High-End Immigrants Create an Imagined Community in Costa Rica: Examining the Evolving Discourse in Ethnic-Minority Media

Anthony T. Spencer
Professor
College of Design & Communication
Universidad Americana (UAM)
Managua, Nicaragua

Anthony T. Spencer earned his doctoral degree from the University of Oklahoma (2008). All correspondence should be directed to Anthony T. Spencer at spenceruam@outlook.com
A previous version of this paper was presented at The National Communication Association Convention. 2009. Chicago, IL.
Abstract
This study explores the ways in which an English-language newspaper in Costa Rica recreates a cultural and linguistic imagined community for economically advantaged English-speaking immigrants. Participants in this study include newspaper staff members, members of the expatriate American community as well as host culture members. Interview and textual data are analyzed using critical discourse analysis (Blommaert, 2005) to place the data in a theoretical framework of Anderson’s (1981) concept of imagined communities. This study illustrates both practical and theoretical intercultural implications found in this imagined community of English speakers in a Spanish-speaking nation. This article nuances Anderson’s theory of imagined communities and provides data applicable to ethnic minority media in a variety of linguistic and cultural contexts.

Keywords: Imagined Communities, International Communication, Intercultural Communication, Ethnic Media, Expatriates, American, Costa Rica, Newspaper
What do you call a person who speaks three or more languages?
Answer: Multilingual

What do you call a person who speaks two languages?
Answer: Bilingual

What do you call a person who speaks one language?
Answer: An American

The joke above oversimplifies the linguistic capabilities and deficiencies of English-speaking Americans as a group, but it does tap into certain preconceptions about the desire of Americans to become bilingual or multilingual. When sojourners, expatriates and migrants travel overseas they often seek out others who have shared backgrounds, cultural values and most importantly, a common language (Huber & O’Reilly, 2004). These commonalities are particularly important for English-speaking migrants who live outside of their linguistic comfort zone (O’Reilly, 2002). As Americans travel abroad as long-term tourists and/or become residents in non English-speaking countries they too tend to find community by seeking out other native English speakers. This cultural and linguistic connection is particularly vital for the newcomers who seek to develop an established social network.

In this paper I will demonstrate the ways in which American immigrants and long-term tourists in Costa Rica construct and reconstruct community by reading and interacting with an English-language newspaper. I explore this phenomenon through American expatriates’ and Costa Ricans’ perceptions of the community formed by the newspaper, The Tico Times. As Spanish speakers acknowledge the existence of an outsider community living within their national boundaries, these perceptions help create and maintain the boundaries of this real, yet at the same time imagined English-speaking community in Costa Rica. That is to say while the community of people is very real it is made stronger by a linguist and cultural connection as explicated by Anderson’s (1983) concept of imagined community. Ultimately the imagined community has very real implications in everyday intercultural interactions between the two groups.

Context

While all the English-speaking migrants live in a hybrid culture (Bhabha, 1994) to varying degrees depending on levels of linguistic and cultural integration; the Costa Rican and American employees working for The Tico Times live in a decidedly bilingual hybrid space or border culture, akin to the borderland region that exists in the U.S. Southwest (Anzaldúa, 2002). And while Spanish is the minority language and Latinos are the ethnic minority in the U.S./Mexico border region, and English is the minority language of the hybrid imagined community of American expatriates in Costa Rica, these two borderlands are not mirror images of each other. English language and “white” cultures retain the prestige over Spanish language and Latino cultures in both the United States and Costa Rica.

English-speaking North Americans, Gringos, who live in Costa Rica and want to take the steps to integrate further into Costa Rican, Tico, culture must create cultural spaces on their own or seek out and utilize their compatriots’ resources. The English-language newspaper, The Tico Times remains at the center of the cultural and linguistic resources Americans use to build community in Costa Rica. The newspaper’s senior reporter, Katherine, explains how The Tico Times and its news agenda are at the core of cultural negotiations for most expatriates.

Katherine: I think that for some people and it could be people who are really integrated or not it is sort of a lifeline. Even if they are pretty integrated The Tico
Times is where they get the news they really understand easily that connects them with the community.

The population of Costa Rica is still relatively small. According to the Costa Rican Embassy in Washington D.C. the most recent unpublished census numbers report a population of 4,325,838 (M. Garcia, personal communication, May 11, 2006). There are approximately 70,000 U.S. citizens and Canadians who reside in the country (Kimitch, 2006). When compared to the country’s native population, the number of U.S. and to a lesser extent Canadian citizens combine to account for more than six percent of Costa Rica’s total population. Of course these estimates do not include short-term or long-term tourists and students who reside in the country which would further increase the number of English-speaking foreigners at any given time.

