

Spanish-Speaking Institutions and Language Assimilation in the Rio Grande Valley

by

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The Rio Grande Valley in Texas, situated on the US-Mexico border, has a population of more than one million, of which more than 90% is of Latino descent.¹ However, no public institutions formally function in Spanish, thus inhibiting institutional completeness² and challenging long-term preservation of the language. Why does this population of Latino descent not demand Spanish-language service? Contrary to traditional research on institutional completeness, we consider institutions as the dependent variable and argue that the absence of institutions reflects the perception, within the population, of inferior status ascribed to Spanish when compared to English.

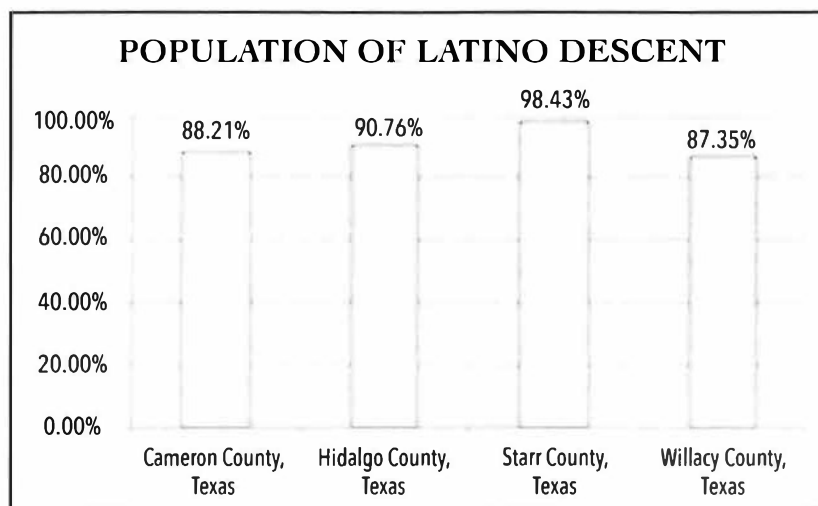
Introduction

The Rio Grande Valley (RGV) was annexed to the United States (US) with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, after Mexico lost the Mexican-American War. What is surprising about the RGV is that its Latino population, unlike many other linguistic groups in Europe and Canada, does not demand linguistic rights from Texas or the US. As far as we know, there are no popularly expressed grievances from Latinos in the RGV when it comes to schools in Spanish, hospitals in Spanish, government administration in Spanish. By comparison, minority nations of Québec (in Canada) and of Catalonia (in Spain) and the minority population of Danish (in Germany) —to give a few

examples—have been requesting institutions in their languages since at least the mid-1900s. The 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (signed by 25 member states) recognizes “203 national minorities or linguistic groups,” whose linguistic rights are recognized and followed by a committee of the Council of Europe. In Canada, the Francophone minority nation, mainly in the province of Québec, has relatively extensive and entrenched rights in terms of education, healthcare, immigration, and government administration. For Europeans and Québécois, the puzzle is: Why don’t Latinos in the RGV pressure their elected officials for linguistic rights?

The Rio Grande Valley is located on the southern Texas border, next to Mexico. It consists of four counties: Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy. In the RGV, 90.25% of the population (1.3 million) is of Latino descent.³ In Cameron County, more than 88% of the 410,000 inhabitants are of Latino origin. In Hidalgo County, the proportion reaches more than 90% of some 790,000 inhabitants. In Starr County, the proportion is higher, reaching 98% of the 61,000 people. The percentage of Latino population is the lowest in Willacy County, where 87% of the 22,000 people are Latino. Figure 1 shows the population of Latino descent in the RGV.

Figure 1: Population of Latino descent⁴



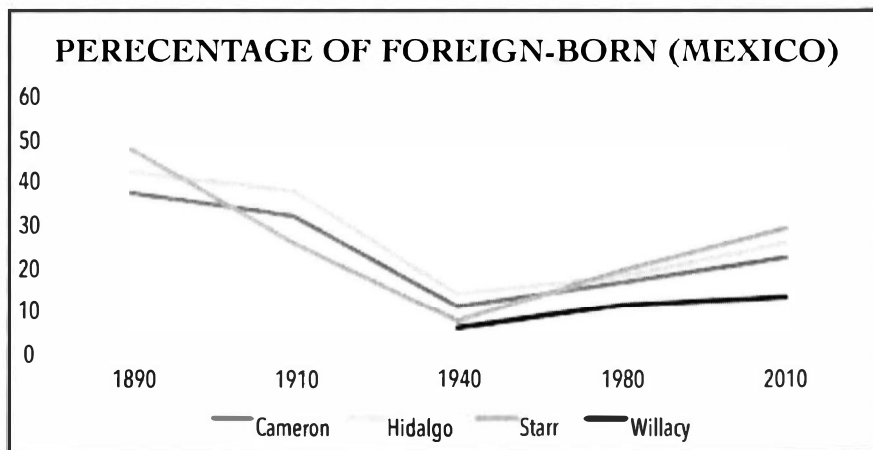
Average income per capita is among the lowest in the country. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2013, these four counties had a 32.4% poverty rate (Cameron) to 43.1% (Willacy). In comparison, for the entire country, the poverty rate was 15.8% in the same year. The median household income ranged from \$ 25,408 (Starr) to \$ 34,607 (Hidalgo). In comparison, it reached \$ 52,250 for the United States.⁵ The proportion of the population that has a BA in 2013 is estimated at 14.2% in Cameron County, at 15.9% in Hidalgo, at 8.6% in Starr and at 8.8% in Willacy. The national average (of the population with a bachelor's degree) is 28.8% and for Texas, 26.7%.⁶

