

## **‘Converse racialization’ and ‘un/marking’ language: The making of a bilingual university in a neoliberal world**

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### ABSTRACT

The discourse on the opening of a bilingual university along the Texas-Mexico border leads us to propose a theory of ‘converse racialization’ through which the local Spanish is being progressively ‘unmarked’ and disassociated from the language practice of Mexican Americans. Converse racialization, as the equal and opposite co-constituting underside of racialization, shifts the directionality of semiotic indexes away from a particular ‘race’ or ‘ethnicity’ (including whiteness) and produces an apparent state of ‘unmarkedness’. We argue that the process of ‘unmarking’ Spanish has social, economic, and racializing consequences. Specifically, the language-as-resource discourse obscures and rearticulates the ‘deficiency perspective’ that continues to perpetuate structural inequalities that Latinxs in the border face. (Racialization, higher education, critical race theory, bilingualism, neoliberalism)\*

### INTRODUCTION

At the southernmost tip of Texas, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) opened its doors on August 31, 2015 as a ‘bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate’ campus—the only one of its kind and at a scale never before attempted in the United States. Unlike most American universities that tend to limit ‘bilingual’ curricula and instruction to foreign language, bilingual education, or creative writing departments, UTRGV currently offers 188 classes in Spanish or in bilingual format across disciplines, from physics to American history. This is a categorical achievement in the near 200 year-long quest for the educational advancement of Latinxs in Texas—a state historically structured by violent economic and political disenfranchisement as well as a racially segregated education system designed to maintain exploitative labor practices (Montejano 1987; González 1990/2013, 1999; Blanton 2004). In other words, the opening of a major ‘bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate’ university in the state of Texas was, to vastly understate, unlikely. What, then, has changed? To begin to answer this question, UTRGV must be historically situated within contemporary neoliberal economic conditions (Harvey 2005), which are constituted by a competitive, market-oriented rationality that motivates the resignification of language(s) and language skills as ‘assets’ and ‘resources’ in the twenty-first century (Flubacher & Del Percio 2017; Martín

Rojó & Del Percio 2019). This resignification has transformed the conceptual terrain on which the Latinx struggle for equity is grounded. However, if such conceptualizations of ‘language’ and ‘culture’ remain solely limited to what is acceptable to neoliberalism, they will re-inscribe the racial hierarchies and inequalities already systemic to social life in the United States.

UTRGV’s public position remains steadfast: the local South Texas population is imagined to hold bilingual ‘assets’ in Spanish and English—a quantifiable, measurable, and commodifiable resource that will foster economic growth for the state of Texas by ‘producing’ competitive graduates with a dual tripartite ‘bilingual competency’: speaking, reading, and writing in both English and Spanish. The language of the marketplace—resources, assets, productivity, competition—is omnipresent in the public discourse of what is billed as the ‘Bilingual, Bicultural, and Biliterate’ (B3) university. The apparent strategy of the university is to recast the Spanish language, bilingualism, and Mexican American heritage into neoliberal ‘skills’ and ‘diversity’ discourses, which reimagine so-called ‘soft skills’ (all forms of sociality including language competence) as a resource readily exchangeable in the marketplace (Urciuoli 2008, 2016a,b).

As part of a powerful state institution (the University of Texas System), UTRGV is uniquely positioned geographically, demographically, and financially to emerge as an influential actor in the struggle for Latinx educational advancement in the United States (De La Trinidad, Guajardo, Kranz, & Guajardo 2017). To do so, UTRGV is publicly resignifying Spanish and bilingualism into the language-as-resource discourse, which invokes conceptualizations of people and language in a way legible to the marketplace. As we illustrate here, this works in tandem with wider processes of racialization. Here, we are speaking of an institutionally backed (re)racialization—or, *converse racialization*. That is, UTRGV is underwriting a discursive process that resignifies a racialized, stigmatized object (in this case, the Spanish language) into an ‘unmarked’ object or mobile resource disconnected from the local Latinx population in an effort to ‘add value’ to the language (Spanish) and the specific language competence (bilingualism) without necessarily addressing the ongoing racialization of both the language and its speakers in the United States. Specifically, we assert the language-as-resource discourse potentially obscures and rearticulates the ‘deficiency perspective’ (Valencia 2010), which continues to perpetuate the structural inequalities that Latinxs in the border face.

We contribute to the body of scholarship that cautions against conceptualizing language(s) and multilingualism as linguistic ‘assets’ and marketable global resources, which tends to undermine political struggles for equity of language minoritized populations in the United States and around the world (Heller 2003, 2010; Petrovic 2005; Varghese & Park 2010; Heller & Duchêne 2016). However, the central goal of this article is to provide an analytical framework that rests on the discursive process we call *converse racialization*. We believe this helps elucidate how this university was quietly made possible, and how a racialized object such as the

Spanish language appears to be shifting toward a state of ‘unmarkedness’ in an effort to add capitalist value within the tenets of neoliberalism.

We begin with some historical context on Texas, while also drawing attention to particular conceptualizations of language and how these continue to affect Latinxs in the United States. The bulk of this article provides a theoretical foundation from which we present the discursive process of converse racialization, drawing on scholarship from ethnic studies, critical race theory, and linguistic anthropology.

We focus on the descriptive term *unmarked* as an effect of *misrecognition* (Bourdieu 1991)—or the denial of political consequences of a set of practices in an effort to gain legitimacy, often reproducing inequality while disguising the benefits to the dominant population. We suggest reframing both terms of the marked/unmarked dichotomy into equal and opposite co-constitutive processes: *marking* (racialization) and *unmarking* (converse racialization). A discourse analysis is presented to illustrate the processual unmarking of Spanish using various selections of UTRGV marketing texts and media, including their website (e.g. degree plans, implementation plans, and university guidelines), as well as articles and interviews. We argue that the discursive processes of *converse racialization* and *un/mark*ing come with social, economic, and racializing consequences, even though they create an intellectual space to contest neoliberal institutional framings of ‘language’ and ‘culture’.

