Space of Multilingualism: Exploring Ethnolinguistic Diversity in Los Angeles, California

Within the state of California lies Los Angeles (L.A.), one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse cities in America, ‘a language hub and a fantastic laboratory in which to observe the role and interaction of linguistic communities’ (Parodi, 2014, p. 33). This report focuses on the hierarchical relationship between the three most spoken languages in L.A. – English, Spanish, and Korean – drawing on media data from the L.A. Times. It uses quantitative data about language speakers, analyses the ideological beliefs held by residents, media, and politicians towards these languages, and evaluates academic insights regarding the future implications of these linguistic relationships.

This report focuses on English because it is the most widely spoken language in L.A., Spanish because of its past linguistic heritage and current influence, and Korean because of its growing importance. It is also worth noting that this report does *not* use the much-referred to term ‘Spanglish’ to identify code-switching, loanwords, and borrowings between Spanish and English. Following the cultural history outlined by Sánchez-Muñoz, the term ‘Chicano Spanish’ is preferred, as it better encompasses a sense of local ownership and pride (2018, pp. 53–54). Moreover, the term ‘Spanglish’ is inaccurate, as it represents US-spoken varieties of Spanish, including Cuban Spanish, Dominican Spanish, and Puerto Rican Spanish, which are typologically divergent from Chicano Spanish (Parodi, 2014, pp. 41–42).

One of the most remarkable, relevant findings of this project is that half of L.A.’s population is bilingual in Spanish and English (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018). By using media data (Appendix A and B) and taking recent political events into consideration, this report evaluates the dynamic between English and Spanish from a new angle. It also incorporates a relatively overlooked dimension: the relationship between those two dominant languages and Korean. English may be the quasi-official language, but Hispanic culture and history are entrenched in southwestern USA, demonstrated by L.A.’s numerous Spanish place names, such as ‘Sierra Madre’, ‘Topanga’, and ‘Los Angeles’ itself. Comparatively, Koreans only immigrated to L.A. in recent decades. Although Korean is the third most used language in L.A., it is spoken by just 2.37% of the population, compared to 42.15% English speakers, and 41.67% Spanish speakers (US Census Bureau, 2010), as shown by Table 1.

LANGUAGE	NUMBER OF SPEAKERS	%
Total	**3,412,889**	**100**
English	1,438,573	42.15
Spanish	1,422,316	41.67
Korean	81,040	2.37
Tagalog	78,043	2.29
Armenian	57,924	1.70
Chinese	52,928	1.55
Farsi	43,043	1.26
Russian	28,870	0.85
Japanese	21,664	0.63

French	20,021	0.59
Vietnamese	17,686	0.52
Hebrew	16,292	0.48
Arabic	13,578	0.40

Table 1. Languages spoken in L.A.

(Parodi, 2014, p. 35)

L.A. is California’s most populous city, comprising some 3,979,576 residents according to estimates by the US Census Bureau (2010). 47.5% of the population are Hispanic, 29.4% are Non-Hispanic Whites, and 10.7% are Asian. Intriguingly, the Hispanic percentage of L.A.’s population (47.5%) roughly correlates with the percentage of Spanish speakers (41.67%), while the Non-Hispanic White percentage of the population (29.4%) is lower than the percentage of English speakers (42.15%), suggesting that the joint-dominance of English in L.A. is disproportionate, influenced by external factors.

One of such factors is the city’s history. Before the Mexican-American War (1846-48), California was almost entirely Spanish-speaking (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018). Even after the war, when California was ceded to the USA, most residents only spoke Spanish; for its first thirty years under US mandate, California was officially a bilingual state, with all laws published in English and Spanish (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018). This linguistic legacy is prevalent in the attitudes within the city – more than 1.2 million residents identify as Mexican (US Census Bureau, 2010), and perhaps question the status of L.A. as ‘American’.