Moreover, while the percentage of illiteracy in Texas is 19%, illiteracy rates for the four counties in question are much higher and have kept high over the last twenty years. Counties of Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, and Willacy have remarkably low percentages of basic prose literacy skills. For instance, in 1992, the percentage of the population lacking basic prose literacy skills in Cameron County was at 43%, and in 2003 the same percentage was reported. (2003 is the last year for which data are available.) For Hidalgo County, in 1992, the percentage of the population lacking basic prose literacy skills was at 49%, and for 2003 the rate increased to 50%. For Starr County, in 1992, the percentage of the population lacking basic prose literacy skills was at 67%, and for 2003 it had decreased to 65%. For Willacy County, in 1992, the percentage of the population lacking basic prose literacy skills was at 51%, and for 2003 it was at 40%.⁷ It should be noted, however, that with regard to illiteracy (the lacking basic prose literacy skills) the term is used to refer to people who cannot read English.

Migration has always been a component of the fabric of U.S. society.⁸ In 1850, around 10% of the population was foreign born. During the 1800s, most migrants were European, and the percentage in the overall population peaked at 15%. Migratory quotas in 1921 and 1924, the Great Depression, and World War II eventually led to a record low in the percentage of migrants

in the country. In 1970, only 5% of the population was foreign born. It is important to consider that migration from Mexico has not always been at the same pace and, indeed, several migratory waves have been registered. "The first wave, occurring prior to World War II, consisted of agricultural workers recruited by private labor contractors, with the number of Mexican immigrants rising from 105,200 in 1900 to 624,400 in 1930. The Bracero program, from 1942 to 1964, ushered in the second wave, also consisting mostly of agricultural guest workers. The third, largely unauthorized wave began after the Bracero program was terminated and after 1965 changes to U.S. immigration law ended national-origin quotas and imposed the first numerical limits on Mexico and other Latin-American countries. The majority of Mexican immigrants in this third wave were male, seasonal farm laborers who regularly traveled back and forth across the border. The passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA) and subsequent investments in border security were a turning point, initiating the fourth wave of Mexican migration."⁹ Figure 2 shows the percentage of the population born in Mexico for each RGV county, from 1890 until 2010.

Figure 2: Percentage of foreign-born (Mexico)¹⁰



Our research has two objectives. Empirically, it seeks to present data on a linguistic minority, the Latinos settled in the RGV in Texas, and original data on the language use in RGV institutions. On the theoretical level, our research aims at envisaging institutions protecting a language group (Spanish-speaking) as the dependent variable, thus challenging traditional research on institutional completeness of those who regard institutions as the independent variable.

In what follows, we briefly discuss the concept of institutional completeness as initially presented by Raymond Breton and then developed by literature in academia and courts. In particular, we question the traditional direction of causality by suggesting that institutions of a language group should be considered a dependent variable rather than an independent variable. This design highlights the value that a given language group ascribes to the protection of its tongue. We then present the socioeconomic and linguistic characteristics of the RGV using data from the American Community Survey (US Census Bureau). The region is both one of the poorest in the United States and one of the most Spanish-speaking in the country. We show that there exists a positive correlation between income and the use of English (rather than Spanish) at home. We also present original data on language use in RGV institutions. Finally, we argue that the absence of important Spanish-speaking institutions in the region can be explained by the low attractiveness of the Latino identity, which is manifested by the lower chances of living under the poverty line (for monolingual Anglophones vs. bilingual individuals), education (monolingual Anglophone), and the militarization of the border (which emphasizes crime south of the border, where the country is monolingual Spanish).

