

Gringo(a)

I belong to various social groups in society: I am a woman, a teenager, a soccer player, a musician, a future teacher, and an active traveler to Nicaragua. These social groups make up who I am and what I contribute to society, but culturally, half of me has originated from Puerto Rico and the other half from Germany. My two very different cultural backgrounds is what affects my life the most because growing up, one of my parents frequently spoke Spanish while the other spoke English. Because of this, I have more than one identity; I look white but I have a Spanish last name. Furthermore, I am caught between these two different worlds and have acquired two different identities, which has made it very difficult for me to figure out where I belong. The government, my friends, and my family have also had a hard time defining and classifying me because not only am I different, but the people who I engage with socially are very different as well.

Half of my friends are white English speakers while the others are Latino Spanish speakers. Not only do I speak different languages when I am around my different group of friends, but the kinds of words that I use are different as well. For this assignment, I chose to observe the discourse of my Latino, Spanish speaking friends with whom I travel to Nicaragua. I thought it would be interesting to analyze how words from my Latina and Spanish speaking identity relate to and differ from words used in my white, English speaking identity. Because I am a member of both cultural groups, I thought I would have an inside edge on the word's usage and potential effects because this is a word that does have dual meanings and can be used in very different contexts.

I have chosen the word “gringo(a)” because it is a word that is frequently used in the Latino environment directed, mostly, at people of white descent. The word “gringo”

originated in Mexico in the early 1900's, during the Mexican Revolution. "Gringo" was used to describe the white Americans who were busy changing the political scene of Mexico and many Mexicans referred to these white Americans as gringos because they believed them to be invaders and enemies. Many of these Mexicans were also opposed to the political changes that were occurring in their country at the hands of these white Americans, so the word "gringo" was not used in a kind or light-hearted manner. Back in the 1900's the use of the word gringo was very derogatory and was adopted by almost all Latinos around the world to describe the white "invaders." As time has passed, however, the word gringo has become less offensive (most likely because of peace treaties signed between the Mexicans and Americans). Today, many Latinos apply the word gringo not to foreign invaders, but to anyone who looks different than them within their own country, mostly tourists. The meaning of the word "gringo" has also changed from enemy to foreigner and from a very derogatory word to more of a light-hearted adjective.

Even though the meaning of the word "gringo" has changed, it still has very negative connotations depending on the context in which it is used. For example, when I travel to Nicaragua with my Latino, Spanish speaking friends, I look considerably different, and I stand out. Because of this, the Nicaraguans will laugh at me, joke, and use the word "gringa" to verbalize my status as an outsider. Even though the word gringa means foreigner, it is still used as a means of exclusion. Furthermore, because I am considered a gringa in Nicaragua, I am not able to engage with or relate to the people as much as I would like. The color difference of my skin, compared to theirs, makes it almost impossible to interact and be considered worthy of interacting with. The situation

becomes even more complicated when I prove to be of Hispanic descent, and yet, I don't physically look as though that were true.

What is interesting about the word gringo is how it is used interchangeably. While traveling I am frequently called a gringa, and while this upsets me, my Latino friends do not find it to be offensive, and in fact, they use it quite regularly. While relaxing in the dorms, for example, my Latino friends met and later called my roommate a gringa. She is white, and she only speaks English, but since we were located within a society (at the University of Washington, in the United States) where this is the majority, I found it ironic how it was still used to describe her as "different." My friends later explained to me that it was not meant to be offensive, just a way to differentiate "her" from "us." Even though it is not morally right to make groups with a "them versus us" mindset, the reality is that this kind of social activity is an occurrence that is all too familiar and an activity of which almost everyone in society partakes.

The consequences of these actions, and especially the interchangeability and the duality of the word "gringo" further highlights ethnic differences in a hurtful manner. It is offensive to hear the word "gringa" used both lightly and negatively, because of its contextual origin. While at one point in time "gringo" was used callously and has seemingly changed (for the better), the history of the word is something that can not be easily reconciled or forgotten. For people like me, who have to hear the word used in relation to themselves or others, both negatively and "positively," we are put in the position of being considered both an insider and an outsider. But because I am a person who the word is intended and at the same time not intended for, I am forced to deal with the question of identity every day, and ask myself where I really belong.