Another factor is the socioeconomic climate. Spanish or Korean speakers are predominantly of Latino or Korean ethnicity, and are typically lower down on the Californian economic scale (Koh, 2007; Jordan, 2007). The overlap in Latino and Korean communities is growing, as Latinos are the largest workforce and customer base for many Korean-run L.A. businesses (Yi, 2006). Korean entrepreneurs seeking to boost business choose to learn Spanish over English – the supposedly prestigious lingua franca (Kresta, 1994). English is no longer the L2 of choice for many immigrants arriving in California, exemplified by the increasing interconnectivity between Koreans and Hispanics, who are forming an interdependent relationship economically, socially, and linguistically.

The third factor is the sociopolitical climate of L.A., California, and the USA. Anti-Hispanic sentiment has been a source of tension since the Mexican-American War, and has been exacerbated by recent political events, notably the actions of President Trump (Parodi, 2014). Trump’s promise to ‘build a great wall along the southern border’ and allegations that Mexicans are ‘drug dealers, criminals, and rapists’ and border’ deepen Hispanophobia, making Hispanic communities feel under attack (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018). His reference to Mexicans as ‘bad *hombres’* is an example of anti-Latino discourse and Mock Spanish: ‘an ordinarily positive or neutral word in Spanish (hombres) is used to indicate a whole range of negative associations … Trump connected the notion of ‘immigrant’ not simply to ‘men’ (the literal translation of that word) but to Mexican men as inherently undesirable, criminal, and violent' (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018, p. 62).

Language is often used to preserve a sense of heritage, culture, and identity – subconsciously or intentionally – becoming a means of defiance in the face of such polarising statements. Spanish in L.A. evidences this phenomenon, as Trump's anti-Hispanic comments likely reminded the city's large Mexican community of past bigotry: inadequate workers' rights, segregation, and violence, particularly the 'Zoot Suit Riots' (1943), in which thousands of civilians and off-duty police officers attacked Hispanic youths in L.A. (Shin et al, 2015). These negative attitudes towards Latinos are perpetuated through negative attitudes towards bilingualism; the language difference serving as a proxy for xenophobia.

Conceptualised during the rise of nationalist states in the nineteenth century, the 'nation-state' ideology embodies the separatist idea that each nation should have its own territory, history, culture, and language (Ferguson, 2006). Some perceive state monolingualism as a sign of national unity, rather than the unnatural outcome of eliminating minority languages (Shin et al, 2015). Using various agents (such as academies, institutions, and media) language policy can uphold this nationalistic mantra through *standardisation* – the construction and dissemination of a uniform, supradialectal normative variety (Ferguson, 2006). This is usually an unmarked, high-prestige variety (like Standard English) supressing minority dialects (such as Spanish, Korean, or various others). Language shift is also influenced by non-institutionalised factors such family language policy – implicit decisions made at community and family levels (Ferguson, 2006).

Areas such as L.A. debunk the myth that monolingualism indicates unity. Adopting English as the official medium of governmental communication may avoid the hassle of translation, but it neglects the millions of non-English speaking immigrants, leaving them unable to understand vital information regarding public health, safety, and the law (Mohan and Simmons, 2004). California's first constitution (1849) declared that official business must be conducted in English and Spanish, lasting until 1986, when Proposition 63 mandated that legislature 'shall take all steps necessary to ensure that the role of English as the common language of the State of California is preserved or enhanced' (California Education Code, 2011). This shift in linguistic hierarchy represents the shift in Californian policymakers' nationality – at the time of the first constitution, many spoke and read Spanish because Mexico had only recently ceded California to the US, whereas in recent decades there is an English-speaking dominance in official positions (Jordan, 2007).

Nonetheless, this dissemination has been unsuccessful. For a language or variety to be widespread it must also be adopted through informal consensus among speakers, not just by official state agencies (Ferguson, 2006). L.A.'s vast linguistic diversity illustrated in Table 1 shows no sign of homogenising; local business owners continue to operate in English, Spanish, Korean, and several other languages (Parodi, 2014). Some agencies and corporations do not comply with legislative standardisation, evidenced by the L.A. Department of Motor Vehicles permitting applicants to take written tests in English, Spanish, Korean, Japanese, Arabic, and Tagalog (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018).