Institutional completeness and direction of causality

Breton's "institutional completeness" is a central concept in studies of language policy. It reflects the idea that "the more in-

stitutions a community has (the more complete institution-wise it is) the more its members have relationships among themselves, thus the less likely they are to assimilate to the culturally dominant group."¹¹ In his first research on immigrant communities, Breton showed that churches were the institutions that most strengthened the relationship of an immigrant with his immigrant community; welfare organizations, as well as newspapers and periodicals, also contributed to fostering inter-personal relations with his immigrant community.¹² These findings are important, as they demonstrate that assimilation can be delayed thanks to institutions that create ties among group members. They have since been used to study the Francophone minority in Canada and language communities in general (see Cardinal and González Hidalgo¹³). In Canada, the Supreme Court has used institutional completeness to prevent the closing of a French hospital in Ontario, arguing that the institution was necessary for preserving Francophones' linguistic rights.¹⁴

As noted by Breton himself, institutional completeness has traditionally interpreted institutions as an independent rather than dependent variable.¹⁵ In other words, the quality or size of the institutions of a linguistic group is traditionally seen as a determining factor of assimilation for members of the group they serve. Some institutions, such as schools and hospitals, offer the highest completeness, that is to say, they allow an individual to live his tongue from his birth to his death.¹⁶ Two decades after his initial definition of institutional completeness, Breton hinted that the mechanism of causality needed to be rethought: "One must admit that membership in the community is to a large extent an individual choice: a person can integrate them socially if it is not already, or escape it, even if he was a member since birth."¹⁷ In 2015, Breton openly invited students of his work to consider reversing the orthodox causality of institutional completeness and therefore to identify institutions as the dependent variable.

This perspective is interesting because it focuses on the value of linguistic or ethnic protection rather than on the ability

of a small number of group members to establish institutions. To illustrate this dichotomy, we assume that there are two main types of institutions. On the one hand, there exist “interdependent” institutions for a linguistic community and its members.¹⁸ Without these institutions, community members would fail to thrive because they could not maintain their language from birth to death.¹⁹ On the other hand, there are “pragmatic” institutions, which “use cultural goods and social services without commitment vis-à-vis individuals and institutions that produce them, except perhaps temporarily.”²⁰ In other words, this last category of institutions is implemented by “elites disconnected from the reality of people [belonging to the linguistic community].”²¹ When the second type of institution prevails, considering the institutions as an independent variable (and institutional completeness as a dependent variable) is an erroneous appreciation of reality because the institutions do not represent the will of the community or the identity of the members of the community.²²

Figure 3: Institutional completeness' directions of causality

(1) Institutional completeness' traditional direction of causality (when institutions are treated as independent variable): Group's own institutions (institutional completeness) → Interpersonal relationships among group members → Less assimilation. (2) Institutional completeness' revised direction of causality (when institutions are treated as dependent variable): Language's social status → Group's own institutions (institutional completeness).

By reversing the causality direction and assessing institutions as the dependent variable, this research asks why or how a group comes to creating institutions that guarantee its linguistic development. Why are there so few official Spanish-speaking institutions in the RGV? Which reasons explain the absence of community demands to promote the Spanish language in a region, the RGV, where the population is substantially of Latino descent?

The next section of this article presents original data on Spanish institutional completeness in the RGV with a survey of selected institutions that matter for language transmission. Later, this chapter suggests that the negative status associated with the Spanish language discourages its adoption or transmission. This low status can be observed through three variables: a) chances of living in poverty are higher for people speaking Spanish than those who speak only English (even if they are of Latino descent); b) the education system is monolingual Anglophone; and c) the militarization of the border between Mexico (Spanish-speaking) and the U.S. (mostly English-speaking) lowers the attractiveness of Spanish.

Spanish institutional completeness in the RGV

In October and November 2015, we surveyed the important institutions of the RGV to find out whether they provide services in Spanish. We obtained the information by calling directly each institution and speaking only in Spanish. We collected data for core institutions: government institutions (including schools), religious institutions (mainly Catholic churches), and business institutions (regional development councils and Chambers of Commerce). We also obtained additional data on hospitals and clinics, TV channels and radio stations, as well as large stores and supply stores. Below are our findings.

Government services in all four counties are normally provided in both Spanish and English. Table 1 presents whether RGV government institutions offer services in Spanish.

Table 1: Availability of Services in Spanish in Government Institutions in Brownsville (Cameron County), McAllen (Hidalgo County), Raymondville (Willacy County), and Rio Grande City (Starr County)

As Table 1 indicates, one can obtain government services in Spanish throughout the RGV, but there are no elementary schools or high schools that function in Spanish and no colleges in Spanish in the RGV.

