



# TWO LANGUAGES, TWO WORLDS

Jaime Valderas

## Language divides local Latinos.

Story by Kera Abraham ■ Photos by Luis Salazar

**C**andice Coots and Jaime Valderas are both proud of their Mexican heritage. They share the feeling that Latinos need a supportive cultural community in the predominantly white city of Eugene. But even though they are both young and sociable, their lives are worlds apart.

Coots, a UO student, was born in Anaheim, Calif. and moved to southern Oregon when she was 8 years old. Despite her shiny brown hair and dark eyes, those who don't know her might not guess that she is ethnically half-Mexican. She's visited Mexico and she loves her mother's tamales, but her Spanish is limited.

Valderas, a recent immigrant who works as an installer for a heating company, was born in Veracruz, Mexico. He came to the U.S. in 1999 to visit a brother in California, and moved to the Willamette Valley in 2001 because he liked the area's tranquility. He chats in Spanish with friends and co-workers, but he speaks only broken English.

Coots and Valderas represent two distinct groups in the Latino community: those who speak Spanish and those who don't. According to the 2000 Census, 15 percent of Eugene's Latinos speak Spanish only. But Eugene has an exceptionally high percentage of monolingual, English-speaking Latinos, at almost half of the local Latino community. In comparison, only 21 percent of Latinos in the U.S. speak English only.

At 5 percent of the total population, Latinos are Eugene's biggest minority group, according to the 2000 Census. Numbering nearly 7,000, the local Latino population has more than doubled since 1990 — three times the growth rate of Latinos in California, and twice the growth rate of Latinos nationwide. According to Coots, who collected data for the 2000 Census, the number of Latinos in Eugene is likely even higher because many undocumented residents decline to fill out Census forms for fear of deportation.

Differences separate the Latino population into distinct demographic groups. About two-thirds were born in the U.S. and the other third were born in Latin American countries. Seventy percent have Mexican ancestry. Though Mexican nationals and native-born Mexican-Americans share a common heritage, disparities in language and culture make it hard for the two groups to relate.

### DIFFERENT WORLDS

According to Lane Community College Anthropology Professor Bruce Sanchez, considerable tension divides native- and foreign-born American residents with Mexican roots. "Mexican-Americans think that Mexican nationals are an embarrassment and do not know how to behave," says Sanchez, "and Mexican nationals believe that Mexican-Americans have abandoned their culture; that is, they are *pochos*."

*Pochos* is a slang word used by Mexican nationals to insult Mexican-Americans who speak English and identify with American culture. It literally means "faded in color." For Mexican-Americans, it is a derisive term that suggests a disconnection from their cultural heritage.

Yet the insults fly both ways. A Mexican national who emigrates to the U.S. is "what people would call a 'wetback,' straight from the river," says Coots. The terms "wetback" and "*pochos*" illustrate the rift dividing native-born and immigrant Latinos. Language is a primary factor affecting that gap.

"It's often a question of cultural legitimacy," says Tomas Hulick-Baiza, the coordinator for multicultural recruitment at the UO. "Speaking as someone who was born on this side of the border and raised biculturally, it often seems that Mexicans are going to judge us by the quality of our Spanish. I've always seen it as an oppressive behavior. Often you'll find people from each side who make fun of one another, like 'your Spanish is *pochos*,' or 'look at your English.'"

Sanchez, like Hulick-Baiza, is a Mexican-American who was born in the

U.S. He speaks only English, and he does not identify strongly with Mexican culture. "I do not feel I share a lot with immigrants from Mexico," says Sanchez. "We live in different worlds."

### MAINTAINING ROOTS

If Latino immigrants live in their own world in Eugene, its capital is the Whiteaker neighborhood, which is 16 percent Latino and contains an assortment of Latino businesses.

A red and white hand-painted sign marks Las Brasas, a Mexican restaurant located on Blair Blvd. and 5th Ave. Inside, indigenous masks and photographs of the dishes on the menu decorate the bright yellow walls. A large wood carving dominates one wall, displaying an eagle holding a snake under the words "*Estados Unidos Mexicanos*."

Valderas has come to Las Brasas for lunch on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Sipping a Mexican soda and speaking in Spanish, the 26-year-old immigrant says he appreciates the friendliness of non-Mexican people in Eugene. "Here, you go to the store, and people say '*Hola! ¿Cómo estás?*' in Spanish. White people," he emphasizes.

In contrast, he says, Mexican-Americans born in the U.S. "are a little bit racist ... It's like they see you as a little beneath them. As if you are illegal." He complains that many Mexican-Americans don't want to speak Spanish or share in the Mexican culture. "I prefer an American ... to a 'Mexican' who was born here, a *pochos*," he says.

Unlike *pochos*, asserts Valderas, Mexican nationals are humble and know the value of