This is important in light of various restrictive language policies passed in California. Most notorious is Proposition 227 (1998), viewed by some as a ‘by-product of the English-only movement’ in the US during its enactment (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018, p. 63). By requiring Californian public schools to teach Limited English Proficiency students in special classes for a year, and then be mainstreamed to English-only instruction, Proposition 227 effectively eliminated bilingual classes for twenty years (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018, p. 63). Latinos were the most negatively impacted, as 25% of the Californian student population comes from non-English-speaking households, with most speaking Spanish (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018, p. 63). This was emphasised by the US Justice Department’s findings that California had not addressed the high failure rates of English Language Learners (ELLs), and that it was disregarding the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (Shin et al, 2015). In July 2017, Proposition 58 repealed the English-only immersion requirement, allowing non-English languages to be used in public schools (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018). In other words, Proposition 58 does not impose bilingual education, but makes it available based on parental demand. It is now easier for the 1.4 million ELLs in California to attend bilingual classes which cater to their level of English, with the option to enrol in dual-language programs across all subjects (Parodi, 2014). This resurgence of bilingual educational emphasis reverses a period of intolerance and inequality contradictory to L.A.’s rich linguistic legacy.

Media representations are an indicator and influencer of public attitudes towards language. Throughout L.A. and California, the biggest media outlet is the L.A. Times, with a daily readership of 1.3 million people, and a combined print and online weekly audience of 4.6 million (One World Media, 2021). Ideologies towards English, Spanish, and Korean are regularly addressed in articles (see Appendix A and B). 31% of L.A. Times’ readers are below thirty-five-years-old, 78% have a university degree, and 75% have houses worth more than $1 million (One World Media, 2021). In other words, an average reader is middle-aged or older, educated, and of reasonably high socioeconomic status. There is no data available regarding ethnicity, but – when considering that Latinos and Koreans are often lower on the socioeconomic scale (Koh, 2007; Jordan, 2007) – an educated guess indicates that the L.A. Times’ readership is predominantly non-Hispanic and white, given the high percentage of readers who own houses worth more than $1 million, which is nearly double the average Californian house price (One World Media, 2021).

This raises an important issue: how are articles from the L.A. Times altered to appease its readership, and what problems might this cause? Despite being based in a city that is almost 50% Latino, only 12% of the L.A. Times’ journalists are Latino, and nearly 15% are Asian-American (Arellano, 2020). The paper has come under scrutiny for past anti-Latino coverage, even calling Mexicans ‘wetbacks’, ‘border-jumpers’, and ‘greasers’ (Arellano, 2020). Before the aforementioned Zoot Suit Riots, the L.A. Times openly anticipated the beatings, and applauded them with the headline ‘Zoot Suiters Learn Lesson in Fight with Servicemen’ (Arellano, 2020). This xenophobic past is now strongly condemned by the L.A. Times Guild’s Latino Caucus, but it may have a negative, long-lasting impact on ideologies towards Spanish and Latinos. Furthermore, the underrepresentation of Hispanics and Asians in the L.A. Times’ newsroom likely preserves stereotypes about Hispanics or Asians occupying high-ranking positions (Arellano, 2020).

The L.A. Times has become more considerate about the language ideologies it spreads. In 2018, Patrick Soon-Shiong – a South African-Chinese biotech entrepreneur – took ownership of the struggling newspaper, promising to address racism in the newsroom (KTLA 5, 2018). Soon-Shiong mentions appealing to California's uniquely wide demographic, including the Latino and Korean communities, identifying this as the key to a successful future (KTLA 5, 2018). The L.A. Times has since broadened its linguistic horizons by launching the 'L.A. Times en Español', and a Spanish-language version of the Coronavirus in California Tracker (Los Angeles Times, 2021). Examples of underlying language ideologies publicised in the L.A. Times are referenced frequently throughout this report as Appendix A (Kresta, 1994) and Appendix B (Yi, 2006).