EMERGING HISTORIES, EMERGING  
CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF LANGUAGE

The use of Spanish in primary and secondary education has not occurred without constant political struggle. Texas initially supported public bilingual education until the years before WWI, which resulted in the state’s 1918 English-only law designed to ‘protect’ democracy from immigrants and force ‘Americanization’. English-only instruction also provided a ‘pedagogical’ justification for the segregation of Mexican American children, now said to need specialized English instruction (Blanton 2004). Racist movements against Spanish speakers often invoked early language research and ‘scientific’ testing measures to back the claim that Mexicans and Mexican Americans suffered from a diminished mental capacity, sometimes framed as due to the Spanish language, and other times due to engaging in bilingual practices (San Miguel 1987, 2001; Delgado Bernal 1999; González 1990/2013, 1999; Blanton 2004). Over time, the Spanish language came to strongly index a specific form of racialized personhood that was ‘naturally deficient’. The ‘deficiency’ perspective—or the perception of persons as always lacking abilities, which in turn tends to erase structurally produced inequalities—remains a powerful ideology to the present day (Valdés 1997; Valencia 2010; Flores & Rosa 2015). It follows then that the neoliberal framing of Spanish-as-resource, where the Spanish language is framed as an ‘asset’, would appear to be a logical response to counter the deficiency perspective in a deep south Texas university.

UTRGV is located in the geographic region known as the Rio Grande Valley (RGV), which has a 90% ‘Hispanic’-identifying population (US Census Bureau 2010). It is located on the southeastern most tip of Texas—a strip of land lining the Rio Grande River that includes the four counties immediately north of Mexico and surrounded by Border Patrol checkpoints on three sides (north, south, and west) with the Gulf of Mexico to the east. The geographic territory itself was once claimed by native and indigenous populations, but it was eventually colonized as part of the Spanish Empire, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the United States (and the Confederacy), and was sometimes claimed by two nations simultaneously (Menchaca 2011; Lozano 2018). In terms of linguistic practice, the Spanish language preceded the arrival of English, that is, English was the ‘foreign’ language in this area.

Spanish in the United States is generally taught as an academic subject following elitist traditions and presented as a ‘foreign’ language, and not in relation to the Spanish spoken by the 50.6 million Latinxs in the United States (García 2014:68). As shown in the analysis below, despite the fact that content classes are being taught in Spanish, UTRGV has chosen to follow a conceptual framing of Spanish as a ‘foreign language’, ignoring its historical presence prior to its colonization by Texas and the United States. To figure out why, we need a broader context.

In the twenty-first century, sociolinguistic scholarship has noted the increased reevaluation of linguistic resources in a global neoliberal economy (Heller 2003, 2010; Moyer & Martín Rojo 2007; Duchêne & Heller 2012; Heller & Duchêne 2016; Martín Rojo & Del Percio 2019). It could be argued that it is these emerging global arrangements along with the rising dominance of the language-as-resource discourse that has enabled the creation of UTRGV as a bilingual English/Spanish institution of higher education in the conservative state of Texas. However, Spanish has already served as an economic resource or has functioned to open up access to other resources for Spanish speakers at various moments in history (Valdés 1997; Villa 2000; Carreira 2000; García & Mason 2009). What is perceived as ‘new’ about this contemporary resignification of Spanish is its broader economic appeal to White-identifying middle and upper classes in the United States—the same groups that have delegitimized the Spanish of Latinxs in the first place (García 2009a; Rumbaut 2009; Flores & Rosa 2015). There is a (re)convergence of interests (Bell 1980; Freire, Valdez, & Delavan 2016) where the dominant (white) population has become increasingly willing to support the interests of subjugated populations in an effort to reproduce their own dominance in a neoliberal world. Additionally, as higher education becomes an increasingly competitive arena (for rankings, for funding, for prestige, for students and faculty), concepts like ‘diversity’, and here, Spanish and bilingualism, become competitive economic interests for universities as well (more on this below).

The public discourse and marketing of English/Spanish bilingualism suggests, intentionally or not, that UTRGV will be ‘producing’ graduates that speak an elite

register of Spanish disconnected from the Spanish speaking homes of the Rio Grande Valley. Readers may wonder how this is different from what happens in universities across Latin America and Spain, where the Spanish register used in university instruction is often different from that used by some in the local population at home. But in those universities, Spanish has not been a racialized object used to perpetuate social inequalities. Instead, Spanish is a national object of pride. When in some instances higher education leads some individuals to appropriate features perceived as standard, this is not seen as debasing a whole community of speakers. In fact, there are many university-educated successful Latin Americans and Spaniards whose Spanish contains features that the university may perceive as nonstandard. Spanish in these national cases continues to be linked to a people whose repertoires demonstrate the variability that marks 'authentic' Spanish speakers. We can, for example, mostly recognize Andalusian, Argentinian, or Cuban Spanish-speaking people across their racial, social class, and gender differences, whether they are using features considered 'standard' or not. Spanish then is always from someplace and produced somewhere by speakers considered authentic and legitimate.