The long-standing English-language newspaper, The Tico Times, has served the expatriate community for more than half a century. The Tico Times is published weekly with a page run of approximately fifty pages. In terms of page numbers the newspaper is almost evenly divided between news and cultural/leisure events plus the classified section. The newspaper has a circulation of approximately 20,000 for each issue. The Tico Times is the largest English-language newspaper in Central America and is distributed throughout Costa Rica (Howard, 2005-6).

In addition to the North Americans, the other large immigrant populations which reside in Costa Rica are Nicaraguans and Colombians. All three of these groups can be categorized as ethnic and minority cultures within the larger Costa Rican society. According to Browne (2005), the term ethnic minority refers to anyone who identifies as a part of a group that maintains a distinction in language or culture from the dominant society at large. Three types of minorities are identified, they are: indigenous, linguistic and ethnic. Ethnicity is defined as a general agreement of people who perceive themselves constituting a community based on shared values and cultural norms.

The Nicaraguans and Colombians form an ethnic minority group while Americans fall under both the ethnic and linguistic distinctions. While an analysis of the Colombian and Nicaraguan groups would be fruitful to further excavate the concept of imagined communities and its impact on perceptions of daily intercultural interactions that examination is out of the scope of the current study. In order to most accurately differentiate the English-speaking immigrants I use the term high-end immigrants (Spencer, 2011) to more accurately examine the Gringos as a separate ethnic and linguistic group.

The relationship of English and Spanish is one that is long and complex and in the past few decades the usage of the English language has changed from that of “traditional” immigrant to “high-end” (financially and socially privileged) immigrant usage and maintains all the accompanying prestige of whiteness and wealth in intercultural interactions. To better excavate this relationship I provide a brief yet succinct history of English-language usage in Costa Rica in which these current interactions are deeply imbedded and will assist in the demonstrating how I apply Anderson’s (1983) theoretical construction of imagined community.

It was at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries that the U.S.-based United Fruit Company (UFC) gained its firm footing in Central and South American fruit production and exportation when American railroad scion Minor Keith obtained the contract to build railroad lines from the bustling port city of Limón to the capital of San José (Sharman, 2001). Oppressive work conditions and a small and unwilling labor pool prompted Keith to recruit and bring to Costa Rica thousands of Afro-Caribbean workers, primarily English speakers from Jamaica. After work on the railroad was completed, many of these workers stayed in Costa Rica
to work in the fruit industry. For half a century the Costa Rican government limited the movement of these immigrants and forced them to live in the Caribbean zone of the country. This move in essence restricted them to travel and live in the eastern region of the nation. This ethno-linguistic minority group only gained full rights of citizenship in the middle of the 20th century (Biesanz, Biesanz, & Biesanz, 1999).

In effect, a U.S. corporation altered the ethnic and linguistic landscape of Costa Rica. Before Keith and United Fruit Company brought these English speakers in large numbers, Spanish and various indigenous languages comprised the country’s ethno-linguistic sphere. According to Purcell and Sawyers (1993) it was the interference of English in this linguistic sphere which became problematic because the English-speaking blacks were able to more effectively communicate with the Anglo managers who came to Costa Rica from the United States to supervise Keith’s railroad project. The English speakers earned more money than their Spanish-speaking counterparts and as most were from Jamaica considered themselves superior culturally because of their British citizenship. After the railroad was completed the Costa Rican government attempted to forcefully assimilate its English-speaking black population with limited success while simultaneously restricting its movements and linguistic integration (Harpelle, 1993). Due to these restrictions and failed governmental attempts at assimilation, the majority of blacks still live along the nation’s Caribbean coast, primarily in Limón. A large portion of the population continues to speak English as its native language and many of the elderly residents are monolingual English speakers.

The historical relations between the Spanish-speaking majority and the English speaking minority created a linguistic class system in which the English language endured a second-class status. This linguistic status forced many black Costa Ricans group to attempt to assimilate linguistically into the mainstream population with varying degrees of success. When the relatively wealthy and mostly white English-speaking tourists and long-term residents began to travel to Costa Rica the status of English overtook Spanish in terms of economic and often cultural power in this linguistic milieu. With the influx of white, relatively affluent English-speaking immigrants and the development of The Tico Times the concept of the English-Speaking community of Costa Rica has changed in color, prestige and the very which it is imagined and reified through media outlets.

Imagined ideas of a nation as community emerge from official language, colonization, wars and public memory and mass media. The media sustain historically developed imagined communities, circulating discourses that create and define national identities. According to Anderson (1983), the literary convention of the newspaper organizes cultural experience in a way that constructs (imagines) rather than reflects the reality of community life. By forming, or reforming, our concept of community the layout of the newspaper also modifies our understanding of the time and space of events and their relationships to one another.

