in 1956 to help North American students acquire journalistic skills while living in Costa Rica, and it began at a local English-language high school. According to the current publisher and Dyer’s daughter, the choice of location was between Costa Rica and Guatemala, and Costa Rica was selected because it had a more stable government. The Dyer family had moved to Costa Rica because Mr Dyer had become the director of public relations in Central America for the United Fruit Company. In 1960, Mr. Dyer was transferred to UFC’s operation in Chile, and the newspaper was put on hiatus. Tired of working for a multinational company, the family returned to Costa Rica and re-established the newspaper in 1972 (D. Dyer, personal communication, October 30, 2006). The paper evolved over the years as its readership expanded and diversified. It is important to emphasize that, although the newspaper now is perceived by most Costa Ricans to aid American expatriates in navigating intercultural interactions and capital acquisitions, the media outlet actually began as an educational forum. Today, as an English-language newspaper, _The Tico Times_ predominately, but not exclusively, serves the American community residing in Costa Rica. Cultural negotiations between Americans and Costa Rican elites take place primarily in English given the generally low level of Spanish proficiency amongst expatriate communities.

Traditionally, newspapers similar to _The Tico Times_ serve marginalized ethnic-minority communities. However, in contrast _The Tico Times_ serves a minority population that has access to resources and power. For the mostly white, English-speaking, economically-privileged immigrants who need assistance navigating their newfound hybrid space (Spencer, 2011), _The Tico Times_ performs the role of cultural broker, and it is the largest English-language newspaper in Central America (Howard, 2005-6).

Cultural Negotiation

To more clearly explore this concept of cultural negotiation I borrow upon three seemingly disparate yet parallel forms of scholarship inquiry: anthropology, traditional intercultural communication scholarship and mass media research.

**Anthropological Perspective**

Crapanzo (1986) refers to the Greek God Hermes when discussing the importance of what he terms “cultural translators,” people in a similar position to that of Hermes, who passed along messages from the gods to the mortals and interpreted those messages by placing them into a context that mortals could understand. In much the same way as Hermes gathered information and framed it for mortals, many anthropologists surmise that immigrants also need their own cultural translators. Fadiman (1997) also describes this process as being essential in navigating a new system of cultural and linguistic norms. She notes the importance of having what she terms a “cultural broker” to help negotiate interactions with a community. Whether researchers name this position cultural translator or cultural broker the purpose remains the same.
**Intercultural Communication Perspective**

Several intercultural communication theorists also have explored the issue of immigrants utilizing a cultural broker to integrate into a new culture. However, the terminology used to describe this process varies by researcher. Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) explore the need for foreigners to employ an intermediary to assist their negotiations in Chinese linguistic and cultural norms. Martin and Nakayama (2004) borrow the term cultural broker from social psychologist Peter Adler when referring to a person who assists another person’s cross-cultural interactions. I use the term cultural broker in this research project to keep the integrity of a give-and-take relationship which brokerage implies.

It is neither possible nor feasible for every person to have his or her own personal cultural broker. For many English-speaking foreigners in Costa Rica, *The Tico Times* performs the role of cultural broker. Reporters make observations of important events and interview key economic, political, and cultural players in Costa Rica.

**Mass Media Perspective**

In the case of *The Tico Times* and its relationship to the Costa Rican English-speaking immigrant community, print media have become the appropriate catalyst of cultural and linguistic consciousness, and thus I have chosen to examine how one outlet assists readers in the negotiation of their hybrid identity. The relationship between mass media outlets and cultural reproduction is as murky and interesting as the process of understanding and explaining hybrid cultural identities. Ethnic-minority media enable immigrants to retain their own native language and culture as much as they facilitate integration into the new host culture (Jeffres, 2000). Through an autobiographical approach to understanding the complex emotions media can evoke, Keshishian (2000) reminds us that the relationship between cultural integration and media usage can be difficult to understand and interpret.