This is not so when a language and its people have been racialized and delegitimized. The Spanish language promoted by UTRGV is said to be 'global', 'modern', and 'foreign', but not definitively linked to a specific country, and especially not the Spanish-speaking homes of Rio Grande Valley residents—a *foreign-not-family* discursive frame that advances a language from nowhere. Yet, a language from nowhere does not exist. In this case, Spanish is, at minimum, from anywhere else but 'home'—a *language-elsewhere* that can be recognized as a 'standard' register that is not marked by a history of the racializing deficiency perspective. This kind of unmarking could potentially 'add value' to Spanish without altering the subordinated status or perceived 'otherness' of Latinxs who are (or imagined to be) Spanish speakers in the United States. Put another way, a 'Spanish-elsewhere' is meant to index a specific 'unmarked' institutionally legitimized language practice and form of neoliberal personhood, which will likely resignify the language without resignifying the racialized Latinx bodies who use it (or are imagined to use it). Unmarking social phenomena, then, comes with a set of interests—racial, symbolic, economic—which are veiled through the process of unmarking. A racialized, stigmatized object, such as the Spanish language, is resignified as an 'unmarked' object in an effort to add capitalist value within the tenets of neoliberalism. Next, we identify the theoretical grounding from which we advance the notion of converse racialization and unmarking.

#### THEORIZING CONVERSE RACIALIZATION AND UN/MARKING

Bonnie Urciuoli (1996) has studied how groups are discursively racialized. We would like to posit another active form of discursive race formation, *converse*

*racialization*. Specifically, converse racialization shifts the directionality of semiotic indexes—signs that draw connections and lines of contiguity—away from a particular ‘race’ or ‘ethnicity’ (including whiteness) and toward an apparent state of ‘unmarkedness’.

A focus on indexicality foregrounds the ongoing emergence of meanings that may be activated (or erased) in particular contexts that are themselves situated within constellations of ideologically related meanings, or what Penelope Eckert (2008) calls ‘indexical fields’. Indexicals come bundled with presupposed meanings and histories that entail a range of productive effects on any given context, which may reinforce previous indexical connections or forge new ones (Silverstein 2003a). Indexicality is a culturally embedded mode of signification interpreted by human agents. People come to notice, in varying degrees of intensity, only some signs as connecting to other signs, while others are taken for granted. And, the degree to which some sign becomes marked by a particular meaning depends on the degree to which a sign is conventionalized, or institutionalized. That is, indexical fields may be rearranged and over time lead human agents to interpret them as cohering into relatively stable racializing discourses that MARK certain groups, bodies, and linguistic practices in everyday social life.

Urciuoli (1996) employed an oppositional, contrastive relation with poles ranging from ‘marked’ to ‘unmarked’ to describe the degree or intensity of racialization. Persons and practices perceived as ‘unmarked’ implies a political positionality considered normative, which becomes the ground by which difference is measured—meaning nonwhiteness emerges in relation to whiteness. To reproduce its positioning as ‘unmarked’, whiteness must be institutionally legitimated, adapted, and modified (through academia, education, law, politics, economics, etc.) in a way that backgrounds or erases its hierarchical privilege to define and naturalize social relations. Crucially, ‘unmarked’ phenomena cannot exist without an ‘unmarked’ perspective that recognizes phenomena as such. The perspective that entails ‘unmarkedness’ is not a timeless reality, but is a co-constitutive effect of the active process of *unmarking*. Converse racialization gives name to the specific form of discursive race formation that perpetuates the erasure of indexicals that could draw attention to any potentially non-normative aspect of a given phenomenon, which creates particular affordances—possibilities, likelihoods, and constraints—unequally distributed across white- and nonwhite-identifying populations.

*Converse racialization* does not simply refer to the racialization of a white race group, but to its on-going constitution as the social and political norm that maintains the domination of minoritized groups. Therefore, converse racialization can be a discursive tool for the domination and oppression of black and brown bodies. In this sense, converse racialization (unmarking) has always been integral to racialization (marking); it only draws less attention to itself—meaning racialization and its converse are equal co-constitutive processes of *un/mark*ing. Yet, stigmatized groups, bodies, and linguistic practices may also undergo unmarking. However, we should not assume that when converse racialization is applied to stigmatized

populations that the privilege to order social relations and hierarchies that are afforded to white populations are equally extended to nonwhite populations. Instead, the unmarking of stigmatized groups/practices produces a different set of affordances that can be beneficial, but also potentially dangerous if accepted uncritically. For these reasons, we assert non-white groups/practices do not undergo a uniform 'de-racialization', but a *re-racialization* that becomes more acceptable or less subversive from a historically legitimated institutional positionality.

Unmarking produces the effect of 'normalcy' detached from social inequality, racial subjugation, and political struggle that leaves the phenomenon neutral, unnoticed, unspoken, and literally unremarkable. These norms are in turn *misrecognized* (Bourdieu 1991) as natural and timeless by veiling the historical processes that produced those norms, and thus reducing the likelihood of their being perceived or remarked upon in a way that would encourage critique, or to be discursively remarked upon. Without directing our analysis toward both sides of the *un/marking* process, developing the critical awareness to respond effectively to hegemonic racializing projects remains unlikely. In the next sections, we foreground the processual unmarking of Spanish at UTRGV, which, as mentioned above, affords new avenues to contest the racial subordination of the Latinx community, but is also coupled with potential dangers.

#### BECOMING A 'BILINGUAL' UNIVERSITY IN A NEOLIBERAL WORLD: STRATEGIC PLANNING

This analysis of *unmarking* must be historically situated within a contemporary neoliberalizing field of higher education, which encourages, and indeed puts into practice, a specific set of behaviors and form of rationality that privileges 'entrepreneurialism' and 'competition' as the 'unmarked' norm. Since the 1990s, universities have been more intensely positioned to compete in the neoliberal global market (Levidow 2005), leading to a wide adoption of market-oriented and managerial procedures (Shumar 1997; Tuchman 2009), campuses steeped in 'corporate culture' (Giroux 2002; Levin 2005, 2006), and an overall economic restructuring (Slaughter & Rhoades 2004)—or what scholars have described as the 'neoliberalization' of the academy (Saunders 2010). Universities are observed to be acting as entrepreneurial competitors that produce entrepreneurial individuals (Zimmermann & Flubacher 2017)—that is, idealized subjects that make 'rational,' market-oriented choices, under constant self-improvement, and maximally responsible for one's own success and failure. This is an historically situated form of 'neoliberal agency' where people are expected to reflexively run themselves as though they were a business, which changes what it means to be an individual (Gershon 2011). Universities, then, must strategically plan how they will project themselves, or forge indexical connections between themselves, their competitive graduates, and the future of the global marketplace.

