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Let Us Speak: Aurora Lucero's Speech and the Spanish Language of New Mexico

Elena V. Valdez, New Mexico Highlands University

When the territory of New Mexico was considered for statehood in the decades following the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848, which ceded much of what is now the US Southwest to the United States, the linguistic and ethnic identities of the territory's inhabitants were regularly cited as reasons not to admit New Mexico to the union (Nieto-Phillips, 2004). In 1910, Congress proposed an Enabling Act that would have both required English-only instruction in the schools and people to speak, read, and write in English to be employed in government (González-Berry, 2002; Gallegos, 2014). The act was criticized for attempting to circumvent the political power of the Spanish-speaking community and deny their children an education in their heritage language.

A teenager by the name of Aurora Lucero was among those who spoke against the bill that would enable New Mexico to become a state. In a speech at an oratorical contest in 1910, Lucero answered the question she posed in her title, "Should the Spanish Language be Taught in the Schools of New Mexico?," with a resounding yes, though not without the shadow of Spanish coloniality and its oppressive impact on the Indigenous people of New Mexico. Following Lucero's oral delivery, the speech received considerable attention and was published in the *New Mexico Normal University Bulletin* in January 1911 (Gallegos 2014; Meléndez, 1997). The speech thus became part of a larger genealogy of Mexican American literary and print culture that critiques the English-only, white heteropatriarchal order and invites us to explore the racialized, classed, and gendered nuances of Latinidad.[30] Put in conversation with contemporary policies and primary sources such as the 2025 Executive Order 14224, "Designating English as the Official Language of the United States," the speech provides ample opportunity to examine how

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[30] See Gallegos (2014), for an analysis of how Aurora Lucero and her Nuevomexicana/o contemporaries repositioned themselves within the broader US context during the early twentieth century. See also Rivera (2022), for an analysis of Lucero's later contributions to the Depression-era Federal Writer's Project and her promotion of the Spanish fantasy heritage. See Nogar and Hohn (2022), for information about Anna Nogar's digital humanities project on Aurora Lucero.

language has figured into ongoing debates about citizenship and belonging in the United States, that is, who is entitled to what protections, who has political
power, etc.

Given our current political landscape, Lucero's speech is more relevant than ever. According to a report issued by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2022, the number of people who speak a language other than English has nearly tripled from forty years ago, with Spanish being the second most common language spoken at home (Dietrich & Hernandez, 2022). The same report describes how the federal government has used language data to allocate funding for students who are developing their English-language skills and to support language services for speakers of particular languages under Section 203 of the Voting Rights Act. Though Executive Order 14224 has been considered largely symbolic, history suggests we should worry about the rationale behind it.

I adapted the lesson that follows from one I have implemented in my own high school US History courses and a presentation I delivered as part of a panel titled "Diversifying Folklore Studies and Education: Sharing and Creating Inclusive Folklore Pedagogy" at the 2024 American Folklore Society Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Teachers should feel free to revise the lesson to meet the needs of their students and to align with their local content-area standards. This lesson may be easily incorporated into units on westward expansion, the Progressive movement, cultural and political controversies, and so on. Before directing students to complete the formative tasks, which are ordered deliberately, ensure students are provided the included background information and any material that may help situate the lesson within the broader historical unit.

Procedure

1. Begin with the bellringer to assess student's prior knowledge. Consider using the question, "How does the language you speak affect the way other people see you?" or "How do people feel about languages other than English being spoken in the United States?" Students should write down their responses, then share with a partner. Ask two or more groups to share their responses with the class.

2. Provide students with background information on the Spanish-speaking communities of New Mexico and Aurora Lucero's speech. Supplement the information with additional context if needed.

3. Determine how students should tackle the formative tasks. Should you read and annotate the texts as a class? Should you then ask students to answer the questions in small groups (3 to 4 students) on large sheets of butcher paper so they can later present their answers to their peers? Should students work with a partner but submit their answers on their own worksheets? Teachers must facilitate the formative tasks in a way that is best for their students.

4. Facilitate the formative tasks using the primary sources and questions provided.

5. Introduce the summative task for students to complete individually. Be sure to demonstrate how to fold the zine and provide ample materials to support your students' creativity.

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Essential Question
How has language figured into national debates about citizenship and belonging in the United States?

Staging the Question
How does the language you speak affect the way other people see you?