Imagined Communities

Anderson (1983) traces the foundations of modern nationalism to two specific cultural systems, “the religious community and the dynastic realm” (p. 12). It is through religion and dynasty that the “literati” gained prominence in establishing real yet “imagined communities.” Group members do not need to interact with each other interpersonally for community formation; the community requires only a shared identification that emerges from a shared set of common narratives and discourses (Anderson, 1983). When mass media circulate shared discourses, community can be created and re-created as people identify with similar narratives.
According to Anderson (1983) print-languages laid the foundation for national consciousnesses in three ways. First, they created unified fields of exchange and communication. Second, print capitalism gave “fixity” or standardization to language. Third, print capitalism produced languages of power. These events standardized one dialect of a language as dominant and relegated other versions to being dialects. Anderson summarizes his conclusions of the convergence of capitalism and print technology stating:

Yet it is obvious that while today almost all modern self-conceived nations-and also nation states-have ‘national print languages’, many of them have these languages in common, and in others only a tiny fraction of the population ‘uses’ the national language in conversation or on paper. The nation-states of Spanish America or those of the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ family are conspicuous examples of the first outcome; many ex-colonial states, particularly in Africa, of the second. (p. 46)

Anderson’s analysis of language and media production laid the foundation for media to play a significant role in the construction of nation as imagined community. Anderson’s focus on language helps to explain how nationalism functions in building imagined ethno-linguistic communities.

Minority Media and Imagined Communities

Because most members will never know each other personally, instead of “knowing” one another, the media allow people to identify through shared media discourse. Thus, Anderson argues that these communities of people feel they belong to are “imagined.” In the case of The Tico Times this is particularly true. Most members of the expatriate community will only “know” each other through the newspaper as it creates and sustains a sense of identity shared by members/readers.

The relationship between imagined communities and ethnic minority media is particularly salient, but has primarily been studied in under-represented and/or oppressed populations. In this study I apply theoretical concepts of imagined community and ethnic minority media as they relate to a privileged ethnic and linguistic minority group I term high-end immigrants. In this context I use the term high-end immigrant media to distinguish media such as The Tico Times from traditional minority media research. Riggins (1992) clearly connected the social construction of ethnicity, self-identity and “imagined communities”. He notes that “the media play a key role in this dynamic process by defining, preserving, or weakening ethnic (and national) identities” (p. 2). Riggins divides ethnic minority media research into two areas: research that explores the role of ethnic minority media in processes of indigenous/aboriginal survival and research that investigates non-indigenous ethnic minority media. Recent scholarship regarding indigenous ethnic minority media include: Browne’s Native American media research (2005); Lorna Roth’s studies of Inuit media (2005); and the research on indigenous radio in Colombia performed by Rodríguez and El-Gazi (2007).

Scholarship on immigrant media has also gained importance around the globe, focusing on Latino media in the United States (Downing, 1992, 1994), immigrant media in Australia (Ngui, 1994), France (Boucaud & Stubbs, 1994; Croucher, Ooman, & Steele, 2009), and Israel (Bar-Haïm, 1992). This research is unique from both indigenous and non-indigenous ethnic minority media as it addresses the usage and needs of ethnic minority media by economically advantaged immigrants. Historically ethnic minority media research has focused on how disempowered and marginalized ethnic minority groups use media to strengthen their own political and cultural agendas. This research examines how a privileged and powerful group of
immigrants—high-end immigrants—use media to navigate foreign cultural environments, to create their own cultural space in a foreign land.

Darling (2007) applied Anderson’s concept of imagined communities to analyze how a rebel radio station aided in the construction of community in war-torn El Salvador. “In contrast to the “imagined communities” of creoles…that newspapers accidentally created in colonial Latin America, the insurgents deliberately constructed a community of rebel radio listeners” (p. 69). The radio’s nation building did not come about by luck; this was a well-orchestrated campaign to create a community for political and/or military purposes. While community building can be purposeful, it can be inadvertent. When media outlets create audiences, they produce the basis for establishing imagined communities.

Examining the relationship between the imagined community and self-identity, Philips (2002) further explored and expanded upon Anderson’s theoretical notions of nation and community. Philips found that the identity of the individual often loses importance in the eyes of scholars who focus only on the macro level of society. This study is important because often the individual is omitted when discussing formations of real and imagined communities. Just as Camauër (2010) focused on both the regional and the transnational impacts of ethnic Arabs in Sweden, I incorporate individual perceptions in relationship to both the physical and imagined communities constructed in Costa Rica.