We begin our analysis with the publication in March 2017 of UTRGV's five-year university strategic plan (University of Texas Rio Grande Valley 2017a,b). The announcement of its publication appeared in the *Rio Grande Guardian*, the Rio Grande Valley's 'first and leading' online newspaper dedicated to South Texas border issues. Outgoing Provost Havidán Rodríguez commented on the importance of the strategic plan, stating:

It is important because it defines the university for the Rio Grande Valley. It defines who we are and where we are headed as a university. We are here to serve the people of the Rio Grande Valley. The people we are addressing are either students, the parents of students, the grandparents of students, the neighbors of students, the parents of future students, we are all impacted by what happens at the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley. (Reyes 2017)

Provost Rodríguez is quoted at length to emphasize the perceived connection between the university and the local student/parent population. The UTRGV is a 'distributed campus' with many teaching sites spread over 100+ miles along the US-Mexico border serving primarily students who already live in the four most southern counties in Texas (Starr, Hidalgo, Willacy, and Cameron). Approximately 93.5% of the 27,809 students are local residents of the Rio Grande Valley (Institutional summary, 2017–2018).<sup>1</sup> Of the total student population 89% identify as Hispanic. The strategic plan describes itself as the starting point for the university's development and is meant to be a 'live' document that is reviewed every six months. While the strategic plan is designed to serve regional needs, it interdiscursively links to two previously released University of Texas System guidelines referred to as the Guiding Principles (released in 2013) and the Quantum Leaps (released in 2015).<sup>2</sup>

The goals of the Quantum Leaps are meant to be generally applicable to all Texas universities within the UT System. For example, some general goals include 'increase the number of students entering the college pipeline' and 'build the state's and nation's next generation of leaders'. The Quantum Leaps initiatives (included in the strategic plan appendix) is frequently referred to throughout the UTRGV strategic plan. By contrast, the earlier published Guiding Principles (also included in the strategic plan appendix) were passed down from the UT System Board of Regents in 2013 for the purpose of directing the designing and planning of the institution that would become UTRGV two years later. In no uncertain terms, the vision embedded in these fifteen state-level guiding principles imagines a university that is globally competitive. More than half of the principles include phrases like, 'become a global leader in higher education', 'help solve local, state, national and global problems', 'improve the quality of life for the region, the state, the nation and our world', and, eventually the end goal to serve as the 'Gateway to the Americas'. While the Guiding Principles do mention the importance of the 'region', the 'local', and the 'community', ultimately, the principles forge indexical links that go 'beyond' the Rio Grande Valley—that is, connect the university's relevance across spatial and temporal scales: from the community, to the regional, to the state, to the global, and from the past/present into the future.

The title of the strategic plan, ‘Transforming our world’ (University of Texas Rio Grande Valley 2017a), produces a globally linked conceptualization of UTRGV. This is in stark contrast to the quote from the *Rio Grande Guardian* presented above where Provost Rodríguez places heavy emphasis on defining UTRGV through its local student/parent population. Notably, the perceived bilingualism of the current and incoming student population of UTRGV is not listed as a ‘Core priority’ in the strategic plan, but located in a separate section called ‘Other key areas of focus’. The strategic plan was a coordinated, highly inclusive effort between a strategic plan committee, a strategic planning steering committee, and fifteen additional subcommittees, all tasked with collecting data and feedback from December 2015 until its publication in March 2017. The strategic plan is a full color, professional marketing document that comes in three versions: a forty-page version, a shortened twenty-four-page ‘overview’ version (where every other page has photos of campus life), and a ‘summary’ version that is two pages of text. With this said, we assume every aspect of the final draft of the strategic plan was intentional—that is, takes into account local, national, and global political, marketing, and educational trends.

In Shumar’s (1997) ethnographic account of a neoliberalizing university, he notes that publicly disseminated university brochures as well as strategic planning are directly taken from corporate marketing and organizational methods. At UTRGV, the strategic plan doubles as a marketing brochure to attract prospective students and their parents both within and ‘beyond’ the Rio Grande Valley. Notably, no translations into Spanish have been made of the strategic plan or the university website, which were early goals in the opening of the university. At a practical level, we discovered this is a staffing issue. However, this also reveals who remains the prioritized audience: English speakers/readers. To become ‘globally’ relevant in a neoliberal world means taking strategic steps to frame cultural or racial difference as nonthreatening to the institutional order—that is, making the already bilingual population of the university ‘officially’ bilingual in terms legible to a neoliberal marketplace. In this sense, UTRGV must take careful steps to not mark itself as ‘too different’ or somehow outside neoliberal values, while also manipulating (resignifying) the meaning of racially marked objects—like ‘language’ and ‘culture’—into objects that have the potential to index a ‘competitive edge’ for the institution and prospective students.

The texts presented illustrate how a university might project itself into the global marketplace; it must offer something unique to be competitive, but not in a subversive way. This became the condition for which Spanish and bilingualism were able to be reimagined, not as a source of racial ‘deficiency,’ or as a politically charged object, but as an ‘unmarked’ competitive asset. We previously asserted that a broader neoliberal rationality has produced an unmarked *foreign-not-family* linguistic register, a *language-elsewhere* disconnected from ‘culture’ and history. Next, we analyze the public discourse of various university actors to illustrate when and where such conceptualizations emerge and how they align with a

broader neoliberal rationality that serves to un/mark language in a specific way: as a ‘competitive edge’.