Table 1: Availability of Services in Spanish in Government Institutions in Brownsville (Cameron County), McAllen (Hidalgo County), Raymondville (Willacy County), and Rio Grande City (Starr County)

| Government Institution | Assistance Provided in Spanish? |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Department of Public Safety | X Driving test manual is provided also in Spanish |
| Public Health | X |
| Fire Department | X |
| US Post Office | X |
| Municipal Court | X |
| Traffic | X |
| Public Library | X Books in Spanish available |
| Elementary Schools | Personnel speaks Spanish but services are offered only in English |
| High Schools | Personnel speaks Spanish but services are offered only in English |
| Colleges/Universities | Personnel speaks Spanish but services are offered only in English (There is no college in Willacy County.) |

In the case of bilingual schools in the RGV, it is important to note that these are not available for the inhabitants of any of the four counties.²³ At the college level, access to education in Spanish is very limited. For instance, the Texas Southmost College offers a degree in Spanish Translation, but the program in itself is not entirely in Spanish. In the case of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, a bachelor's and master's degree are offered in Spanish as a Language but are imparted in English.²⁴ There is, however, an online Master's Degree offered entirely in Spanish.²⁵

According to our own collection of data, there are almost 69 Catholic churches offering services in Spanish in the RGV (see Table 2 below). Since, for the RGV, Catholicism is the main religion in all major cities and towns of the four counties, one can conclude that a large portion of the Latino population in the RGV has access to religious services in Spanish. In the case of Cameron County, adherents to the Catholic Church account for 137,889, while adherents to Protestantism account for 47,744.²⁶ For Hidalgo County, the same pattern can be found as adherents to Catholicism account for 267,071 of the county population, while members of different Protestant religions account for 75,327.²⁷ Starr County is also predominantly Catholic, with 27,157 of its population belonging to the Catholic religion, while 2,368 inhabitants identify as Protestants.²⁸ Lastly, Willacy County, which has the lowest population of all RGV counties, also has a large Catholic majority with 11,010 of its inhabitants identifying as Catholics, while only 1,614 identify as Protestants.²⁹

Table 2: Catholic Gatherings in the RGV and Availability of Services in Spanish³⁰

| Congregation | Town | Mass Offered in Spanish? |
|---------------------------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| Resurrection | Alamo | Yes |
| San Martin de Porres | Alton | Yes |
| Christ the King | Brownsville | Yes |
| Church of the Good Shepherd | Brownsville | Yes |
| Holy Family | Brownsville | Yes |
| Immaculate Conception Cathedral | Brownsville | Yes |
| Mary, Mother of the Church | Brownsville | Yes |
| Our Lady of Good Counsel | Brownsville | Yes |
| Our Lady of Guadalupe | Brownsville | Yes |

Table 2, continued.

| Congregation | Town | Mass Offered in Spanish? |
|---|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| San Felipe de Jesus | Brownsville | Yes |
| St. Eugene de Mazenod | Brownsville | Yes |
| St. Joseph | Brownsville | Yes |
| St. Luke | Brownsville | Yes |
| The Parish of the Lord of Divine Mercy | Brownsville | Yes |
| St. Joseph | Donna | Yes |
| St. Theresa of the Infant Jesus | Edcouch | Yes |
| Holy Family | Edinburg | Yes |
| Sacred Heart | Edinburg | Yes |
| St. Joseph | Edinburg | Yes |
| St. Ignatius | El Ranchito | Yes |
| Sacred Heart | Elsa | Yes |
| Sacred Heart | Escobares | Yes |
| Immaculate Heart of Mary | Harlingen | Yes |
| Our Lady of the Assumption | Harlingen | Yes |
| Queen of Peace | Harlingen | Yes |
| St. Anthony | Harlingen | Yes |
| Sacred Heart | Hidalgo | Yes |
| St. Francis Xavier | La Feria | Yes |
| Holy Family | La Grulla | Yes |
| Our Lady, Queen of Angels' Parish | La Joya | Yes |
| St. Cecilia | Los Fresnos | Yes |
| Prince of Peace | Lyford | Yes |
| Holy Spirit | McAllen | Yes |

Table 2, continued.

| Congregation | Town | Mass Offered in Spanish? |
|--|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| Our Lady of Perpetual Help | McAllen | Yes |
| Our Lady of Sorrows | McAllen | Yes |
| Sacred Heart | McAllen | Yes |
| Saint Juan Diego Cuahtlatōazin | McAllen | Yes |
| St. Joseph the Worker | McAllen | Yes |
| Immaculate Conception | McCook | No |
| Our Lady of Mercy | Mercedes | Yes |
| Sacred Heart | Mercedes | Yes |
| Our Lady of Guadalupe | Mission | Yes |
| Our Lady of Saint John of the Fields | Mission | Yes |
| Our Lady of the Holy Rosary | Mission | Yes |
| San Cristobal Magallanes and Companions | Mission | Yes |
| St. Paul | Mission | Yes |
| Our Heavenly Father | Olmito | Yes |
| St. Anne | Penitas | Yes |
| St. Anne, Mother of Mary | Pharr | Yes |
| St. Frances Xavier Cabrini | Pharr | Yes |
| St. Jude Thaddeus | Pharr | Yes |
| St. Margaret Mary | Pharr | Yes |
| Our Lady, Star of the Sea | Port Isabel | Yes |
| Holy Spirit | Progreso | Yes |
| Our Lady of Guadalupe | Raymondville | Yes |