Understanding the relationship between news imagery of political and/or ideological communities is paramount to examining the ways in which Americans maintain a high-end immigrant community in Costa Rica. Building on the works of political scholarship, Silverstein (1998b) makes an important connection between imagined communities and language communities:

…when groupness is at issue within Western, market-imaged political frameworks, language becomes a site of struggle—both toward a telos of creating a new language community and, by contrast, in resistive preservation or resuscitation of what once was/is to be still counted as a language community. (p. 415)

The belief that language becomes a site of struggle in processes of community building is extremely important in traditional scholarship about nation building as well as imagined communities.

A strong parallel can be constructed between the existing scholarship regarding minority-media usage and Anderson’s (1983) concept of an “imagined community.” Expatriate Americans, high-end immigrants, in Costa Rica do not see themselves as a nation; however, they clearly view themselves as a community drawn together via linguistic norms and national origins as expressed in the public sphere recreated by The Tico Times. Thanks to The Tico Times expatriates form a strong community of English speakers in a predominately Spanish-speaking world. Thus, the following research question emerges:

RQ: In what way(s) do English speakers and Spanish speakers perceive and understand the intercultural ramifications of the imagined American community recreated by The Tico Times in Costa Rica?

Method

Qualitative data collection of newsgathering and dissemination informs scholars as to the underlying intentions of meaning produced in journalistic content (Silcock, 2002). Between the months of September to November 2006 I interviewed ten staff members of The Tico Times. From December 2006 through July 2007 I conducted thirty interviews with English-speaking and Spanish-speaking residents in Costa Rica who either read the newspaper or at least acknowledged the newspaper as fundamental to situating Gringos within Tico cultural settings. I
obtained access to the staff members through preexisting contacts with the newspaper’s administration or participants were recruited through a snowball sampling of existing relationships in the country. The combination of interviews with staffers and residents totaled forty; twenty of the participants were native English speakers and twenty were native Spanish speakers. The newspaper itself served as an important supplemental artifact to reinforce the interview data utilized in this study.

Participants

Participants were able to choose for their interviews to be conducted in either English or Spanish. All native English speakers chose to take part in English. All Spanish speakers with the exception of two chose to conduct their interviews in Spanish. These participants selected English as a courtesy with the proviso they could revert to Spanish at any point in the interview. All data transcripts are provided in English.

I chose English-speaking participants based on the amount of time they had spent in Costa Rica, only interviewing expatriates who had lived at least one year in Costa Rica. I also selected participants who proclaimed a desire to integrate to a functional level in Costa Rican society. In order to stratify the sample I included various age groups and sought participants with varied career and professional interests. I included Costa Rican participants who had experience interacting with foreigners on a regular basis and were familiar with and/or had read the newspaper.

All the Spanish speakers and all but three of the English speakers consented to their first and last names being used. In order to provide a degree of anonymity I only use participants’ first names when reporting their data. Each member of the newspaper staff also consented to be identified by her/his position in the organization. The three participants who did not provide consent for their names to be used appear as “anonymous” throughout this paper. All participants resided in the heavily populated “Central Valley”, in or around the Capital of San José. I also draw upon the newspaper itself as supplementary data to better illustrate the ways in which high-end English-speaking immigrants in Costa Rica dialogue with *The Tico Times* in this development of a very real, yet imagined community.

Data Analysis

Distinct themes emerged in analysis of the interview and to a lesser degree supporting textual data from the newspaper and its website. European linguistic and cultural scholars led by Fairclough (1992) build on thematic construction and links thematic analysis to critical analysis of language and discourse, particularly as discourse relates to hegemonic structures (Gramsci, 1971). Blommaert (2005) advocates a careful and systematic examination of the themes and topics which emerge in data through critical discourse analysis. In my data analysis I combine the dialogic perspective of language and reflexivity of language usage (Bakhtin, 1981) with critical discourse analysis (CDA) as Pietikäinen and Dufva (2006) propose to theorize language in structuralist terms and remain aware of individual perspectives within those structures. My goal in data analysis is to examine the primary themes of discourse within the two larger framework of *Gringo* (American) and *Tico* (Costa Rican) cultural constructions. All interviews were transcribed and each transcription varied in length according to the length of the interview. While it would be impossible to include data from all the interviews conducted in this study, the topics of the data incorporated have consistently appeared in multiple interviews. Thus, the following transcriptions provide a thematically-representative sample from the corpus of data.
Re-creating the Gringo Community in Costa Rica