‘UNMARKING’ THE SPANISH LANGUAGE:  
PRODUCING A COMPETITIVE EDGE

For Spanish to be discursively framed as an unmarked, competitive global resource, it must be detached from the local and resignified as a ‘foreign’ language, as a language-elsewhere, not learned ‘naturally’ at home, but as an academic subject (García 2014). This form of Spanish-language competency indexes an individual actor who invested their time in learning, and therefore, invested in themselves (Martín Rojo 2019). UTRGV continues this tradition by offering graduate and undergraduate degrees in the Department of Literatures and Cultural Studies where Spanish (along with French) are described as ‘modern’, but also as a ‘foreign’ language on the department website. The website describes the Rio Grande Valley as a ‘center of social, commercial and professional activity that is conducted either entirely in Spanish, or bilingually in Spanish and English’. More often than not, the UTRGV website indexically links Spanish to commercial/professional linguistic practice while downplaying, backgrounding, or erasing (Irvine & Gal 2000) what could be described as ‘informal’ or ‘family’ linguistic practice and appealing to what we previously called a *foreign-not-family* register of Spanish, a language-elsewhere. However, if the goal is the unmarking of Spanish, why would UTRGV continue to describe the language as ‘foreign’?

Latinxs, and specifically, persons of Mexican descent (or imagined to be of Mexican descent), have historically been cast as ‘foreign’, which ‘DISTANCED them both from Euro-Americans culturally and from the Southwest as spatial referent: it stripped Mexicans of the claim of belonging that they had had as natives, even as conquered natives’ (Ngai 2004:133, our emphasis). In an institution of higher education, the designation ‘foreign’ may serve a related distancing function. Rosa (2016) asserts that one way we might dissociate Spanish from present-day stigmatized Spanish-speaking populations is to position the language as part of an imagined Latinx past—a form of temporal distancing. In this sense, a Spanish from a ‘foreign’ past implies a successful assimilation into (white) American society instead of a language marked by American history as the ‘language of the conquered, the colonized and the immigrants; that is, as a *language of poverty*’ (García & Mason 2009:78, italics in original). UTRGV’s description of Spanish as ‘foreign’, but also ‘global’ and ‘modern’ may serve as both a spatial and temporal distancing strategy. ‘Foreign’ indexes outside of the historical United States, while ‘modern’ AND ‘foreign’ index an academic register from elsewhere that can be projected into a global future unhindered by American history. Additionally, the Spanish language (and its real and imagined speakers) continues to be framed as dangerous to the linguistic orderliness of the United States (Hill 1998; Leeman 2004; Zentella 2009; Otheguy & Stern 2011; Otheguy 2016) and

remains too threatening to be presented as an ‘American language’ (Lozano 2018). This section analyzes discursive examples of *converse racialization*—the *unmarking* of a racially stigmatized linguistic object (the Spanish language)—found in interviews with various actors (students, professors, administrators, and politicians) of the UTRGV’s bilingual initiative, while paying close attention to the way language skills become indexically linked to notions of global competitiveness (see Piller & Cho 2013).

In 2014, before the legacy institutions University of Texas Pan-American (UTPA) and University of Brownsville (UTB) were officially combined, renamed, and ‘reopened’ as UTRGV, the news of the bilingual initiative began drawing public feedback. UTPA Professor Victor Alvarado expressed excitement to the *Rio Grande Guardian*, stating:

The idea is terrific. I think it would make this place a very UNIQUE one.... But, by the same token I think it is going to be extremely difficult to do unless they begin to actively recruit faculty who come, perhaps, FROM OTHER LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES. They were very happy to see somebody speaking in their own language, CORRECTLY and they could follow it. (Taylor 2014, our emphasis)

Alvarado hails from Chile and has supported the idea of UTPA becoming bilingual for many years and believes it would be a source of ‘uniqueness’. In the same interview, he recounted a story of his experience attempting to teach a course in Spanish at UTPA in 1972.

After five minutes[,] I had to stop because the students had no idea what I was talking about. They did not have the technical vocabulary, they did not know how to write or take notes, except for the few who were from OTHER LATIN AMERICAN COUNTRIES. They were very happy to see somebody speaking in their own language, CORRECTLY and they could follow it. (Taylor 2014, our emphasis)

The primary obstacle that Alvarado perceives is that the students and faculty are not, as he describes, ‘truly bilingual’ and ‘never studied Spanish formally’, except those who came from ‘foreign countries, Mexico, South America or Spain’. Those who he considers bilingual students only ‘learn Spanish at a colloquial level’. Undoubtedly, the ‘colloquial’ Spanish he refers to is the local register of Spanish heard in homes, restaurants, the campus cafeteria, but also local businesses and politics. Alvarado finds it more plausible to attract professors from other countries (from elsewhere) who speak ‘correct’ Spanish (a Spanish-elsewhere) to take over the bilingual initiative. These faculty members would also potentially serve the purpose of embodying indexical connections ‘beyond’ the Rio Grande Valley—that is, to the southern hemisphere and Europe. This aligns with our assertion that a foreign-not-family model advocates for a specific register of Spanish, a language-elsewhere, as more valuable, or to Alvarado simply ‘correct’ in comparison to the regional Spanish register, or even any Spanish learned in the United States. This seems at odds with characterizations of the Rio Grande Valley being a region full of pre-existing linguistic ‘assets’. This is not, however, at odds with producing a globally linked competitive university.

In another interview, former UTRGV Provost Rodríguez locates the source of uniqueness the university offers.