Table 2, continued.

| Congregation | Town | Mass Offered in Spanish? |
|--|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| St. Anthony | Raymondville | No |
| Immaculate Conception | Rio Grande City | Yes |
| St. Paul The Apostle | Rio Grande City | Yes |
| St. Helen | Rio Hondo | Yes |
| Our Lady of Refuge | Roma | Yes |
| Our Lady, Queen of the Universe | San Benito | Yes |
| St. Benedict | San Benito | Yes |
| St. Theresa | San Benito | Yes |
| St. Joseph the Worker | San Carlos | Yes |
| St. Isidore | San Isidro | Yes |
| Basilica of Our Lady of San Juan Del Valle-National Shrine | San Juan | Yes |
| St. John the Baptist | San Juan | Yes |
| St. Mary | Santa Rosa | Yes |
| San Martin De Porres | Weslaco | Yes |
| St. Joan of Arc | Weslaco | Yes |
| St. Pius X | Weslaco | Yes |

Two regional development councils exist in the RGV. The Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council serves the counties of Cameron, Hidalgo, and Willacy, while the South Texas Development Council serves Starr County. We called directly to the main office of each regional council and found that all regional councils provide services in Spanish and staff

speaks English; members need to speak English (although there is no preferred language with customers or members); and the preferred language while at work is English.

There are five Chambers of Commerce in the RGV: Brownsville, McAllen, Edinburg, Raymondville, and Rio Grande City. We called directly the main office of each Chamber of Commerce. We found that: all provide services in Spanish and staff speaks English (in Rio Grande City, not all employees speak Spanish); members do not need to speak English (in Rio Grande City, as per the Chamber, not knowing English is seen as an obstacle for members as most business meetings and social gatherings are held in English); there is no preferred language with customers or members (except in Rio Grande City, where the preferred language is English) and the preferred language while at work is English.

Still, according to our own data, in the RGV, there are 15 hospitals and clinics offering services in Spanish (see Table 3 below), approximately 40 TV channels and radio stations produced in Spanish (see Table 4 below), 5 newspapers, and at least 28 large stores and supply stores that use Spanish (see Table 5 below).

Table 3: Hospitals and Clinics in the RGV and Availability of Services in Spanish³¹

| Town | Name | Check-in Forms in Spanish? | Help Provided to Spanish Speakers? |
|-------------|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Brownsville | Valley Baptist | Yes | Yes |
| Brownsville | Valley Regional | Yes | Yes |
| Brownsville | Solara Hospital | Yes | Yes |
| Brownsville | Su Clinica | Yes | Yes |
| McAllen | McAllen Medical Center | Yes | Yes |

| | | | |
|-----------------|--|-----|-----|
| McAllen | Rio Grande Regional Hospital | Yes | Yes |
| McAllen | Solara Hospital | Yes | Yes |
| McAllen | South Texas Health System | Yes | Yes |
| Raymondville | Valley Family Clinic | No | Yes |
| Raymondville | Raymondville Family Medical Clinic | Yes | Yes |
| Raymondville | Spence Clinic | No | Yes |
| Raymondville | Family Health Services Clinic | Yes | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | Starr County Memorial Hospital | Yes | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | Rural Health at Starr County Memorial Hospital | Yes | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | Driscoll-Rio Grande City Clinic | Yes | Yes |

Table 4: TV Channels and Radio Stations in Spanish in the RGV³²

| Town | TV Channel | Radio Station | Produced in Spanish? |
|-------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Brownsville | Azteca America | KBNR Manantial | Yes |
| Brownsville | Univision | KKPS La Nueva | Yes |
| Brownsville | Televisa 2 | KGBT | Yes |
| Brownsville | Galavision | XERT Reynosa | Yes |
| Brownsville | Mundo Max Valle | XEMS Matamoros | Yes |

Table 4, continued.