Despite the growth of ethnographic research concerning media audiences (Murphy & Kraidy, 2003), studies of media production are not as common. It is especially difficult to find ethnographies which relate journalistic practices to issues of language and culture. One exception is Silcock (2002) who studied journalism practices in a television newsroom in Germany. He compared the alignment and importance of stories as well as the behind-the-scenes debates surrounding the stories between the English and German newsrooms at the Deutsche-Welle television network. Silcock particularly focused on the language spoken and its relationship with mythmaking in story production and dissemination.

**Hybridity**

The women and men who work in a particular media outlet very often inhabit the same cultural and linguistic spaces as the people who consume their product. That is why I have chosen to examine the way English-speaking journalists examine and re-examine their hybrid linguistic and cultural spaces as...
they make sense of important and practical issues for their readers. I believe hybridity to be the most appropriate theoretical construct through which to illustrate the ways an American-style newspaper in Costa Rica facilitates intercultural negotiations for its readers. Hybridity (Bhabha, 1994) as a cultural theory allows scholars to recognize and interrogate the unique spaces which form when linguistic and cultural groups come together. In this analysis I attempt to detect and explore the processes of language usage and ability, as well as cultural negotiation as enacted by a newspaper staff for its readers.

Hybridity as a cultural theory of communication embraces the emotions and contestations within a framework of cultural studies and linguistics. According to Bhabha (1994), the margins of culture that touch and conflict and often overlap are where scholars are likely to find the richest examples of hybrid lives, languages, and commonalities. Other scholars (Dean & Leibsohn, 2003; Kraidy, 1999, 2005; Werbner, 1997) have also examined the importance of the messy and complicated fissures which emerge from the hybrid mixings of art, language, and culture in the social fabric of our lives.

I utilize the cultural theory of hybridity to better explicate and interrogate these fissures which emerge in all types of interactions in a bicultural lifestyle. While investigating the acculturation process of Korean immigrants in the United States, Moon and Park (2007) found that ethnic minority media can produce “culturally hybrid messages” (p. 338). These media messages might share commonalities with those produced in the homeland, in this case Korea, but would also be unique to the situation of the Koreans living abroad. The Tico Times also reproduces a hybrid type of news for Americans living in Costa Rica. The format and language of the news might be familiar to these high-end English-speaking immigrants, but the topics covered by the newspaper come from the intercultural and linguistic scenarios the readers encounter.

I urge journalists as well as scholars to explore the hybrid spaces these news producers inhabit as they assist their audiences who negotiate a hybrid cultural space. The reporters and editors who act as gatekeepers for the masses also live within the same hybrid world. These media professionals are often better trained to navigate a bicultural world, which is why they are able to assist their readers. By virtue of this research project, I have asked the editorial and reporting staff of The Tico Times to literally view themselves and their hybrid lives through a cultural and linguistic looking glass to explain they way(s) in which they act as brokers for the tens of thousands of English speakers in Costa Rica. This brings about the following research question:

How do the staff members of a newspaper enact the role of a linguistic and/or cultural broker for English speakers in Costa Rica?

Method

The merits of qualitative methodologies are particularly well suited for exploring social phenomenon in great detail and depth. Various scholars have elaborated upon the value and advocated for scholars to employ these methods in a variety of contexts (Briggs, 1986; Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Spradley & McCurdy, 1988). The most effective method to answer the aforementioned re-
search question is through in-depth interviews of the staff members and observation as they collect and disseminate information to their readers. I also incorporate supplemental textual data from the newspaper. Harcup (2005) provided important nuances to the traditional binary oppositions of mainstream and alternative media as he asked the media practitioners about their roles in various types of outlets. The Tico Times itself falls along the type of media continuum Harcup explored between traditional and alternative outlets.