Ethnic groups in L.A. tend not to be geographically or linguistically intermingled (Parodi, 2014). Anglos, Latinos, and Koreans mostly use their own language for intra-community communication, with Spanish predominantly spoken in East L.A., Korean in Koreatown, and English in Malibu, Hidden Hills, and Topanga, among others (Parodi, 2014, p. 34). However, Yi (2006) observes a trend of Koreans and Latinos becoming increasingly mixed, as 'many restaurants in Koreatown have begun carrying menus in Spanish as well as English and Korean'. Kresta (1994) also notes that 'Korean merchants and other business people, including some who cannot speak English, are scrambling to learn the language in an effort to boost business and improve community relations'. This is reciprocated by Latinos learning other languages (such as Korean and Chinese) when working with speakers of these languages outside the school system (Parodi, 2014, p. 42).

Given its status as a lingua franca, many consider English as linguistically dominant in the USA. This is accurate to a certain extent, as the spread of Global English has caused *language shift*, by which a community's primary medium of communication transitions from one language to another, and the *localisation of English*, by which individual variants of English appear worldwide in the form of accent, syntax, lexis, or pragmatics, such as Chicano Spanish (Ferguson, 2006). However, high rates of Spanish, Korean, and other minority languages make L.A. an exception (Table 1). Many Spanish and Korean speakers are opting to learn the other's language instead of English, exemplified by Spanish-language courses offered at the Korean American Center having more than double the enrolment of English classes (Kresta, 1994). This provides more opportunity for *language contact* – two languages collide, and their speakers form a pidgin to understand one another, which eventually becomes a creole when future generations grow up speaking it natively (Ferguson, 2006). The expansion of Spanish outside Latino communities and overlap with Korean in mixed L.A. communities is also noted by Parodi: 'there are advertisements on boards written in an ethnic language other than Spanish and in Spanish on the walls' (2014, p. 42). A fascinating potential implication of the language contact in these diglossic L.A. communities could be the formation of a Spanish-Korean creole, as has occurred with Chicano Spanish.

In spite of political discourse, Spanish usage is growing. It is the most widely studied foreign language in American high schools and colleges, particularly in California (Parodi, 2014). However, the fact that these classes are taught in Standard Mexican Spanish, rather than Chicano Spanish or another L.A. vernacular, illustrates how multiple non-standard varieties are often comprised under general language terms. An example is ‘English’ – this usually signifies the standardised form, rather than, for instance, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which is widely spoken in South Central L.A. (Parodi, 2014, p. 35). This is important when considering the difference in prestige between languages, as Standard English (SE) is perceived as more prestigious than Spanish, but a sub-dialect of SE like AAVE is generally seen as less prestigious (Parodi, 2014). Likewise, Standard Mexican Spanish is a higher prestige variant than other Mexican or Central American varieties, reinforced by its dissemination in language classes (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018). Despite this, the use of Central American variants in L.A. is growing, correlated with the rise in number of Central American residents, which has more than doubled since the 1980s (US Census Bureau, 2010). An example is the increased use of the second person singular personal pronoun ‘vos’ rather than ‘tú’ – the Chicano Spanish variety (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018, p. 57).

With this diglossic dynamic comes linguistic hierarchy. Korean usage is rising, but, given that global languages such as English, Spanish, or Chinese usually rank higher than national languages (like Korean), and that it has existed in L.A. for a relatively short time, Korean is perceived as inferior (Koh, 2007). Spanish and English have a deeper history and heritage – Spanish has been spoken in L.A. since the eighteenth century (Parodi, 2014, p. 41). Anglo and Hispanic cultures are more entrenched in L.A., from street signs to place names, and this shared monopoly is unlikely to change in the near-future (Shin et al, 2015). Nevertheless, this monopoly is not evenly balanced. English maintains an aura of higher prestige, demonstrating that the extent to which a language is entrenched in a city’s culture is not the only relevant factor – if it were, then Spanish would sit atop L.A.’s linguistic hierarchy.