| Town | TV Channel | Radio Station | Produced in Spanish? |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| McAllen | Azteca America | KGBT Univisión | Yes |
| McAllen | Univision | KRIO Radio Esperanza | Yes |
| McAllen | Televisa 2 | KVJY | Yes |
| McAllen | Once TV | XERT Reynosa | Yes |
| McAllen | Mundo Max Valle | KUBR- La Radio Cristiana | Yes |
| Raymondville | 4.2 KGBTDT2 | XERDO- Radio Avanzado | Yes |
| Raymondville | 32.2 KTFVCD2 | KBIC Radio Vida | Yes |
| Raymondville | Vallevision | KBUC Super Tejano | Yes |
| Raymondville | 48.1 Univision | KVHI Vision Hispana | Yes |
| Raymondville | 48.3 KNVODT3 | KNVO- Jose | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | Telemundo | KGBT La Primera | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | 003 Univision | KQBO La Patrona | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | 007 Valle Vision | KRGX Estrella | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | 011 TV Azteca | XHAAA- La Caliente | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | 013 Azteca America | KERG-Radio Vida | Yes |

Table 5: Shops and Supply Stores in the RGV and Availability of Services in Spanish³³

| Town | Name | Aisle information in Spanish? | Help Provided to Spanish Speakers? |
|-------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Brownsville | HEB Boca Chica | Yes | Yes |
| Brownsville | HEB in Paredes | Yes | Yes |

Table 5, continued.

| Town | Name | Aisle information in Spanish? | Help Provided to Spanish Speakers? |
|--------------|--------------------------------------|--|---|
| Brownsville | WalMart Alton Gloor | No | Yes |
| Brownsville | WalMart Ruben Torres | Yes | Yes |
| Donna | WalMart Donna | Yes | Yes |
| Edinburg | WalMart Edinburg | No | Yes |
| Harlingen | HEB in Harlingen- Morgan & Grimes | No | Yes |
| Harlingen | WalMart Harlingen | No | Yes |
| McAllen | HEB South & 2nd Street | No | Yes |
| McAllen | HEB North & Fern | No | Yes |
| McAllen | HEB 10th & Trenton | No | Yes |
| McAllen | WalMart McAllen | No | Yes |
| Port Isabel | WalMart Port Isabel | Yes | Yes |
| Raymondville | HEB Raymondville | No | Yes |
| Raymondville | WalMart Raymondville | No | Yes |
| Raymondville | Stripes Store #7311 | No | Yes |
| Raymondville | Stripes Store #2277 | Aisles have no description | Yes |
| Raymondville | Raymondville Family Pharmacy | No | Yes |
| Raymondville | Raymondville Superette | Aisles have no description | Yes |

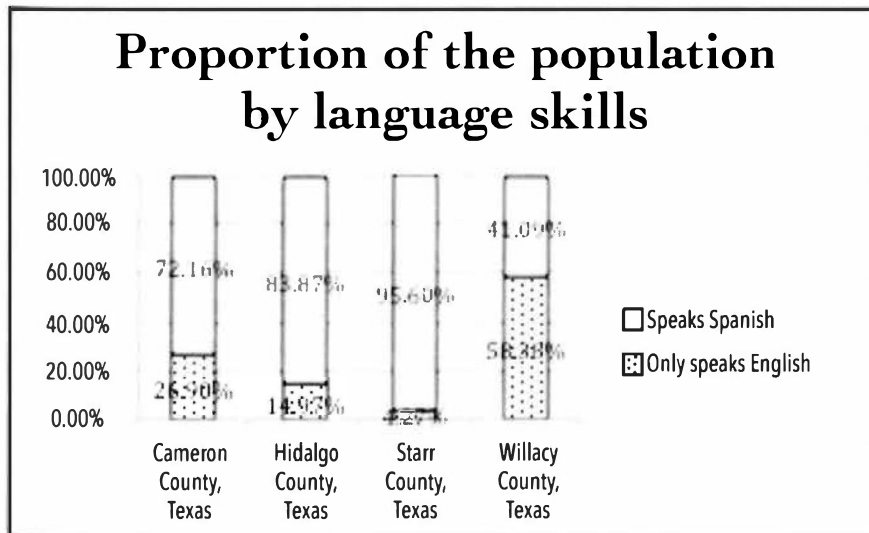
Table 5, continued

| Town | Name | Aisle information in Spanish? | Help Provided to Spanish Speakers? |
|-----------------|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Raymondville | AutoZone | No | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | Rio Grande City HEB | No | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | Wal Mart Rio Grande City | Yes | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | Stripes Store #2206 | Aisles have no description | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | Stripes Store #2437 | Aisles have no description | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | Bealls | No | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | Country Store | Aisles have no description | Yes |
| Rio Grande City | El Tigre Food Store II | Aisles have no description | Yes |
| Weslaco | Wal Mart Weslaco | No | Yes |

