Spanglish: The Third Way

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Received October 30, 2001

This paper attempts to reflect on the current sociolinguistic trends among the US Spanish-Speaking population by summarizing what appears to be the main and leading ideas about the Spanglish phenomenon.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, nearly 400 million people speak Spanish as their mother language. The expansion of the language of Cervantes is particularly vigorous in the United States, where the candidates for President in the 2000 elections resorted to speaking in Spanish to attract the Hispanic vote.

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The form of Spanish which uses many words borrowed from English is called Spanglish. An article in The New York Times described Spanglish as the third language of New York, after English and Spanish.

The use of English words in the following examples might sound strange to you if you are not used to hearing them regularly. A red traffic light is called *red light* (instead of *semáforo en rojo*), the roof of a building is *el techo* (instead of *el techo*), to park a car is *parquear* (instead of *aparcar*), and to have lunch is *lunchar* (instead of *comer*).

The differences are mostly limited to vocabulary, but sometimes they can affect the logic and syntactical structures of the language: for example: *te llamo para atrás* (I’ll call you back) instead of *te vuelvo a llamar*.

Its critics claim that Spanglish is an invasion of Spanish by the English language.

Its defendants state that it reflects the reality of many Spanish speakers in North America, living with two languages and two cultures.

Languages in contact

The use of more than one language is common, particularly in frontier regions and in polyglot countries. Also common is the use of a restricted form of a language for a specialized purpose, such as the restricted variety of English used worldwide for air traffic control.

Occasionally formal and informal varieties of the same language may differ to such an extent that they are used virtually as different languages, as until recent in modern Greece.

Sometimes, contact between languages may give rise to a system so different from the original(s) that it can no longer be regarded as the same language.

A *pidgin* is a limited language system, with rules of its own, used for communication between people with no common language.

A *creole* is a pidgin which has become the first language of a community.

A *mixed language* is one in which elements from two or more languages have become so intertwined that it is unclear which is the ‘basic’ language.
What is Spanglish?

According to The Oxford Companion to the English Language, Spanglish originated in the 1960s as a blend of Spanish and English, on the analogy of franglais.

Spanglish is the combination of English and Spanish into a new language. It is primarily a spoken language, but can be written, as seen in works by Jimmy Santiago Baca, Ana Castillo, Victor Hernández Cruz, and Lorna D. Cervantes, among others.

Is it a dialect, a language, or something else?

Linguists have traditionally categorized Spanglish as a non-standard dialect of English, labeled Chicano English (ChE). Recently, however, some linguists have argued that Spanglish should actually be considered a Creole language. Non-linguists tend to consider Spanglish an unsophisticated pidgin. To complicate the matter, there are at least four different Spanglishes spoken in the United States (Stavans 565): Puerto Rican Spanglish, Cuban Spanglish (also known as Cubonics), Mexican Spanglish, and Spanglish spoken by Spanish-speakers from countries other than Mexico.¹

Linguistic structure of Spanglish

The term Spanglish often refers broadly to non-standard Spanish which contains:

1. Loanwords from English, such as: wachar to watch, pushar to push.

2. Loan senses attached to traditional Spanish words, such as: asistir to assist, help, atender to attend (school).

3. Calques, such as: llamar pa(ra) (a)trás to call back (on the telephone).

4. Code-switching, such as Sàcame los files for the new applicants de alla! (Get out the files for the new applicants from over there).

A more precise terminology developed by Chilean linguist Lucia EliasOlivares (1976) identifies standard Spanish, popular Spanish, mixed Spanish, Caló, and code-switching, to cover a continuum of varieties between Spanish proper and English proper.

In this scheme, mixed Spanish contains extensive borrowings and calques, Caló is a mixed cryptolect descended in part from the traditional germanía (the argot of the Hispanic underworld) and associated in the main with adolescent boys in gangs, and code-switching is the rapid alternation of Spanish and English.

All variations of Spanglish use three basic techniques: Spanishizing, code switching, and borrowing.

(1) “This afternoon, I am going to the mall to /chop/.” (the last word would be pronounced “chop” but spelled “shop”)

This is an example of “Spanishization” of the English word “shop.” Speakers of Spanglish will often take English words and pronounce them according to the rules of Spanish, thus dropping consonants at the ends of words, and replacing M’s with N’s, V’s with B’s, and the soft “sh” sound with the harder “ch.”

(2) “The tired man was en un troque viejo a las four in the morning.”

This is an example of code switching. Here English phrases and Spanish phrases are combined in one sentence. The phrases in English follow English rules of grammar and syntax, hence “the tired man” follows the pattern of article + adjective + noun, and the phrase in Spanish follows the Spanish rules of grammar and syntax, hence “un troque viejo” follows the pattern of article + noun + adjective.

(3) “Give me un bipeo.”