Social, economic, and political factors are also decisive. Regardless of how widespread Spanish is, it remains marked, because most view the USA as an ‘English-speaking country’ (Shin et al, 2015). Such ideologies rarely address the language itself, but are fuelled by metalinguistic discourses – such as “you speak good English for a Mexican” – the generalisations of which are often flawed, but have implications for language use, shift, and hierarchy (Shin et al, 2015). These do not study the objectivity or truth of a language attitude, but rather its social situatedness. According to Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice, the language itself is only worth what its speakers are worth (Hanks, 2005). Standardised languages are not inherently more valuable; their value derives from their social power (Hanks, 2005). In L.A., Spanish and English have comparable historical influence – if anything, Spanish is even more deeply engrained – but English is seen as a higher-value commodity due to its representations in popular culture, media, and politics, and its lingua franca status (Shin et al, 2015).

The vilification of Spanish and its speakers by political figures damages ideologies towards the language through negative connotations to crime and violence (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2018). Similarly, political discourse and racial prejudice have triggered a rise in anti-Asian sentiment during the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting in an increase in hate crime towards those of Asian ethnicity, with over eight-hundred Covid-related hate incidents reported in California from March to May 2020 (Chen et al, 2020). It is probable that ideologies towards speakers of Asian languages like Korean have been negatively affected. Despite their status as national languages elsewhere, most ethnic languages in the US have limited usage and functionality in American society, and therefore become ‘crucial elements of ethnic identity for the immigrants and their descendants’ (Parodi, 2014, p. 38). In the post-Trump era of American politics, many hope that this identity-forming role of ethnic languages is respected, even if they do not align with nationalistic societal ideals, and that linguistically rich, ethnically complex areas like L.A. are appreciated as catalysts for spreading bicultural acceptance, rather than targets for restrictive language policies and xenophobic stereotypes.

There are significant implications of language use and hierarchy in L.A. for the city, the state of California, and the USA itself. National levels of multilingualism are increasing, raising questions about how contemporary US society is run. Given that more than half of eighteen to thirty-four year-olds in L.A. speak a language other than English at home, and 25% nationwide (Mohan & Simmons, 2004), should monolingual English-speaking Americans be taught Spanish (or another minority language) from first grade? The US has no official language, with English serving as a de facto official language, but should Spanish also be given authorised status?

In this report, the articles examined for representations of language ideologies originate from the L.A. Times, the future of which depends how successfully it appeals to a wider demographic through the launch of a Spanish and (potentially) Korean edition (KTLA 5, 2018). It is hoped that other institutions and corporations accept that multilingualism is beneficial and essential for their own existence, and for society. The US is not alone in marginalising non-English speakers, but – as one of the most linguistically diverse countries worldwide, and the nation seen by many as the quintessence of democracy – it can set an example to emulate. Acceptance of linguistic differences should be the norm, and may be an effective solution to soothing an ever-more globalised and polarised world.

3,298 Words

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Appendix A (Kresta, 1994)

Word Bond : Korean Americans Learning Spanish to Form Latino Links

By TAMMY HYUNJOO KRESTA

AUG. 17, 1994 12 AM PT

L.A. TIMES STAFF WRITER

GARDEN GROVE —
Each Monday night this summer, a tiny classroom has been packed with Korean American doctors, merchants and other professionals eagerly scribbling down their teacher's every word.

*

In Korean, the instructor asks his students to repeat after him.

"Cuanto cuesta," he says.

The 70 pupils chant in unison.

In Southern California, where Spanish has entered the mainstream, Korean merchants and other business people, including some who cannot speak English, are scrambling to learn the language in an effort to boost business and improve community relations, according to local leaders.

Enrollment for this Spanish-language course, offered at the Korean American Center, is more than double that of the center's classes in business management, citizenship and even English.

The center offered the course for the first time this year in an effort to boost sagging business in Garden Grove's Koreatown, which stretches two miles along Garden Grove Boulevard, said Dr. Koo Oh, president of the Orange County Korean American Assn.

"The main problem with Garden Grove Koreatown is mainly that there are only Korean people," Oh said. "If it continues like this, it's not going to progress. They should go mainstream. To do that, they should know English and Spanish."

