

**Perceptions of register variation in the public space: Young bilinguals' assessments  
language access for health care along the Texas-Mexico border**

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Language access is an important determinant of unequal care and uneven health outcomes in Latino populations (IOM 2003). Policy formation at the federal, organizational and state levels has been directed at improving language access for patients with limited English proficiency including the use of signage and print materials in languages other than English (OMH 2001). The implementation of such policy, however, has not been uniform (Martinez 2009). Language access measures in healthcare organizations vary by region, type of facility, and access strategy. The wide array of language access measures employed is reflected by highly salient register variation in health-related messages in Spanish (Halliday 1978). Such variation is observable in field—technical terms in English are substituted for generic and non-technical terms in Spanish—mode—the visual presentation of signs in English differs from signs in Spanish – and tenor—the relationship between the author and the audience varies between English and Spanish. A photovoice approach (Wang & Burris 1997) was used to gain access to community perceptions and interpretations of register variation in Spanish language health information in the border region. A purposeful convenience sample of 20 young bilinguals was recruited. Participants were young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 who have acted as health information brokers in their families. An orientation meeting was conducted to familiarize participants with language access policies and with the methods of photovoice. Participants collected photographs that represented language access in clinics, hospitals, and doctor's offices in their communities and provided captions for each photo. Discussion groups were held to incite critical dialogue and reflection on the photos presented.

The results show that Spanish and English are unevenly distributed in public spaces within health service organization. Photo evidence revealed that Spanish language signage and materials are focused primarily on “marketable” information, e.g. clinic hours of operation, payment options, services available. It also revealed that English language signage and materials include a broad array of information types including marketable information, disease prevention information, and health promotion information. Finally, the evidence revealed that Spanish signs tend to contain higher degrees of orthographic variation and emphasize an asymmetric relationship of domination between author and addressee in comparison to English signs. Young bilinguals interpret this distribution as a persistent inequality that must be addressed in policy at federal, organizational, and state levels. The results of this study provide further evidence of an uneven implementation of federal language access policy in the border region.