The Tico Times “re-creates” a form of imagined community by taking cultural frames Americans understand and applying those frames to guide readers through societal structures in Costa Rica. Often the newspaper will take traditional references from the United States and recreate them in a hybridized fashion. For example, Figure 1 denotes well wishes from the newspaper staff for the Fourth of July holiday. The special insert uses American symbols, the U.S. flag prominently displayed over the characteristic stitching of American blue jeans, circulates the symbols of identity shared by this community. The fourth of July does not maintain significance outside of the United States or the reconstructions of this re-imagines itself outside its geo-political borders. Perhaps most interesting is that the only intersection between Costa Rica and the U.S. holiday is the sense of nationalism shared in this affluent expatriate community. Thus, in the newspaper’s acknowledgment of the holiday through shared national symbols, the medium creates points of identification for U.S. expatriates, reinserts normative American values, and whether purposefully or by chance disseminates American ideology to other Costa Rican readers.

Figure 1 The Tico Times June 29, 2007

The newspaper’s administration and staff firmly acknowledge the readership as primarily English-speaking Americans; however, the readership also includes other English-speaking foreigners and Costa Ricans. One-third of The Tico Times readership is outside of Costa Rica, accessing the paper through both mail-order and online subscriptions.

As with the paper’s coverage of the Fourth of July, The Tico Times’ logo aids in creating an imagined community. The Tico Times logo could be interpreted as a visual representation of the desire many high-end immigrants have to start a new life in the sunny tropics. Whereas the Fourth of July insert unifies expatriates on the basis of their American history, the logo seeks identification in their Costa Rican present. While the newspaper may have various readerships,
the publication’s smiling sunshine is iconic of the vision Americans seek out in their move to Costa Rica. I have taken the logo from the newspaper’s website and placed it as Figure 2 to illustrate the sunshine and perceived happy attitudes associated with a move to the tropics.

Abby, the newspaper’s general manager, described the logo and the significance it has for *The Tico Times* and its readers:

Abby: The sun represents the tropics, the warmth; the face on the sun represents the intelligent reader, the curious reader with the little spectacles.

When comparing natural objects and cultural artifacts, people tend to think in terms of a dyad: on one hand, the cultural subject that is represented and on the other, the object that represents. However, semiotics as a linguistic construction states that meaning emerges actually from a triad: the subject that is represented, the object in the form of a sign vehicle and a referential correlate (Noth, 1990). In the case of *The Tico Times*’ logo, the natural object (the sun) and the cultural artifact (the sunglasses) and the message (fun in the sun) create this triad of subject, object and referential correlate. In this case, the referential correlate denotes the hybrid fun-loving yet intellectual English speaker created by and reaffirmed in the citizen that inhabits this imagined community. The newspaper icon denotes a hybrid lifestyle of fun, sun and awareness. This lifestyle intersects at the borders of U.S. and Costa Rican cultures.

We can locate the imagined community that American expatriates create in Costa Rica in this type of hybrid cultural space, or borderland cultural region. As they imagine their community and recreate its structures through the cultural artifacts they produce, *The Tico Times*’ news staffers live and work in this hybrid or borderland space:

Abby: The mission of *The Tico Times* is to provide news in English to the English-speaking community in Costa Rica and abroad, news in English about Costa Rica and the region. Now what does that mean? Um, here in Costa Rica in the English-speaking community there is a subset that only speaks English, that have no desire to speak any other language and we are their primary and only news source. There is a subset of people who English is their second language and they don’t speak Spanish but they are maybe from Taiwan or from Europe and they are doing business here or their family or spouse or someone is here doing business or they are here on vacation and they read us because they don’t read Spanish. And then there are Costa Ricans and other Latin Americans who um are bilingual and who read the Spanish-language dailies.

Readers’ Perceptions

While the media producers reflect on the newsgathering process and its relation to the newspaper’s readership, the media audiences focus merely on the finished product and the ways in which that product assists them in cultural mediations. Each American expatriate community member I interviewed stated that *The Tico Times* was either their primary or one of their primary news sources about Costa Rica. The English-language audience members described their Spanish-language abilities ranging from very little to functional. Thus, the newspaper was a steady presence in all of their lives.

Ashley is a relative a newcomer to Costa Rica. She had only lived in the country for one year at the time our interview took place. She was direct and forthcoming about the importance
of the newspaper in her life. For her, the newspaper not only provided her current events; it also provided the information within her traditional frames of reference.

Ashley: It is my primary source. It is the only one that I can understand fully. And, what I like about The Tico Times is that it has lots of sections about what’s going on with plays and movies and art exhibits and kind of adds to the feeling that this is a really cool place.

Ashley also confided how miserable she was in Costa Rica the first months she lived there. She primarily found contentment and happiness through the sense of community she encountered with the English-speaking community and by reading The Tico Times. The newspaper brokered the way she understood the community around her.