As mentioned earlier, the population of the four counties of the RGV is very homogeneous. Much of the population speaks Spanish, which is not surprising, given the Latino descent of the population.³⁴ Given the Latino origin of more than 90% of the population, the vast majority of those who speak only English probably have ancestors who spoke only Spanish. In other words, there is linguistic assimilation, that is, one cannot speak one's parents' language. This is in line with what other scholars have found. The Pew Research Center reports a survey in which no third-generation Latino has Spanish as the dominant language; rather, English was the dominant language for all respondents in this category.³⁵ Similarly, Mejías et al.³⁶ and Anderson-Mejías³⁷ surveyed college students in Hidalgo County and reported that they use Spanish mainly for daily communication and to speak with relatives; fourth- and fifth-generation Latinos reported using mainly English.

Figure 4 shows variety among the four counties. In Cameron County, 27% of the population only speaks English. In Hidalgo County, 15% of the population only speaks English. In Starr County, assimilation is the lowest, with 4% of the population who only speak English. However, in Willacy County, assimilation is the highest: 58% of the population only speaks English. It is interesting to note that Willacy County is located north of the RGV and Starr County is the most “isolated” of the RGV counties, being located well inside the U.S. and without any major city.

Figure 4: Proportion of the population by language skills³⁸



It should be noted that the data in Figure 4 are self-reported. They do not indicate the level of Spanish (for those who answer that they can speak Spanish). It is possible that their Spanish is only of the basic level. Similarly, some who report speaking only English (no Spanish at all) might understand spoken Spanish. Yet, we can attest that the data in Figure 4 appear realistic given that the RGV is among the areas with higher levels of Eligibility for Adult Education by Local Workforce Development, an indicator of the lack of English proficiency and the low levels of educational attainment.³⁹

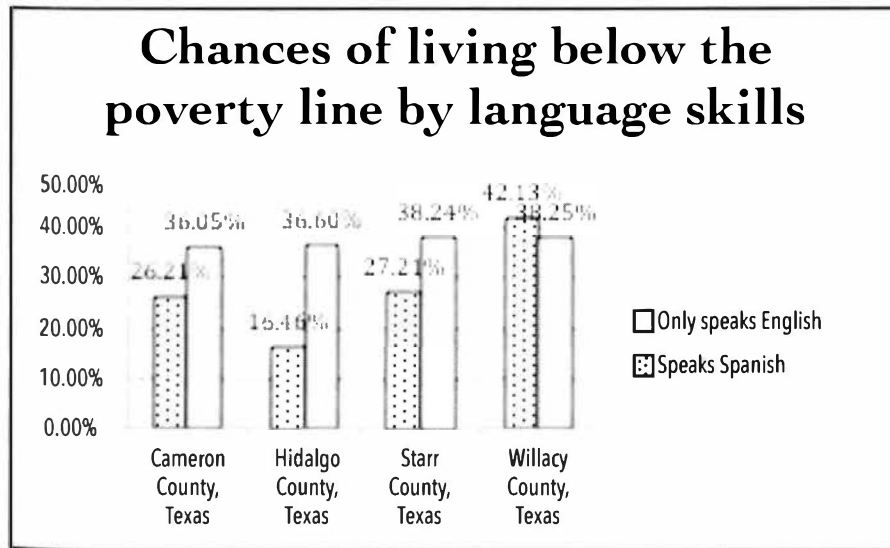
The education system is monolingual Anglophone

The Texas education system most likely contributes to the linguistic assimilation of Latinos in the RGV. As in the rest of the country,⁴⁰ the dominant ideology assumes a monolingual English teaching is necessary to preserve the political unity of the United States⁴¹ and to ensure the socio-economic success of Latinos.⁴² Students in Texas public schools are tested repeatedly in the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STA-AR). There are 34 exams before graduation from high school. By the third year, students are evaluated in mathematics. In eleventh grade, they must pass five exams (algebra, physics, English twice, and U.S. history). Students must pass the math and reading exams in fifth and eighth years to move levels. The success of the 34 examinations is required to obtain the high school diploma (except for home-schooled students). All examinations are administered in English, except for the first two years of study of recent immigrants.⁴³ There are no bilingual public schools in Texas. This is important given that 2.6 million of the 5.08 million students attending Texas public schools in 2012-2013 were Latinos.⁴⁴ In short, if they fail to master English, students cannot graduate from high school. Chances of living in poverty are higher for people speaking Spanish than for those who speak only English