To better understand how the newspaper enacts the role of cultural broker for its readers I conducted ethnographic observations from September to November 2006 at the The Tico Times in San José, Costa Rica. In December of 2005 I visited the newspaper and requested permission from the management to observe and conduct interviews with the staff members. The publisher was keen to the idea as were the staff members. I began the observations in September 2006 and throughout the next three months I became more interactive with the staff--attending editorial meetings, accompanying reporters to stories, and examining all aspects of the various daily activities at the newspaper. As I gained the trust of those I was observing I began to ask questions. I conducted twenty in-depth interviews with staff members from the editorial staff (almost exclusively native English speakers and the business staff (exclusively native Spanish speaking Costa Ricans). The English speakers chose to conduct their interviews in English while all but two of the Spanish speakers chose Spanish.

I asked the participants to provide basic demographic information such as age, gender, length of stay in Costa Rica (applicable to the non-Costa Ricans), number of years employed by the newspaper, residency status in the country, and English/Spanish language abilities. The primary in-depth questions relating to the project included asking about the primary role of The Tico Times, the relationship between Gringos and Ticos in Costa Rica, and the integration of English speakers into Costa Rican culture. All of the participants had worked for the newspaper for at least one year at the time of our interview. All the employees who participated in this project displayed a genuine interest in the research as it pertained to their profession. It is also important to mention here that every employee in all departments of the newspaper is at least functionally bilingual.

In this paper I focus primarily on the data from those interviews and observations. The goal of my study is to understand how The Tico Times operates as a cultural broker between American expatriates and their new Costa Rican homeland. I specifically explore how the bicultural and bilingual staff members perceive their role in this process of cultural negotiation for their readers.

**Data Analysis**

I investigated these interview transcripts and ethnographic observational data by conducting a systematic analysis of the major themes which emerged from my corpus of data. I have supplemented the notes from ethnographic observations and interviews with supplementary data from The Tico Times.

I utilize discourse analysis to inform the analysis of finding in this study. European linguistic and cultural scholars led by Fairclough (1992) build on thematic construction that links thematic analysis to critical analysis of language
and discourse, particularly as discourse relates to hegemonic structures. I carefully and systematically examined the themes and topics which emerged. It is through constructions such as symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) that we have a better understanding of how to combine these themes and construct a framework to better connect these key themes to theory. Blommaert (2005) invites scholars to explore the relationship between language and the power systems which connect them to their social environments. The communicative events which envelop the usage of linguistic and cultural contestation are often found in the messiness of the above mentioned hybrid spaces (Bhabha, 1994). Thus, as I examined the themes I attempted to relate them to the structures in which they emerged.

Findings

The newspaper employees are bilingual, articulate, and educated individuals. The *Ticos* and *Gringos* who worked for the newspaper recognized that they inhabited a hybrid space of their own. It is their profession to navigate a bilingual and bicultural space for the English-language readers and the Spanish-speaking general populace. However, employees often told me that, because they are so enmeshed in this hybrid world, this research project evoked moments of personal awareness causing them to reflect on their job more deeply, as well as the important role of cultural brokering they performed.

As I examined the data I noticed two themes emerged consistently throughout the interview and ethnographic findings. First, the reflexive nature of a hybrid identity emerged in this process with the bilingual newspaper staffers and as they often used their own experiences in Costa Rica to act as broker for their readers in the host culture. The second major theme which came out of the data set was the way in which the newspaper literally instructed people to better negotiate and understand the government bureaucracy in which they lived.

Brokerage

English-speaking residents constantly negotiate their own cultural terrain in Costa Rica. As illustrated above, newspaper staffers use their own experiences to help put the *Tico* in *The Tico Times* and essentially make it more “Costa Rican.” In order to better understand the staffers’ roles regarding the facilitation of cultural negotiations, it is imperative to ascertain their perceptions of those roles. The publisher, Dery Dyer, presented her viewpoint on the function the newspaper has in Costa Rica’s mediascape. I pointedly asked her what she perceived to be the role of the newspaper:

Dery: To present Costa Rican news and developments and things so that anyone can understand them. To present them in such a way that if you live in Podunk, Iowa and have never been to Costa Rica, you will get a clear picture of Costa Rica by reading *The Tico Times*.