In contrast to the very clear brokerage Ashley claims, a long-term expatriate I interviewed stated he did not utilize The Tico Times for his daily interactions. However, this respondent notes how The Tico Times’ reporters and journalists write from a long-term experience of immersion in Costa Rican culture. In this interview we can begin to see how The Tico Times constitutes a strong cultural capital for American expatriates living in Costa Rica. English-speaking expatriates experience The Tico Times as a communication space that offers information and insight into a culture and a social context they individually cannot navigate on their own:

Researcher: Do you think for people who don’t speak Spanish or don’t know much about the culture it is a good way to help them navigate the culture?
Anonymous: I think it is. I think it is. It is certainly better than nothing. And the people who write for it generally have spent a lot time down here. Many of the writers, both the younger writers and the older writers have spent many years down here and know a fair amount about the country.

The above respondent displays trust in the journalists because they are deeply imbedded in the Costa Rican community and culture.

Another long-term expatriate who has lived in Costa Rica more than ten years reflects on the mission of The Tico Times less in terms of utilizing the newspaper to navigate specific cultural interactions with the host culture and more on the opportunities it provides residents to explore the countryside:

Researcher: Does it in your opinion, eventually help to integrate or is it a tool that allows them to separate and isolate because they then don’t have to then learn Spanish? Because then they don’t have to get into the larger society?
Anonymous: It is neither. It is just a comfortable thing for them. They learn about their environment, where to go on trips in Costa Rica.

Researcher: But, if this outlet weren’t there would they have to learn enough Spanish to use the local Spanish-language newspapers or no?
Anonymous: I can’t see that. No. I don’t think it has that great an effect. It’s just a pleasant paper. A lot of them just simply enjoy it, you know and say oh let’s see what is going on. Is there a nice lodge I can go to or what’s happening?

Researcher: Right, just things that pertain to people like them from their community.
Anonymous: I would say that there are articles being done on for instance the indigenous people and different Tico societies and enterprises so yes I read those and learn what’s going on.
Another reader clearly identified that the newspaper is important to community building and is a trustworthy news source. He also found it to be a more specific tool toward cultural integration. His position was less established in the community and he was truly looking to find more ways to navigate the cultural terrain. This respondent also requested anonymity:

Researcher: For somebody who has never heard of *The Tico Times*, describe it for me.
Anonymous: A weekly, local Costa Rican paper that is in English and very simple.
Researcher: What do you mean simple?
Anonymous: Small time stories and next year you’ll probably see the same stories in the same month.
Researcher: Do you think this type of newspaper allows people to better integrate into society or allows them to maintain a separate identity? In other words is it a tool to better integrate or is it a crutch to not have to integrate?
Anonymous: It is a tool to integrate.
Researcher: Has it helped you?
Anonymous: Um, it gives me cultural things to do, shows to go see, activities, places to go stay.

As English-speaking American expatriates read *The Tico Times*, the boundaries of an imagined community emerge. Summoned by *The Tico Times*, expatriates converge to the same cultural spaces and events held in Costa Rica’s Central Valley. Through communication processes, *The Tico Times* delineates the spatial boundaries of what then becomes the expatriate circuits, cafés, restaurants, hotels, cultural sites, and countryside favorite spots throughout the country. Interpersonal communication processes follow, among expatriates that meet at see each other again and again as they navigate the same circuits and spaces suggested by *The Tico Times*. All the English-speaking white residents I interviewed expressed some level of cultural dependency on the newspaper.

Impact on Host Cultural Perceptions

Any Costa Rican who wants to be a major player in Costa Rican financial, banking, export, business investment or real state circles needs to be proficient in English. English has truly become the language of certain financial and cultural spheres within Costa Rica with the resulting exclusion of non-English speakers from circles where important financial and cultural decisions and deals are made. As *The Tico Times* covers these financial and cultural spheres, it contributes to the constitution of an English-speaking public sphere (Habermas, 2005) imbedded in the Costa Rica communication and cultural environment. This “enclave public sphere” is a potential site of financial and cultural power, and despite the fact that it is located in the very center of Costa Rican life, it excludes most Costa Ricans, or Ticos, as it functions exclusively in a language most do not master.