In the RGV, chances of living below the poverty line are higher for Spanish speakers than for people who speak only English. In 2013, for a family of four including two children under 18, the poverty threshold was set at 24,624 US dollars.⁴⁵ Figure 5 shows the chances of living below the poverty line and the knowledge of English. It becomes apparent that, in the RGV, belonging to the Spanish-speaking community entails a "negative identification."⁴⁶ In the words of Breton, belonging to the Spanish-speaking community "[gives its members] the feeling of being impaired, inferior, folkloric, and subject to negative stereotypes."⁴⁷ Speaking English is key to social mobility

for Latinos in the U.S.⁴⁸ Others have shown that Mexican-born immigrants know, or feel, the pressure to learn English to succeed in the U.S. Texas Latinos, when surveyed, report how important learning the main language in the country is.⁴⁹

Figure 5: Chances of living below the poverty line by language skills⁵⁰



Furthermore, 70% of the Mexican migrants aged 16 and above were in the workforce, and this can be compared to the 67% for all foreign born and to 63% of native born. However, median household income for Mexican immigrants was at \$36,700, which is almost \$12,000 lower than for the rest of migrants and \$16,000 lower than native born.⁵¹ A study by Grieco and Ray concludes that Mexican immigrants tend to work more in low-paying occupations than other immigrants and the native-born population.⁵² The militarization of the border between Mexico and the US might lower the attractiveness of Spanish

The crime rate in Mexico contributes to the low attractiveness of the Spanish language in the RGV. States in northern Mexico count extensive kidnappings. The Mexican state of Tamaulipas, on the border with Cameron County, is one of the most

dangerous in the country, to the point that officials of the federal U.S. government “are subject to movement restrictions and a curfew between midnight and 6 a.m.”⁵³ The index of perception of corruption by Transparency International ranks Mexico in 103rd position out of 175 countries. In comparison, the United States occupies the 17th rank.⁵⁴

Beyond crime (whose rapid increase has been recorded since 2008 and therefore has probably little impact on current generations in terms of language skills), some have argued that the “militarization” of the U.S. border damages the image of Spanish-speakers.⁵⁵ The RGV is “protected” by a fence on its south side, reminding of the danger in Mexico, the Spanish-speaking country. In addition, the Border Patrol counts 3,056 officers in the RGV.⁵⁶ Also, Texas politicians emphasize operations on border security, whose budget has reached a billion dollars a year since 2008.⁵⁷ Finally, to leave the RGV, one must cross interior checkpoints (set up to prevent illegal immigration coming from Southern countries).⁵⁸ The symbolism of all these measures is that the region south of the Rio Grande—whose main trademark is the Spanish language—is undesirable, reinforcing the desire to detach oneself from it.

Conclusion

The traditional explanation of causality for institutional completeness states that if a language community (such as that of Latinos in the RGV) has institutions in its own language (Spanish), there will be more contacts between members of the group and lower assimilation (to English). Institutions (the independent variable) prevent linguistic assimilation (the dependent variable). We have argued that the reverse direction of causality might hold. The low status associated with the Spanish language in the RGV deters potential (Latino) group members from joining; it leads to the desire to assimilate into the English group. The majority

of potential group members (the Latinos) do not request more Spanish-speaking institutions, especially schools, in the RGV.

Even though the population of over one million people in the RGV in Texas is overwhelmingly of Latino descent and many Mexicans move to the area every year, assimilation of Spanish-speakers toward English is happening. Adults born in Mexico who move to the RGV can live almost exclusively in Spanish if they so choose: governments, churches, TV channels and radio stations, hospitals and clinics, as well as large stores and supply stores, offer services in their mother tongue. Compared to other Latinos in Texas and in the U.S., the case of the four RGV counties (Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy) seems to illustrate the fact that adult migrants who are closer to the border can speak Spanish on a daily basis because they may be immersed in the Mexican culture. Willacy County—the northmost of RGV counties with the highest rate of assimilation—shows the impact of the distance from the border.

Some of the institutions identified by Breton⁵⁹ as likely to strengthen the links within a particular “ethnic” community (e.g., churches, media) operate, in the RGV, in Spanish and other institutions operate only in English (i.e., schools). Although Latinos of the RGV have many potential contacts with Spanish-speakers, there is still a significant uptake of the English language. Schooling exclusively in English is most certainly a key factor in the assimilation. This assimilation can also be attributed to the large difference in quality of life between the US and Mexico, visible thanks to the geographical proximity of the southern neighbor. The attractiveness of the U.S.’s wealth is symbolized by a fence on the southern border of the U.S. in the RGV, by Border Patrol agents, and by internal checkpoints. Spanish language becomes associated with poverty, hence a desire to free oneself from it. There is little doubt that historical factors also contribute to the negative perception of Spanish. Mexican students were affected by segregated schools in Texas

and elsewhere in the U.S. starting in the early 20th century.⁶⁰ Mexican-Americans were also the targets of lynching, including by Texas Rangers.⁶¹

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Endnotes

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