Paper Proposal

The Role of Language in the American Acculturation Experience

This year’s COV&R theme intrigues me; it has a direct relation to issues of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), my field of study. SLA has been an area of applied linguistics since the 1960s. Since that time, researchers have looked at why some people learn second languages (i.e., languages acquired after childhood) more successfully than others. Research has focused on linguistic reasons (e.g., the structure of languages), psycholinguistic reasons (e.g., how language is represented and “stored” in the brain), individual reasons (e.g., characteristics of “successful language learners,” such as motivation), and social reasons (e.g., acculturation of immigrants).

For example, the Acculturation Model of SLA was suggested in the mid-1970s by John Schumann to explain the case of Alberto, a Costa Rican immigrant who, even after a long time immersed in American culture and the English language, had failed to progress in his SLA. The model suggested that SLA was one part of the immigrant’s acculturation, and that Alberto had “fossilized” in his SLA because he had not become acculturated to American life. Schumann’s view of acculturation, however, was fairly neutral: The model predicted success in SLA based on how similar/different the 2 cultures were, and the individual immigrant was somewhat at the mercy of these hard, cold cultural facts.

More recent views of the role of culture in SLA take a less neutral view and see the possibility for cultural violence in the acculturation of immigrants, just as this year’s COV&R theme describes.

The question of What role does acculturation play in the immigrant’s acquisition of a new language? Can be turned around to What role does language play in the acculturation of immigrants? And from there, How are language and religion intertwined in the acculturation experience of immigrant groups (because they often are)? These are the questions I would like to examine in my paper.