We want people to know we are very serious about this.... When the UT-System Board of Regents announced the formation of UTRGV they set up about 15 guiding principles and one of those guiding principles was to become a bilingual, bi-cultural, and bi-literate university. ... I think it is going to make us UNIQUE around the country. (Taylor 2016a, our emphasis)

The guiding principle he cites states, ‘Promote arts and humanities programs to produce STATE, NATIONAL and WORLD LEADERS who are bi-cultural, bi-lingual [sic] and bi-literate’ (our emphasis). This particular principle sets up the possibility of publicly marketing UTRGV as not only a globally linked Hispanic-serving institution, but also an institution with a ‘unique’ competitive edge. The Provost further characterizes UTRGV as an ‘economic engine for the region’ (Taylor 2016b) and the local Latinx population as a ‘major, major strength’ that ‘we have got to embrace’—additionally noting that ‘we have not found another example [of a bilingual university] in the United States’ (Taylor 2016a). However, to project UTRGV as nationally competitive, this ‘uniqueness’ must be framed in the ‘right way’ (Gershon 2016:237), or not subversive to a marketplace rationality.

Francisco Guajardo, the Executive Director of the B3 (Bilingual, Bicultural, and Biliterate) Institute responsible for overseeing the implementation of bilingualism, biculturalism, and biliteracy across the university, similarly identifies the Guiding Principles as a crucial step toward implementing a university-wide bilingual format. Guajardo explains:

So, in some ways, the [UT System Board of] Regents were saying to us [through the Guiding Principles], the door is open to explore some of the natural ASSETS, the geographical ASSETS, the cultural ASSETS, maybe as part of how you shape the new university. (Taylor 2016c, our emphasis)

In Guajardo’s academic publications (Guajardo & Guajardo 2004, 2017), the word ‘asset’ is often employed to counter the perception of Mexican and Mexican Americans in the Rio Grande Valley as culturally, linguistically, and racially ‘deficient’. Often, he speaks of ‘assets’ in terms of the strength and resilience of the south Texas border communities and their language practices that continue to thrive in spite of the historical subjugation of persons of Mexican descent. Indeed, English and Spanish is heard in most, if not all, arenas of life in the Rio Grande Valley. Yet, when the term ‘asset’ is contextualized across interviews and positioned within global discursive trends, the term ‘asset’ is swept up in the dominant indexical field of neoliberal discourses and becomes indexically linked with serving a competitive function and less associated with the history of Latinx ethnoracial subordination. More specifically, within the rationality of neoliberalism, Spanish ‘adds value’ when racialized subjects are perceived as learning Spanish as an elite register that indexes an individual who acquires additional language competencies to become competitive in the marketplace. This process forms a ‘linguistic elite’ (Silverstein 2003b) whose subject position indexes competitive potential and recognition in a neoliberal global marketplace. And, if a university is involved in

producing globally competitive graduates, it can stake a claim to being a globally competitive university, and even a producer of competition itself. This creates a chain of indexicality between neoliberal subjects unaffiliated with any ethnoracial group, but instead linked to an institution with aspirations to compete in the marketplace at a global scale.

Director Guajardo imagines the possibility of other universities following in the footsteps of UTRGV.

When we do this, other people will say, not only is this interesting, not only is that compelling, but that gives them [UTRGV] a competitive edge. People are always looking for a competitive edge, in all walks of life. ... I do expect that a lot of eyes will be on us and we welcome that. (Taylor 2016c)

Here, being ‘competitive’ at the institutional scale is positioned as normative, while simultaneously forging indexes of competition between and among individuals as both desirable and itself a source of value “in all walks of life.” Bilingualism is not only predicted to be the ‘competitive edge’ the university will be capitalizing on; it is a competitive edge that will be passed onto emerging bilingual graduates from UTRGV—that is, theoretically the students themselves will graduate with institutionally legitimated linguistic assets (bilingualism and biliteracy), but also something called ‘biculturalism’.

As scholars have identified, the language of ‘diversity’ goes together with concepts like ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘inclusion’, with little evidence that initiatives framed as such do anything to actually alter structural inequity (Melamed 2011; Ahmed 2012; Patel 2015; Urciuoli 2016a,b). One of UTRGV’s proposed values of the strategic plan is named ‘Diversity, access, and inclusion’. It states, ‘Establishing an accessible educational environment requires that we cultivate and enhance the DIVERSE, MULTICULTURAL, AND LINGUISTIC ASSETS of our university and the Rio Grande Valley’ (our emphasis). The statement does more than propose an institutional value; it frames aspects of local life as a set of objectified assets that can be acquired as a ‘competitive edge’ by prospective students without mentioning exactly what culture(s), what language(s), and what kind of diversity, which has the effect of unmarking each conceptual object by cloaking them in ambiguity. Nevertheless, there is some imagined ‘unique’ and ‘competitive’ edge—cultural asset(s) and linguistic asset(s)—that can be acquired by UTRGV graduates as two separate things, or as *parallel objectifications* disconnected from history and recognized in a form that ‘adds value’ to neoliberal subjects (Urciuoli 2016b).

The ‘competitive edge’ theme is echoed in three interviews (one professor, one student, and one regional political leader) conducted by the international online news media company, TRT World, whose headquarters is in Turkey and promises to give ‘new perspectives on world events to a global audience’.<sup>3</sup> This news story was uploaded about two years after the opening of UTRGV and features footage from a bilingual classroom being taught by Professor Dagoberto Ramirez. From his UTRGV university office, Ramirez states, “If my students are going to get a nursing degree, and they can speak English and Spanish, they’ll be hired anywhere

along the border, anywhere in large cities”. Bilingualism is presented as an asset and competitive edge that indexes an imagined potential for geographic mobility that can be valued in itself, which is acquired through language skills, which is acquired through individual self-development (Gao & Park 2015). In the next scene showing Ramirez leading a classroom discussion on bilingualism, he proudly exclaims, “A person with two languages is worth two people”. Here Ramirez equates a bilingual worker with the value (and pay?) of two workers—a competitive edge that indexes upward mobility—a proposition that is not supported by any conclusive data (Villa & Villa 2005). This is, however, a distinctly neoliberal form of personhood whose value is based on an accumulated assemblage of competitive skills.