Key Vocabulary
neomexicano, nuevomexicano, assimilation, citizens, culture

The Spanish language was introduced to the region that is known as New Mexico by colonizers in the sixteenth century. The Spanish-speaking communities established as part of Spain's colonial project remained in the region through the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821) and the U.S.-Mexico War (1846-1848). From the mid-nineteenth century to today, many neomexicanos, or nuevomexicanos, have labored to maintain their culture and Spanish language, despite ongoing pressures to assimilate into the mainstream culture of the United States.Language became a point of contention as the territory of New Mexico was considered for statehood over the course of sixty years. For of many Americans, the people of New Mexico were perceived as too different to be true citizens of the United States. When statehood seemed inevitable for the territory by the early twentieth century, Congress proposed an Enabling Act that would require English be the official language of government and education in New Mexico.

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During an oratorical contest at the New Mexico Normal School in 1910, a sixteen-year-old named Aurora Lucero delivered a speech that responded to the language requirements in the Enabling Act. Lucero's speech, "Should the Spanish Language be Taught in the Schools of New Mexico?," makes several claims about the Spanish-speaking people of New Mexico and their language. These claims reflect the historical context in which Lucero delivered her speech and some of the biases that have existed about and among the Spanish-speaking people of New Mexico.

Lucero was a descendent of the nuevomexicano upper class who is remembered for her involvement in the fight for women's suffrage and for her accomplishments as writer, educator, and folklorist. Years after she argued for Spanish-language education, Lucero (later Aurora Lucero White-Lea) wrote several books on Hispano folklore and traditions of New Mexico, including *Los Hispanos* (1947) and *Literary Folklore of the Hispanic Southwest* (1953). Her legacy demonstrates

the complex ways in which many people of Mexican descent mediated their positions as both the colonizers and the colonized in New Mexico during the early twentieth century.

Shall the Spanish Language be Taught in the Schools of New Mexico? (1911)
by Miss Aurora Lucero

The territory of New Mexico has undergone many changes, politically and socially, it has solved many problems; and now, upon the eve of statehood, a new problem is being discussed in every hamlet, village and city: "Shall the Spanish language continue to be taught in our public schools?"

It seems beyond all doubt that New Mexico is soon to take her place as one of the states, in the grand sisterhood of commonwealths of this mighty union. That boon which for 60 long years she has sought in vain seems now within her reach, and to all appearances she has but to extend her hand in order to gain it; yet, in her enthusiasm and eagerness to obtain it, she must not forget that she has problems to meet and solve such as no other state ever had.

In order to understand this problem thoroughly, let us state the peculiarities of our achievement. There is to the south of this rich and vast domain a population of more than 60,000,000 people, all descended from the Spanish Conquistadores. To the north, are found the homes of at least 90,000,000 of another people, nearly all of Anglo-Saxon blood, speaking an entirely different language. New Mexico is the meeting ground of these representatives of the Romanic and Germanic races, and no one can fail to see, even now, that their amalgamation is but a question of time. What the final outcome of such a union will be, of course no one can predict with absolute certainly, but if it be true that history repeats itself under analogous conditions, then we may venture the prediction that a new race will spring from such a union that will far surpass either of its factors in all those traits and characteristics that make man better fitted for high responsibilities. The past history of these two races is a record of glorious deeds and notable achievements. Both have in their natures elements of greatness, and the union of the calm, business like spirit of the Anglo-Saxon with the sanguine, chivalrous enthusiasm of the Castilian will be such a blending of all that is best in human nature that we fail to see how anything better for the wealth of humanity could possibly happen.

A difficulty presents itself at the very beginning; no matter how eager one may be that a new race should people these plains and hills, his hopes will be blasted if the essential means are ignored, means efficacious to the desired end. One of these is the cultivation of a thorough acquaintance, one with the other—the Anglo-Saxon with Castilian—the Anglo-American with the Spanish-American. How can this be done unless each understands the other's language?

In New Mexico, English and Spanish are the leading languages of the territory. The English language is the language in which the great bulk of the business of the country is transacted. The Spanish language, the language of the Spanish-Americans, the language of the Cortezes, the De Sotos and the Coronados, has been for more than three centuries the home language of the territory. Now, however, it has been proposed by the president and the congress of the United States to deprive the territory of this language; that is, they seem to wish to break into fragments at a single blow this strong and marvelous link in the chain of events, which has connected and held together the history of the Old and New Worlds; for this is exactly what the Spanish language

has done, is doing, and will continue to do as long as it is not eliminated from the public schools and driven out of the territory.