Not only does the newspaper present a vision of Costa Rica to the international reader, it creates a strong visual presence in the country as well. Reporters cover
every major news event and press conference alongside their counterparts who work for the Spanish-language media outlets.

**Hybrid Identity**

Each member of the staff inhabited a distinct yet related space along this hybrid fluid continuum of *Gringo* to *Tico* identity. With two exceptions, all the editorial staffers were native English speakers from the United States or Canada. Their own lived experiences varied greatly as they had been in Costa Rica from one to twenty-seven years.

Auriana, who was the editor of *The Tico Times* when I conducted this research, had lived in Costa Rica since she was eight years old, only leaving to return to the United States to attend college. Auriana was in a unique cultural position. She was a native English speaker whose entire primary and secondary education was in regular Spanish-language schools in Costa Rica. Perhaps, she understood better than most other Americans in Costa Rica what it means to inhabit an in-between space both culturally and linguistically. Auriana facetiously referred to this as “horrible” or falling between the cracks of identity:

> Auriana: I live in that horrible area where I’m not quite *Gringa* because I have too much of a Costa Rican background, and I’m not quite *Tica* because I’m obviously *Gringa*. Any *Tica* will tell you that I’m *Gringa*. So, I have very few friends in the same situation. We consider ourselves this hybrid, this rare hybrid that not many people can relate to.

This phenomenon Auriana described is what Pieterse (1994) refers to as the “messiness” of hybridity. These qualities which do not fit neatly into set boundary conditions and axioms very often provide the most important aspects of cultural exchange and negotiation. As more Americans continue to move to Costa Rica the variations of hybridity increase and become more nuanced. Auriana acknowledges the difficulties she faced in integrating into Costa Rican culture are even more overwhelming for adults who move to the country and attempt to functionally integrate. However, having lived in the country for so long, the other staff members often used Auriana as a sounding board for questions about authenticity of language and placing stories into context for readers.

A less extreme example of a hybrid identity in the newsroom emerged from conversations with a reporter named Leland. He came to Costa Rica as an adult and had only lived in the country for two years at the time of our interview. Leland and the other reporters brought varying levels of hybrid experiences to their newsgathering.

> Leland: I work in intercultural communication. It is something that I thought about since I was young and something that I wanted to be in. Part of what I do is try and understand what’s going on in Costa Rica and translate it not only in terms of language but ideas to Americans or *Gringos* or English speakers who are here in Costa Rica. So my job is just that, to translate, and like I said not just in terms of language, what is going on in this
country, find things, differences and explain them and better the understanding of English of this Spanish speaking, different culture.

Leland’s usage of the term “intercultural communication” denotes a high level of reflexivity on his part as he explains and interprets his duties as a reporter for a minority language media news outlet. He essentially explains how he and the other staffers enact the role of cultural broker for the readers. In the transcript below he continues to explore this concept and explain how he is in a unique position to enact that role.

Researcher: Do you think it’s important that you come from this community of Gringos so you go through the same experiences that these Gringos do? Does that make you a better reporter?

Leland: Yeah, I think so.

Researcher: So, you understand what the readers are thinking maybe?

Leland: Definitely. I mean I have been in Costa Rica two years. Before that I was in Mexico six months, in Guatemala then in Costa Rica twice before that. I mean I’ve gone through a lot of cultural changes, culture shock, adjusting to a new culture. So being fluent I am able to access things that people who are not culturally fluent or Spanish fluent can’t access and yeah I can understand. I can be like I remember when I was on the other side of this fence looking at this culture and not being able to understand and to get past that façade and into the meaning behind things and now because I am here and have access to that meaning I can share it with these people. And so yeah I think it makes me a better reporter.

In this transcript Leland expresses the frustration felt when an expatriate is “on the other side of the fence.” He acknowledges the difficulties involved “to get past that façade and find meaning.” He empathizes with the difficulties newcomers encounter upon arriving in a new culture and negotiating a new language. Leland and other reporters clearly articulated their positions as cultural brokers for English-speaking expatriates in Costa Rica. In the data presented above, Leland demonstrates acute awareness of his ability to broker the system on his own because he understands the language and culture.