In an interview with one of Ramirez’s students, Sofía Gonzolas says through a regionally marked register of English, “You can get more opportunity, careers, in career-wise. And you can get more comfortable communicating with people”. Sofía Gonzolas similarly correlates bilingualism with ‘opportunity’—that is, access to a selection of otherwise unattainable careers now available with an additional language skill, which is imagined to be legitimated through the university, not by everyday practice. If language can be imagined as a quantifiable increase to ones’ human capital, it can then also be filtered through a speculative cost-benefit analysis and further projected onto a quantifiable increase in career opportunity—meaning, more languages, more jobs. The statements by Professor Ramirez and student Gonzolas directly align with a number of neoliberal propositions that perpetuate the idea that language has an inherent economic value that can be transformed into an unmarked object that ‘adds value,’ not to everyone, but to university students engaged in making themselves linguistically competitive, what scholar Luisa Martín Rojo (2019) has aptly called a ‘self-made speaker’.

Included in this same news story is an interview with the highest-ranking chairman of the local Republican Party, Sergio Sanchez. While Sanchez asserts that English is the ‘unofficial’ language of the United States, a bilingual competence is good for the local and international economy. When asked to relate his position on UTRGV’s bilingual initiative, he states, “For me, it’s a marketable skill and I would desire that of all the kids going to the university, and, because it is an international market and international trade, because of NAFTA, it’s beneficial”. Sanchez seems to be implying that ‘kids going to the university’ are not already bilingual, or not yet marketable as such. In other words, a language practice that indexes ‘kids’ learning language at home does not index the ‘desirable’ type of neoliberal subjectivity or institutional legitimacy that can be considered a marketable skill. The news story includes a short video clip of President Trump shaking hands while walking down a busy sidewalk, which is used to contextualize the interview by indirectly indexing the racializing comments Trump had recently made while announcing his presidential run in 2015, the now infamous comments on Mexican’s ‘bringing drugs’, ‘bringing crime’, and being ‘rapists’. Yet, when

Spanish is discursively framed as an ‘unmarked’ competitive economic asset it can be insulated from political critique.

Importantly, we see three individual actors in vastly differentiated subject positions (faculty, student, and a political figure) all reproducing discursive formulations of ‘language’ within the competition-driven logic of neoliberalism. Specifically, the idea is that the most valuable kind of bilingualism (with respect to Spanish in the United States) entails a Spanish from elsewhere acquired by competitive subjects that ‘made the effort’ to learn an elite register of Spanish, which in turn shifts indexes away from the family and community practice and instead forges cross-scalar indexes of competitiveness: from the global, to the international, to the institutional, and to the individual. However, this unmarking is not going unnoticed, and some of the strongest critiques also come from the UTRGV faculty.

#### CONTESTING THE TAMING OF THE WILD TONGUE

One of the most vocal critics of the university’s bilingual initiative is Professor Stephanie Alvarez, the founding director of the Center for Mexican American Studies at UTRGV. At the time of this interview with the *Texas Observer* (Tyx 2017), the Mexican-American Studies department had only two faculty members, including Alvarez. For Alvarez, the marketing and focus on the university’s goal to become ‘bilingual’ has deflected attention from the Mexican American studies program, which critically analyzes the history and culture of borderlands regions like South Texas. Alvarez describes the marketing of the university succinctly:

It is easy to sell bilingual[ism] in some ways. ... Many, many people speak Spanish in the [Rio Grande] Valley. It’s not threatening. Whereas [with] Mexican-American studies, you have to have difficult conversations. You’re possibly producing new knowledge that disrupts the dominant narrative, which for some people makes them very uncomfortable. (Tyx 2017)

Here, Alvarez describes what she interprets as the goal of UTRGV, which is to produce ‘bilingual, biliterate’ students, but not ‘bicultural’ students—meaning she perceives the university as attempting to unmark the students and the geographic region by suppressing the historical knowledge of political struggle of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. This includes the history of Latinx education in Texas (and the southwest) in which dominant economic forces shaped education to become a powerful institutional mechanism that reproduced a strictly horizontal movement on the hierarchical socioeconomic scale, which, not coincidentally, doubly entrenched the ethnoracial subordination of Latinx communities (Montejano 1987; González 1990/2013,1999; Muñoz 1989/2007).

Additionally, Alvarez notes that no other degree plan besides Mexican American Studies requires a Mexican American studies course. We can suggest that one potential end result may be the production of bilingual Latinx graduates that speak a register of Spanish no longer marked by the centuries-long historical oppression and domination of racialized real or imagined Spanish-speaking

populations—that is, the kind of ‘disrupting’ knowledge and counter-narratives that could serve as a catalyst for a deeper critical awareness of hegemonic hierarchical orderings of ‘race’, ‘language’, and ‘culture’ in the United States. Indeed, there is no mention of a ‘Mexican culture’ or ‘Mexican American culture’ anywhere in the strategic plan. Un/marking, then, both unwrites and rewrites history, which entails new possibilities, trajectories, and likelihoods in future decision making.

In isolation, each identified moment of discursive converse racialization cannot successfully shift racializing indexes toward a state of ‘unmarkedness’. Only cumulatively and over time will the discursive links reorganize the indexical field to more forcefully emerge and cohere into a stable discursive indexical chain that resignifies Spanish as a resource and commodifiable asset detached from Spanish speakers and Latinx ‘culture’. Yet, the establishment of a bilingual university remains an important step for Latinxs and RGV residents. It would also be misguided to equate university marketing strategies and public discourse with the work being done in the classroom and around the campus. Director Guajardo, himself an experienced scholar-activist, recognizes that UTRGV ‘stands at its own point of innovation, as it seeks to reconcile issues of race, culture, language, and identity through its institution-building efforts’ (De La Trinidad, Guajardo, Kranz, & Guajardo 2017:53). Crucially, Guajardo continues to advocate for pedagogies grounded in alternative epistemological terrains that confront the particular issues faced by stigmatized populations in order to create new possibilities and avenues for research (Guajardo & Guajardo 2004, 2017; Guajardo 2007). In this sense, Director Guajardo and Professor Alvarez are critically aware of the need to proceed with caution.