In the act enabling New Mexico to become a state, passed by congress, it was provided that none except those who speak, read and write the English language with sufficient correctness shall be eligible to the legislature of the new state, or to any of the state public offices. It is claimed by some of those who passed this act that the Spanish-American will become a better citizen by depriving him of the use of his vernacular. In resorting to such a course, it would seem that the contrary effect might be produced in him by the unwarranted interference of congress with his natural rights, and instead of becoming a better, he might be made a worse citizen. Yet the Spanish-Americans of New Mexico have never been bad citizens. They have more than once proved their loyalty to the government and their love for the "Stars and Stripes," as their conduct in the Civil and the Spanish-American wars, and in many of the Indian wars, abundantly testifies.

It is impossible to understand why, in view of such a record, the people of New Mexico should be so unceremoniously deprived of a right which flows from the very essence of their manhood, for the right of language in man is a God-given right, and as such it is guaranteed and secured to him by the federal constitution when it declares that the natural rights of all men are inalienable. To single out New Mexico, then, for such unprecedented treatment, at the very moment that she is welcomed into sisterhood, is not only a gratuitous insult to the intelligence of her people, but it is also a proceeding as untenable in principle as it seems to be outrageous in its intent.

Man is by nature fond of distinction in anything that is praiseworthy. Everybody loves the praise of others, and to obtain it tries to become as accomplished as he can. We are accustomed to recognize the superiority of the person who has a command of one or more foreign languages. Consequently, as an accomplishment in the individual, the study of languages should be encouraged in its citizens. Why, then, should this most enlightened nation prevent the study of the Spanish language in the schools of the majority of the people, and especially since it is as cultured and refined as any of the modern languages and far surpasses them in dignity, beauty and majesty?

A few Spanish words are sufficient to set in motion all the finer and nobler sentiments of our nature. Take, for instance, the entrancing and patriotic image pictured by Espronceda when, in appealing to the Spanish people to rescue their country from the regime of the pusillanimous Charles IV who was absolutely dominated by France:

> Del centro de sus Reyes los pedazos
> Del suelo ensanguentado recogía,
> Y nuevo trono en sus robustos brazos
> Levantado, a su Príncipe ofercía.

This passage from Espronceda is but a single, isolated instance of the richness of Spanish poetry. Pathos, tragedy, indomitable courage, patriotism, and the passionate appeal to action—all are eloquently and sublimely compressed into four short lines.

There is a host of Spanish writers who have beautified and ennobled Spanish literature to at least as high a degree as have the Chaucers, Drydens, Miltons, Byrons and Websters, uplifted the

English language. We have our De Vegas, Calderons, Escriches, Castellars, Bellos and Arboledas, whose talents make them fully the compeers of the best Saxon bards and prose writers and whose pens have made Spanish literature the delight of scholars in every age and clime; while towering above them all stands the colossal genius, the author of "Don Quixote," whose superb merit is universally acknowledged and whose fame is rivaled but not surpassed by that of the great bard of Avon.

Yet this grand array of illustrious scholars, not to mention a vast number of others not less brilliant, will be lost to the youth of New Mexico when the Spanish language ceases to be taught in her schools.

Then consider the great commercial importance of this language. Besides being spoken in Spain and the Philippines, it is spoken in all countries south of the United States. These countries offer an unlimited field for the investment of American energy and enterprise. The advice of Horace Greeley to the young men of our country: "Go West," was heeded and the West became a blooming garden and a mighty empire; but the West is now filling up rapidly and those young men must soon turn south to these Spanish-American countries. If then we would cultivate their friendship and good will, get them to do business with us, admit us into their society, we should be able to greet them with a "Cómo está usted?" as well as that they should be able to greet us with a "How do you do?"

Our public schools must have the Spanish language for the same reason that other modern languages are taught in them; they must have it as the inseparable companion of her sister, the English; they must have it if we wish that our youth shall be fully prepared to meet the duties which are awaiting them in all the Spanish-American countries—duties which they will in vain try to perform, without a thorough knowledge of the Spanish language.

The Spanish language is the language of our fathers, it is our own language, and must be now and hereafter the language of our children and our children's children. It is the language handed down to us by the discoverers of this New World. We are American citizens, it is true, and our conduct places our loyalty and patriotism above reproach. We want to learn the language of our country, and we are doing so; but we do not need, on that account, to deny either our origin or our race or our language or our traditions or our history or our ancestry, because we are not ashamed of them; and we will not do it, because we are proud of them.