Commonly Costa Ricans privilege English-speaking spaces and social circles as more valuable and prestigious than their own. English speakers and *The Tico Times* negotiate an imagined community in Costa Rica which is very real for the Americans because they inherently occupy this space by virtue of language and location. For most Costa Ricans this community is also very real in the way they imagine the world inhabited by English-speaking Gringos. However, for most Costa Ricans, access to the inner life of this particular community is denied on the basis of language. Ricardo, a Costa Rican employee at *The Tico Times*, expresses the
Ricardo: Wooow [emphasis on the vowel!] Because it is like The Tico Times, that belongs to the Gringos. Superior. And you work with Gringo journalists. Superior. And see them. What a great job always sharing Gringo culture and to have them so close and to work for a Gringo company.
Researcher: But, it is not, right? It is a Tico company?
Ricardo: Tico but Gringo-style.

Ricardo’s account of perceived Gringo superiority illustrates the status of imagined community in Costa Rica. I never met anyone Tico nor Gringo who disputed the significance of the newspaper and its role in Tico society. Conversely both linguistic groups perceived the community created and recreated by the newspaper to be one of privilege and be desirable.

I struggled to find Spanish-speaking Costa Ricans who read the newspaper, especially on a regular basis, though the newspaper administration claims that the paper is not merely for the expatriate community. I put the question to Costa Rican reporter Gaby who is unique in her position as the only native Spanish-speaker and Costa Rican citizen on the reporting staff. Gaby received her education primarily in English and attended a prestigious English-language high school. She did say that she read the paper growing up and found it to be an effective method to practice her English. I should also note that Gaby’s English-language ability is very high and I conducted her interview in English. I asked her who she specifically envisioned as her audience when covering news events.

Gaby: When I think of my audience, I do think, we are forced to think a lot about foreigners who don’t know about the country so that is why we have to explain things so much. So it is something that you are constantly thinking about; but when I go out on a story I am not really thinking I want to like help out the Gringo community. I am thinking I want to help out whoever is living here.

Although none of the Ticos who participated in this study claimed to read The Tico Times on a regular basis or even at all, they are acutely aware of the existence and role of the newspaper in envisioning and understanding American culture, particularly in their own country. Costa Ricans often remarked that The Tico Times is for the Gringos. Since the newspaper is thought of by the host culture as particular to the high-end immigrant community, I then probed Gaby to find out if she found it problematic that she brokered the cultural exchanges of foreigners and contributed to the ways in which the American community reified its position of dominance. As Gaby had previously expressed both pride and reticence in her role as a linguistic and cultural broker and had even used the word “traitor” when referring to those who facilitated these exchanges, I asked the following:

Researcher: This is not meant to be offensive but do you ever feel like a traitor working for The Tico Times, that you are helping the Americans buy the country? Or no?
Gaby: Yes. Sometimes I feel like a traitor, like during CAFTA [Central American Free Trade Agreement] marches and stuff and when the kids are all like ah ‘Gringo Times’ and very often they ask me, they have asked me: Why are you working for a gringo newspaper? And then you know, it makes me think, and I do feel kind of like they do.

The feelings from both Ticos and Gringos are very real in this imagined community. The schisms which erupt when languages and cultures collide are also very real. The acknowledged
and unacknowledged tensions between Ticos and Gringos suggest the considerable impact of this imagined community as it brokers relationships. I believe these disruptions are valuable to understanding the Gringo community in Costa Rica.

Those Costa Ricans who find a way into the inner life of the American expatriate community via employment at The Tico Times have an opportunity to gain familiarity with the imagined community of Gringos in Costa Rica. The reflexivity expressed by The Tico Times’ staff members does illustrate a high understanding of intercultural interactions. The remarks they made epitomize the breaking down of cultural barriers which lead from misunderstanding to really understanding the others’ position(s). This difficult process of breaking down barriers seems to happen more in the direction of Ticos understanding Gringos better, instead of the other way around, which in itself re-imagines the historical imperialist ideology.

**A Deterrent to Integration**

Another Costa Rican who does not work at the newspaper yet is very involved in intercultural dealing in the country, believes it can help foreigners cross cultural barriers more effectively. However, he feels that oftentimes the imagined American community actually deters intercultural integration. Luís is a college-educated Tico who works at an English-language university, which in itself evidences the importance not only of English but of a re-imagined American community. This educational administrator says he has good relations with Americans who live in Costa Rica; his supervisor is an American. In regards to The Tico Times, Luís says he does occasionally read The Tico Times to practice English but does not consider himself a regular reader.

Luís: I like it to practice my English
Researcher: But, for news?
Luís: For news I prefer the Spanish ones.
Researcher: But do you think The Tico Times helps the Gringo be more Tico or less Tico?
Luís: I think the Gringo or whatever foreigner should work more on this part of the culture. A medium such as this should not only bring cultural information but bring more information on how to be Tico.

Luís explains that the newspaper could be a more practical tool for expatriates who want to venture outside this community. He does not think that they use the medium effectively enough to learn “how to be a Tico”. Luís explains that the newspaper can be a tool for Americans to integrate into mainstream Costa Rican society or become caught in their high-end community.