Important to Guajardo is making space for the practical reality of the faculty’s training, expertise, and linguistic capacity to teach in Spanish or bilingually. In a conversation with Guajardo in August 2017, he states, “we need to explore, you know, who we are. And, how we language is how we make sense of the world”. Paradoxically, the creation of a bilingual university that was made possible by a process of unmarking Spanish is precisely what has created the intellectual space to question the role that language has had in the history of domination of Mexican Americans. Guajardo has been ‘pushing the envelope’ by inviting dialogue with scholars who, extending the legacy of Anzaldúa (1987), offer a critical view of language—Spanish, English, and bilingualism. A faculty learning community where faculty across academic disciplines come together to discuss language in the borderlands and its role in the struggle has been developed by two faculty members, Alissa Cavazos and Sandra Musanti (see Musanti & Cavazos 2018). Together some members of the faculty are beginning to design pedagogies and curriculum that respond to the body politics of knowledge in the epistemological fronteras in which languaging and learning take place at UTRGV.

One of UTRGV’s most prestigious alumni is Gloria Anzaldúa, who received her bachelor’s degree from what was then Pan American University. The process of converse racialization and the unmarking of Spanish that we have been describing has been conducted with what Audre Lorde has called the ‘master’s tools’ that ‘will

never enable us to bring genuine change' (1979). Those whose locus of enunciation is a *Nepantla*, the Nahuatl word used by Anzaldúa to describe the *tierra entre medio*, the *frontera*, must release what she calls their 'wild tongue' (1987). It is that wild tongue, and not simply a tamed or 'unmarked' tongue, that could speak the silences in knowledge that can challenge the prevailing social structures. Transformation, says Anzaldúa, 'occurs in this in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries' (2002:1). To escape the regulatory force of language—English or Spanish, or English AND Spanish—one has to exert 'an other thinking' (Mignolo 2000) for which 'an other tongue' is necessary. Only the body politics of bilingual minoritized and racialized peoples who understand the power of their own languaging can alter the knowledge-power structure that continues to hide the histories of social and economic domination in the invention of languages (Makoni & Pennycook 2007). And although precarious, a space has been created in UTRGV to start exploring some of these linguistic histories and practices, including what some have called *translanguaging* (García 2009b; García & Li Wei 2014). *Translanguaging* work is a political act (Flores 2014), disrupting the circle of oppression created by the regulatory force of named languages in institutions. Through these explorations some institutional spaces are being created at UTRGV to critically reflect on how the unmarking of Spanish and bilingualism has enabled a process of converse racialization that could also be used to exclude them, despite the university now being declared 'bilingual', 'bicultural', and 'biliterate'.

## CONCLUSION

The processes of converse racialization and the unmarking of Spanish has been the motor that has enabled the creation and operation of a bilingual university at the border. We have shown how a gradual discursive process has been in operation to achieve this goal. But lest the efforts just extend the social and economic domination of the past into the contemporary neoliberal condition, a different conversation is needed, one that does not fall into the unmarking of either English or Spanish but that leverages the complex linguistic histories and ethnographies of Mexican Americans in the *frontera*.

This article has presented an analytic that we find to be a crucial simultaneous underside, and less examined aspect of racialization: the *converse racialization* process or the *unmarking* process that produces the misrecognition of 'unmarkedness', as opposed to producing the perception of 'whiteness' as the social and political norm that maintains the domination of minoritized groups. Racialization does not go uncontested, is highly undetermined, and necessarily comes with contradictory political and economic interests from and within those of the local level, including views from students and professors. We have asserted that it is important to continue to preserve and foreground the historical struggle of Spanish speakers in the United States as a way to combat the ongoing social stigmatization of Latinx

and Spanish speakers and the entailed political economic inequities—that is, to bring the racial referents back in, particularly in situations where unmarking has erased the history of racial subordination that upholds the social and economic interests of one group over another.

We have asserted that an ‘unmarked’ Spanish-elsewhere emerged from, and indeed, facilitates the ongoing production of the deficiency perspective. We should ask: Will the ‘value added’ to a Spanish-elsewhere indexically linked with an ‘unmarked’ form of neoliberal personhood (as opposed to a Latinx bilingual personhood) actually offset the social cost of being perceived as ‘deficient’ in the United States? Our answer: no. Or, rather, not without critique and strategic practical responses to both racialization and converse racialization. We suggest one political intervention in the fight against racism is marking racializing projects that engage in the unmarking of language and whiteness and serve to protect and reproduce the on-going dominance of whiteness in the United States.

## NOTES

\*This article benefited greatly from critiques and conversations with Anna Kushner, Ricardo Otheguy, and Angela Reyes. We also recognize the crucial and insightful feedback from Judith Irvine and the anonymous reviewer.

<sup>1</sup>See [https://www.utrgv.edu/sair/\\_files/documents/instsummary2017.pdf](https://www.utrgv.edu/sair/_files/documents/instsummary2017.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>Guiding Principles and Quantum Leaps can be found in the appendix of the strategic plan (University of Texas Rio Grande Valley 2017a,b).

<sup>3</sup>Going bilingual at University of Texas (2017). TRT World. Online: <https://www.trtworld.com/americas/going-bilingual-at-university-of-texas-5263>.

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(Received 08 February 2019; revision received 06 September 2019; accepted 30 January 2020; final revision received 31 January 2020)

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