The Spanish, next to the English, is the language most widely spread throughout the world; and though now the sun sets on the dominions of the actual successor of Charles V., it does not set, nor will it ever, on the dominion of the Spanish language. It is spoken in the far-off Philippines, and far along, from frozen mountain peaks to blooming valleys, it leaps with ever-increasing echo from Mexico and Central America down to the Straits of Magellan. All the islands cradled in the bosom of the Atlantic rejoice in its grandeur and its majesty. Lastly it is spoken, written and sung in Spain— romantic Spain — the land of knighthood and the mother of heroes, the power that saved Europe from the fate of the Roman Empire, the hand that first unraveled the mystery of the sea, to give a New World to civilization, and to hoist the ensigns of Christianity on the Teocalis of the Incas and the Montezumas.

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Such is the language against which it is proposed to close the doors of the public schools of this territory. A language with such a record, such a history, such traditions and backed, as in the Spanish by the moral influence of so many civilized countries, deserves a place not only in the public schools of New Mexico, where it belongs by inheritance the right which three centuries of permanency therein give it, but in the best colleges of the United States in the proudest seats of learning in the world.

Therefore, in the name of all that is noble, grand and beautiful in the literature of the world; in the name of the broadening of the fields of our business interests, and in the expansion of trade relations with our immediate neighbors; in the name of the Anglo-Saxon youth of this territory who are everywhere endeavoring, with an earnestness fully worthy of the excellent cause to learn the Spanish; in the name of the rights which the people of New Mexico have as citizens of this great republic; in the name of its duty to them, as contracted most solemnly before the world at Guadalupe Hidalgo; in the name of honesty and justice, let us by all means see to it that the Spanish language is not driven from the public schools of New Mexico.

Formative Task I

Read the article "Come Right In, Says Uncle Sam" by Arnold M'Adams. The article was published on July 22, 1910, in the *Evening Times*, a newspaper of Grand Forks, North Dakota. Answer the questions below and provide textual evidence to support your answers

1. How does the article describe the territory of Arizona?	
Textual Evidence	
2. Why should the United States allow Arizona to become a state, according to the article?	

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Textual Evidence	
3. How is New Mexico different from Arizona, according to the article?	
Textual Evidence	
4. What concerns does the article express about the population of New Mexico?	
Textual evidence	
5. How does the newspaper represent the differences between the Arizona and New Mexico territories with the two pictures?	

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Formative Task II

Read and analyze Aurora Lucero's speech, "Shall the Spanish Language be Taught in the Schools of New Mexico?" (1911). Answer the questions below and provide textual evidence to support your answers.

1. How does Lucero describe New Mexico in her speech?	
Textual Evidence:	
2. How does Lucero describe the "Spanish-Americans" of New Mexico?	
Textual Evidence:	
3. Why do you think Lucero describes the Spanish-speaking people of New Mexico this way? Explain.	

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Textual Evidence:	
4. How does Lucero include or omit Indigenous people in her argument? Consider her reference to the "Teocalis of the Incas and Montezumas." What assumptions does she make? Do her assumptions resemble any claims made in the *Evening Times*? Explain.	
Textual Evidence:	
5. Why should Spanish continue to be taught in the schools of New Mexico, according to Lucero? What claims does she make?	
Textual Evidence:	
6. What is the most compelling claim that Lucero provides? Why is this most compelling to you? Explain.	
Textual Evidence:	

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7. How does Aurora Lucero's speech challenge the claims made in the *Evening Times*? Explain.	

Formative Task III

Read and analyze President Donald J. Trump's Executive Order, "Designating English as the Official Language of the United States." Answer the questions and provide textual evidence to support your answers.

1. What argument does the executive order make?	
Textual Evidence:	
2. What claims does the order make to support its argument? Identify at least **three** claims.	
Textual Evidence	

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3. What assumptions does the order make about people who speak languages other than English? Identify at least **three** assumptions.	
Textual Evidence:	
4. What is the most compelling claim the order makes? Why is this most compelling to you? Explain.	

Summative Task

Create a zine to educate others about Aurora Lucero's advocacy for the Spanish language during the early twentieth century or how language has figured into national debates about citizenship and belonging. Students may use the template provided to plan the written and visual content for their zines or improvise. Encourage students to incorporate the first-person voice if they feel like interweaving their personal story about language and education into their analysis of Lucero's speech. Zines may be completed digitally or by hand—let students be creative!

1. Fold a blank standard letter-sized piece of paper (8.5" x 11") according to Daisy Wakefield's "How to Make Your Own Zine," or search the web for directions on making a zine with a single piece of paper. Model for students the process of folding and cutting the paper to assemble the zine.
2. Have students unfold the paper and mark each rectangle with appropriate page number. Feel free to share the attached template. Model the process for students again.
3. Have students fill in their zine using the information they already gathered and include relevant illustrations to engage their readers. Share an example of a completed zine. Print and assemble the attached example if needed.

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