This is an example of borrowing. An English word, “beep” (as in “beeper”), has been Spanishized and become a full-fledged Spanish word. This is a word used even by Spanish-only speakers in Spanish-speaking countries.

Despite the apparent freedom with which they are used, lexical borrowing and code-switching are not random, but are closely related to syntactic structure.

Debate over who speaks Spanglish helps fuel the argument over how to categorize the language. Some, like linguist Lizette Alvarez, say speakers tend to be fluent in both English and Spanish. Alvarez says that with Spanglish, “phrases and sentences shift back and forth almost unconsciously, as the speaker’s intuition grabs the best expressions from either language to sum
up a thought” (484). Reliance on a speaker’s intuition, rather than on a memorized system, implies a mental grammar which may be neither strictly English nor Spanish, but a sophisticated combination of the two. Alvarez describes one Spanglish speaker who “often switches into Spanglish, she said, to convey anger, joy, love, or embarrassment, because Spanish is a more descriptive, emotional language than English “not because she doesn’t know the word” (486).

This description is in direct contrast to another view of Spanglish speakers. Some believe that Spanglish is used specifically when the speaker “doesn’t know the word.” In this view, Spanglish is a pidgin language, an unsophisticated cobbling together of English and Spanish phrases that allows non-English speakers to attempt communication in English. Latino columnist Roger Hernandez says that Spanglish is “an inside joke” among Hispanics, that it functions as a crutch for newcomers and as a type of shorthand for Hispanic English speakers, but that it is definitely not a language used by people who are fluent in English.

However, non-Hispanic speaker of Spanglish can be fluent in English. American novelist and poet Jim Sagel uses Spanglish in his writing and speaking. He says he uses it because “it’s a very enriching thing for American culture and society, certainly for American literature, that we have this influence of this other perspective” (qtd. in Rodriguez 139-40).

Those who believe Spanglish speakers to not be fluent in English tend to categorize Spanglish as a pidgin. Hernandez says it is a “temporary crutch” until the speaker becomes fluent in English. Another Latino columnist, Victor Martin, says the use of Spanglish dwindles in Hispanics that stay in this country, as they become more fluent in English.

On the other hand, two linguists and a scholar offer compelling arguments for Spanglish to be categorized as a Creole. Scott Baird of Trinity University in Texas bases his argument on research he did on gravestones in South Texas:

[Baird] studied the evolution of language on gravestones in family plots [in South Texas] and found... gravestones bearing a mixture of Spanish and English seem to persist for generations while earlier immigrant communities, like the Czech and German, abandoned

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3 Hernandez, Roger. “Spanglish is an Inside Joke - Not a Language.” latinolink.com/opinion/opinion97/040060ROG.htm
their native languages in favor of English within three generations. (Gold)⁵

Linguist Felipe de Ortega y Gasca, of Texas State University, “argues that just as Chaucer’s English showed the hybridization with French that eventually resulted in the English of today, a hybridization of English and Spanish is creating yet another language in Hispanic neighborhoods of the U.S.” (Hernandez)⁶ Another supporter of the Creole argument is Mexican novelist and critic Ilan Stavans, who compares the use and purpose of Spanglish to that of Yiddish: “For almost 200 years, educated Jews in Eastern Europe... refused to grant Yiddish the status of a legitimate communicative language. . . . Yiddish was part Hebrew, part German, and part a sum of Slovak, Czech, Russian, Polish, and other Indo-European idioms” (565).

Linguists continue to categorize Spanglish as a non-standard dialect of English. They say that Spanglish relies more heavily on English vocabulary and grammar than on Spanish (Ornstein-Galicia)⁷. Many instances of borrowing, however, result in an English word being dropped into a Spanish sentence.⁸

At this point, there is a stigma attached to Spanglish when it is used with English-only speakers, although among other bilingual speakers, Spanglish is seen as “hip.” Educated speakers of Spanglish seem to agree with Alvarez and Sagel that Spanglish enriches both languages, and that the use of Spanglish helps users feel connected to a Hispanic cultural heritage.

Spanglish is used by a growing number of Hispanic-Americans who view the hyphen in their heritage as a metaphor for two coexisting worlds. ‘Spanglish has few rules and many variations, but at its most vivid and exuberant, it is an effortless dance between the two languages. Phrases and sentences veer back and forth almost unconsciously as the speaker’s intuition grabs the best expressions from either language to sum up a thought. Sometimes entirely new words are coined’ (Spanish-English is Spoken with no Apologies)⁹. Linguists call this mix of two languages “code-switching”.