Evidence of English speakers feeling they become trapped in their own linguistic community emerges in the following conversation which took place with a middle-aged white male who is semi-retired and lives part-time in Costa Rica. He asked to not be identified by name; however, he was very adamant that his story be told as he thought it exemplified the situation of the average English speaker in Costa Rica.

Researcher: Talk to me about Spanish. Would that be the one key if people want to integrate? Would that be the one advice you could give them to learn Spanish?
Anonymous: Oh, yes. I want to learn Spanish.
Researcher: Why haven’t you?
Anonymous: I found it more difficult than I anticipated.
Researcher: So are you still taking classes? Are you still learning?
Anonymous: I am still trying to learn but not very well.
This participant who asked to remain anonymous exemplifies the attitudes many Americans feel about learning Spanish. Typically they begin to study Spanish, often in one of the country’s many language schools. After a short time they become frustrated and stop going to classes such as in the case of our anonymous participant referenced above. Many of these participants attribute this to the role of the imagined community as reinforced by *The Tico Times*. The newspaper covers the current events and issues in the country so well that these residents feel they do not need to learn Spanish and integrate into society.

Each *Gringo* who spoke with me emphasized the importance of learning Spanish. However, every participant also emphasized how difficult it was for them to learn to speak Spanish. The exception is that every *Gringo* who worked in *The Tico Times* was comfortable in their Spanish language abilities and able to navigate their daily and intellectual interactions without any linguistic difficulties. The residents certainly do not blame the newspaper for trapping them inside their American linguistic and cultural community. The feel mixed emotions; both indebted to the outlet for providing news and feature stories in English as well as minimizing the need for linguistic integration.

**Implications**

The three primary themes which emerged in this data set included perceptions of the way the readers understand Costa Rica, the impact of imagined community on mainstream Costa Rican culture and the fact that the newspaper informs readers while simultaneously providing them with very little motivation for linguistic and cultural integration. This study contributes to intercultural understanding on both theoretical and practical levels. Practically, regarding everyday interactions American and Costa Rican participants who took part in this project echo the same sentiment: The newspaper is there as a tool for cultural integration if the reader wants. However, most often the newspaper allows English-speaking foreigners in Costa Rica the opportunity to remain insulated from everyday interactions with the members of the host culture. Thus these high-end immigrants essentially deny themselves the opportunity to develop Spanish-language skills and often only understand Costa Rican culture through the stories they read in the newspaper, limiting the need for contact across cultural groups.

On a theoretical level the data illustrate how the medium functions as a foundation upon which the *Gringo* understanding of community is maintained. *The Tico Times* does not create this *Gringo* community on its own. The community already exists; however, the newspaper does reinforce the imagined community and to a certain extent it recreates the community. The imagined community particularly becomes salient as it has helped to alter the historical relationship between English and Spanish as explained in the introduction of this study. This finding reconfirms and nuances Anderson’s (1983) criteria understanding print media and national consciousness: a unified form exchange, “fixity” to language and the power associated with a print medium.

*The Tico Times* also reminds *Gringos* that although they live in this imagined Gringo community, they operate inside Costa Rica. Furthermore, the newspaper reinforces American notions of time and space due to the structural format of the newspaper and the linkages between news stories. Thus, the concept of imagined community and its relationship to contemporary interactions becomes more evidenced as scholars continue to explore imagined communities as they relate to the prestige of the English language itself (Norton & Kamal, 2003) as native English speakers continue to leave their homelands in search of new cultural and linguistic environments through migration (Benson, 2010; Gu, 2010; Huber & O’Reilly, 2004). The real
and perceived benefits include social status, economic growth and cultural prestige which manifest in these burgeoning immigrant communities.

Conclusion

Costa Ricans often label this imagined community *Gringolandia*, or Gringoland. This very real place co-exists with the national Costa Rican community. Costa Ricans see this space which they can visit but cannot reside. Americans live there, often in luxurious circumstances and privileged lifestyles; and although the boundaries of this important imagined community are strongly experienced by American insiders and well as by Costa Rican outsiders, this in-between cultural space is not always articulated for high-end immigrants. As economically-advantaged migrants continue to become more mobile in the 21st century the need increases to understand their intercultural interactions and the ideological and subsequent hegemonic structures in which these cultural negotiations take place. It is imperative that scholars and media practitioners explain intercultural interactions in both current terms and as they relate to their historical antecedents.
References


Harpelle, R. N. (1993). The social and political integration of West Indians in Costa Rica:
Discourse in Ethnic-Minority Media