While Leland and the other reporters have not lived in Costa Rica as long as the editor Auriana has, she readily admits that the varying perspectives of the staff members create a product which appeals to the needs of the expatriate population in the country. Just as the editorial staff has varied backgrounds and individual experiences in the country, so do the newspaper’s readers. Thus, we see how the above-mentioned fluid hybrid identities emerge along a continuum from Gringo to Tico (varying levels of integration into Costa Rican society).
Government System

One of the primary frustrations I noticed with foreign residents, especially non-native Spanish speakers in Costa Rica, is how difficult it is to deal with a new system of bureaucratic hurdles. Navigating a new government’s system can be just as challenging as learning to navigate a new language. Auriana was raised in the Costa Rican system, but with a *Gringa* perspective on life. She believes one of the primary functions of the paper for the English-speaking readers is to assist in making governmental red tape easier to cut.

Auriana: Yeah. I mean I think for your average U.S. citizen coming to Costa Rica it would be extremely frustrating and maddening and more than that just nonsensical. Whereas, I think that’s the advantage I have is coming from years in Costa Rica I still think it shouldn’t be that way but I can understand why it is. So I have that understanding of the mañana culture or whatever people call it. I understand therefore it is easier for me to deal with than someone who is expecting things to be different and wants them to be different and can’t handle it.

Even though Auriana understands this system better than most foreigners who live in Costa Rica she acknowledged that it is difficult for her to completely remove the base layer of “*Gringo* time” as she navigates a culture which is on ‘*Tico* time.” These key linguistic terms and phrases evidence the ways in which a critical discourse of language (Blommaert, 2005) enhance the thematic analysis employed in this study. Understanding these key linguistic nuances provide what Auriana termed her advantages of speaking like a *Tica*, but having all the physical characteristics of a *Gringa*.

Auriana: When I demand my rights and I go to the municipal government where I live and I just demand that whatever and they are like oh that crazy *Gringa* and I’m like that’s fine they can think that because of that crazy *Gringa* it’s ok with them that I am sitting there ranting and raving about how I have to pay for garbage pickup when they are not picking up the garbage in front of my house.

Auriana’s personal frustrations are very interesting but far from unique with *The Tico Times* staff. A reporter Katherine wrote an article dealing with immigration officials as she attempted to renew her own *cédula*, identity card, which provides proof of her status to legally work, subscribe to utility services, and entitle her to stay in the country for more than three months at a time. Katherine recounts her time of standing in line with U.S. citizens, Europeans, and many Nicaraguans and Colombians. The topics of conversation included: the best telephone calling cards, cultural and linguistic differences between home and host countries, as well as the difficulties of trying to obtain and/or renew the *cédula*. The editorial cartoon (figure 1) accompanied by Katherine’s article describing the experiences she and her fellow “immigrants” observed in line while waiting for their documents to be processed.
During one particular newsroom conversation I listened to Katherine and Auriana discuss the immigration situation, which required a one-month wait to obtain an appointment to stand in the aforementioned line. Other reporters perked up from their desks and chimed in with their own adjectives as well. The three words the staffers used to describe this process were “mind-boggling,” “ludicrous,” and “hell.” These terms influenced the tone of the story as Katherine had provided a first-hand account for readers. The terms even influenced the staffers to include the figure above to graphically illustrate these concepts in the newspaper. This further demonstrates how the staffers’ hybrid lives provide a direct cultural negotiation for the readers who also inhabit this hybrid space to varying degrees.

The Tico Times’s sales manager Yvonne is a well-educated bilingual woman in her early 30s. As a native Costa Rican Yvonne has a different but just as valuable perspective in understanding how the newspapers instructs Gringos to live within the framework of a Spanish-speaking society and governmental processes. She acknowledges readers place importance on the issues they read in the newspaper:

Yvonne: The Tico Times gives the opportunity to foreigners who don’t speak Spanish to read news in English, and not just that but it covers many different points of view, like papers in the States maybe. It is very like down to earth. I think that is why most of the people living here like The Tico Times. It is in English but it is very different.
Researcher: Would you say it is almost a cultural guide to Costa Rica for people who don’t speak Spanish?