Becky Esparza, Orange County human relations commissioner, said: "It's not only business wise, it establishes a bond between a community and the merchants who are willing to learn Spanish. It shows that they care enough to learn the language."

When Daniel Jeha Lee began teaching the class five weeks ago, he also hoped to offer some insight into the Latino culture from a Korean perspective.

During the seven years he lived in Argentina, he developed a profound respect for that culture, Lee said. When he moved to the United States in 1992, he was saddened to see other Koreans who did not feel the same.

“I feel sorry when Korean people think Spanish people are inferior,” said Lee, 25. “It’s because they don’t understand the culture. I am trying to make a bridge of respect.”

The students in Lee’s class, which meets from 7 to 9 p.m., all speak Korean fluently, but many speak broken English.

“Koreans have a very good heart; they keep trying to learn English, but Spanish comes much easier to them because there are more similarities in pronunciation,” Lee said.

Jia Frydenberg, director of the professional English as a Second Language program at UCI Extension, agreed that “Spanish is a much easier language to learn for Asian people in particular,” she said. “English is so idiosyncratic.”

She added: “If an Asian person learns Spanish, it also helps them to learn English; they complement each other because of the vocabulary and language structure.”

Dr. Kai Lee, 52, a Fountain Valley dentist and one of Lee’s students, is not fluent in English and said he wanted to communicate more with his patients, about 15% of whom are Latino.

“I think (Latinos) feel more comfortable coming to a minority dentist,” Lee said.

Census figures for 1990 show that more than a quarter of the population in Orange County speaks only Spanish at home. Another 10% speak Asian languages, with Vietnamese, Chinese and Korean topping the list.

Hien Phan, director of the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce, said that Vietnamese business people who want to learn Spanish are likely to take classes taught in English at community colleges or private institutions.

Eunah Hwang, another of Lee’s pupils, is fluent is both Korean and English. But she is familiar with language barriers, which is what prompted her to take the class.

About 45% of the students in her kindergarten class in Long Beach speak only Spanish, she said.

“I feel that I can gain a lot of knowledge and apply it to my students,” said Hwang, 27, who also teaches English at the center.

Appendix B (Yi, 2006)

Koreatown Immigrants Blending In

By DANIEL YI

MAY 3, 2006 12 AM PT

L.A. TIMES STAFF WRITER

As immigrant rights marchers gathered in downtown Los Angeles on Monday morning, garment manufacturer Mike Lee said many of his fellow Korean American merchants closed early, fearing a repeat of the 1992 riots.

Lee closed his Poison Ivy shop as well, but did something more. He joined the march.

“I am also an immigrant,” Lee said as the throngs on Wilshire Boulevard crossed Western Avenue.

Just as the 1992 disturbances were a defining event for L.A.'s Korean American community, the recent immigrant rights marches may be a defining event for the community today -- highlighting the growing economic interdependence between Koreans and Latinos, and budding efforts by Koreans to cross the cultural divide.

Latinos constitute the largest workforce for many Korean businesses in the city and are an increasingly important customer base. Although Koreans and Latinos struggle to overcome cultural and language barriers, there have been strides, by design and by economic necessity.

Latinos increasingly shop in Korean grocery stores, served by Latino cashiers who speak Spanish and a smattering of Korean. Some Korean restaurants now offer menus in Spanish. And Monday, two days after the 14th anniversary of the riots, Lee and some other business owners joined their Latino workers in demonstrations.

It is a far cry from 1992, when Korean-owned businesses took the brunt of looting and burning after the acquittal of four white Los Angeles policemen in the beating of black motorist Rodney G. King.

Some 2,200 Korean-owned businesses had about $400 million in damage. One of the riots’ most indelible images was a picture of Korean men, armed with rifles, standing on the roofs of their businesses after police had left.

After the riots, Korean businesses were criticized for being too insular and uncaring about the communities they served, mainly black neighborhoods in South Los Angeles.