Yvonne: Yes I would say they would get involved with the country by reading *The Tico Times* because we cover different news other people don’t cover.

Yvonne succinctly comments that the newspaper covers stories in a particular manner unique to the newspaper’s readership in a way that a Spanish-language publication would obviously not report for its readership. This is what makes a minority and/or ethnic publication such as *The Tico Times* unique in its function and provide nuances to expand the cultural theory of hybridity.

**Discussion**

In this essay I used ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews with newspaper staff members to better understand how they perceive the own, varying hybrid entities as they enacted the role of cultural broker in the intercultural negotiation for English-speakers who visit and/or live in Costa Rica. While the study focused on the newsroom as a holistic being, teasing out the individual identities of the staff members provides for a rather unorthodox, yet enlightening examination of the ways in which a minority language media outlet performs its role.

The richest examples of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) were often uncovered in these relaxed moments of banter among the staff members. The moments of reflexivity I observed were some of the richest and most personally fulfilling. Several of the newspaper’s employees told me they began to examine issues of hybridity and think in those terms after our interviews. I observed these moments of reflexivity with the native English speakers as well as the Spanish speakers who worked at the paper.

The staffers and readers of *The Tico Times* inhabit the same hybrid cultural sphere, but it is important to recognize and understand that the bilingual and well-educated staff members are able to fully function in mainstream Costa Rican society. As they reflect upon their own hybrid spaces they feel they are better able to serve their readers who also inhabit this fluid yet very real state of hybridity. It is by understanding this concept of being neither fully *Gringo* nor fully *Tico* that it becomes easier to understand how readers can better navigate the new system of government paperwork and bureaucracy in which they live.

The in-between cultural space(s) created by these participants formulate a very unique space in the Costa Rican cultural milieu. These Americans, and to a lesser extent Canadians and Europeans, have chosen to take themselves out of their home culture and navigate a new system of beliefs, cultural norms, and language. Kraidy (1999) calls for “native ethnography” to understand “the articulation of local practices with global discourses” (p. 457). This brings up the question of who is qualified to be a “native” of a hybrid space. Traditionally native ethnographic research disrupts the paradigm of ethnographer/observer by
producing a situation in which the ethnographer is a member of the group being observed.

Implications

I assert that these newspaper staff members also perform this role as they reflect upon their own hybrid spaces and how their personal experiences can assist their readers in navigating new cultural and linguistic spaces. Thus, I view the implications as two-fold. First on a practical level, the newspaper staffers constantly must reflect on their own identities, and in this way they are able to relate to the needs of their readers. Second, on a theoretical level, scholars can further nuance the study of hybrid linguistic and cultural spaces as they explore the lived experiences of the media producers who enact the role of cultural broker for their audiences.

It is a constant negotiation on the part of the English-speaking residents in Costa Rica to navigate this cultural terrain. However, as the newspaper staffers reflect on their own hybrid experiences they help their readers understand how to negotiate their own identities and their daily lives. As more high-end immigrants move outside their own linguistic and cultural spheres, the importance of English-language publications such as The Tico Times will continue to increase. Thus, these theoretical implications allow scholars to investigate the phenomenon of how hybrid interactions as experienced by newspaper staffers are passed along to readers who do not have their own personal cultural negotiator, and so therefore they must rely on The Tico Times to enact the role of their cultural broker.

References


Anthony Spencer (Ph.D., University of Oklahoma, 2008; M.A., University of North Texas, 2003) is an Assistant Professor at West Texas A&M University. His primary areas of inquiry are intercultural and international communication and communication theory, exploring issues of language, culture and identity. Dr. Spencer conducts research in the United States, Central America, Cuba, France, and Spain.