“After the riots, Korean [businesses] simply moved out of black neighborhoods,” said Kyeyoung Park, an associate professor of anthropology and Asian American studies at UCLA. “That can’t be done in relation to Latinos.”

Latinos, not Koreans, constitute the single biggest group of residents in Koreatown -- now a booming business and residential district that has prospered in recent years thanks in part to investments from South Korea. In downtown’s garment district, Korean-owned businesses depend on Latino labor to keep the sewing machines whirring.

From downtown to Koreatown, Korean-owned businesses were shuttered Monday, for a lack of workers or lack of customers -- or both.

Many were also closed for fear that the crowds might get out of hand.

In Hannam Supermarket at Vermont Avenue and Olympic Boulevard, Korean language news filled the store instead of the usual ambience music, with constant updates about the crowd's movements.

A few miles west, Galleria Market manager Simon Ahn said his staff was monitoring the news as well. The store was prepared to close at the first sign of disturbance, he said. It never happened.

But as businesses braced for the worst, Monday's events provided a glimpse of the evolving relationship between Koreans and Latinos in the city.

A week before the planned marches, many business owners said they had talked to their Latino workers to handle expected absences and assure them that their jobs would be safe.

At Galleria Market, many Korean employees offered to cover the shifts of their Latino counterparts who wished to attend the marches, Ahn said. "It was our way of showing support," he said.

Galleria Market employee Eduardo Hernandez was working alongside Ahn on Monday, bagging groceries.

The Mexican native said he didn't see his Korean employer's decision to stay open as a lack of solidarity with demonstrators.

"We are all here because we need to work to survive," said Hernandez, 40, who added that his wife took the day off from her housecleaning job to march with their 9-year-old son. "We all demonstrate in our own ways."

The market is a prime example of the evolving ties between the two communities. It saw a nearly 40% decrease in business Monday morning, Ahn said. Korean customers scared away by the demonstrations accounted for part of that, he said. But "we also have a lot of Latino customers who come in the mornings for the fresh produce."

Many restaurants in Koreatown have begun carrying menus in Spanish as well as English and Korean, said Grace Yoo, executive director of the Korean American Coalition, a community advocacy organization in Los Angeles.

"Over the years, there have been growing numbers of employees in Korean businesses who are Latinos," she said. "When the staff is Latino, it makes it more comfortable for Latinos to come into the business as well."

Yoo cautioned that the increasing interaction between Koreans and Latinos is not to be taken as an effort by Koreans to make amends for the criticisms leveled at them after the 1992 riots. Many Koreans view those criticisms as unfair and unfounded. The interaction instead is a natural development as both communities grow and interact in Los Angeles' multiethnic setting.

"The Korean community is not looking to do things for publicity," Yoo said.

Still, a little good publicity can't hurt.

That’s why garment manufacturer Lee joined the march Monday, he said.

“We want to show that we are not only takers,” said Lee, 47, president of the Korean Apparel Manufacturers Assn. This year, the association donated 60,000 pieces of clothing to needy families in African American and Latino neighborhoods.

“We have to show we are in the community,” Lee said.

As he spoke during the march, organizers with the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance chanted slogans in Spanish, Korean and English. The group, which represents Korean and Latino workers, has been at odds with Korean-owned businesses over wages and benefits, illustrating that labor-related tensions exist.

Regardless of what divides the ethnic groups, the only way to bridge the gap is to engage the other side, restaurant owner David Lee said.

“I see a lot of Hispanic workers being promoted by Korean business owners,” said David Lee, who Monday closed his So Na Mu Restaurant and joined the march. “This morning, I joked with my Latino workers that I only saw two of them marching.”

He employs 16 immigrants from Latin America and eight from South Korea. Every month or two, all the workers gather over food.

“There is a language barrier,” said David Lee, 53, a former banker. “My Korean workers do not speak Spanish or English. My Latino workers do not speak English or Korean.”

But the Latino workers have picked up one phrase in Korean they repeat often when they eat Korean food.

“They say *mashisoh*,” said Lee. Meaning, “it’s delicious.”