⁶ Hernandez, Roger. “Spanglish is an Inside Joke - Not a Language.” latinolink.com/opinion/opinion97/040060ROG.htm
There are a number of possible reasons for the code-switching. Most speakers fall into Spanglish only among other bilingual Hispanics, and when they do, it is often with a sense of humor. But sometimes a speaker may not be able to express himself in one language (e.g. a newly-arrived immigrant) so he switches to the other to compensate for the deficiency. And as a result, the speaker may be triggered into speaking in the other language for a while. This type of code-switching tends to occur when the speaker is upset, tired or distracted in some way.

Secondly, switching commonly occurs when an individual wishes to express solidarity with a particular social group. This type of switching may also be used to exclude others who do not speak the second language from a conversation.

The alteration may also occur when a speaker wishes to convey his attitude to the listener. While monolingual speakers can communicate these attitudes by means of variation in the level of formality in their speech, bilingual speakers can convey the same by code-switching. The switch to the other language is bound to create a special effect (Skiba, 1997).

As with other foreign languages, some Spanish words simply cannot be translated. A professor from Duke University, Gustavo Perez Firmat, states in Lizette Alvarez’s article Spanish-English Hybrid is Spoken with No Apologies that ‘English is very concise and efficient’ but ‘Spanish has sabrosura, flavor’. ‘The essence of Latino culture often gets lost in the translation to English’, agrees professor Olivia Castellano (The Sacramento Bee) 10. ‘The language itself immerses you directly into the traditions, beliefs, values.’

According to Castellano, some words that cannot fully be translated are e.g. alma (soul), respeto (respect) and madre (mother). Castellano says that alma is not only soul, ‘it’s a million things. It’s passion, it’s spirit’. And the word respeto is very powerful. ‘While a non-Spanish-speaking Latino will only understand the English connotation, respeto in Latino culture means total devotion to the elderly as the greatest repositories of wisdom and connections to the past’. ‘Likewise, “mother” in English is somebody’s mom, but madre connects you to spiritual things, the Virgin Mary, a mother of God’, continues Castellano. ‘To be disrespectful to your madre is sacrilege. You’re not yelling only at your own mom’.

Sometimes an English word is borrowed for reasons of efficiency, since Spanish is famously multisyllabic. Instead of saying, estacionamiento for “parking”, Spanglish speakers opt for

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10 Magagnini, Stephen. Latino s, Language and Identity: Sense of pride growing, along with heated debate The Sacramento Bee, California, July 12, 1998.
parquin. And instead of *escribir a máquina* (to type) they say *taipear*. Another such word is *los winshi-waiper* for “windshield wipers” (in Spanish *las limpiaparabrisas*). Swiftly advancing technology has also added the verbs *bipiar* (from the noun “beeper”) and *i-meiliar* (to e-mail) to the Spanglish vocabulary (Alvarez, L., 1997).

Spanglish may sound pretty simple and easy, but there are few basic things that are good to know before joining a conversation using Spanglish.

As developed by Poplack (1980), there are two main restrictions to ensure the effective use of code-switching. The first of these is the free morpheme constraint. This constraint suggests that a speaker may not switch language between a word and its endings unless the word is pronounced as if it were in the language of the ending. An example to illustrate this constraint is a creation of the word *runeando* (- running). Cook suggests that this is impossible because “run” is a distinctively English sound. But on the other hand, the word *f lipeando* (- flipping) is possible since “flip” could be a Spanish word. In other words, the word “flip” is pronounced the same way in both languages.

‘The second constraint is referred to as the equivalence constraint. This constraint is characterised by a notion that the switch can come at a point in the sentence where it does not violate the grammar of either language’ (Skiba, 1997).

But Tony Zavaleta, an anthropologist who studies the U.S.-Mexican border, ‘says that true code-switching - with no interruption in thought - takes more than simply knowing both languages. It’s a result of living in an environment like the Texas-Mexican border, where Spanish and English have meshed since the 1800s. Spanglish is a cultural foundation, a sense of ownership and place, to facilitate a person to switch off the languages’.

With proper grammar taking a backseat to convenience, some educators worry that generations of Hispanics are growing up without knowing either language properly. Sometimes traditionalists call code-switching a product of laziness and ignorance. And according to above cited Lizette Alvarez’s article ‘it is true that as Spanish gets fuzzier to American-born Hispanics, they come to rely on an English word to fill the gap. But a new school of thought has recently emerged saying

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11 [http://www.npcts.edu/acad/spanish/spanglish.html](http://www.npcts.edu/acad/spanish/spanglish.html)
that Spanglish illustrates a high degree of fluency in both languages’. For example, a Hispanic mother might tell her daughter to put on her red shoes: *Ponte los red shoes*. The mother may know the Spanish word for red shoes (*zapatos rojos* or *zapatos colorados*), but she decides to use the English ones. And the mother says *los red shoes* because the Spanish word for shoes, *zapatos*, is the masculine *los zapatos*.

And Richard Skiba writes in his journal that

‘code-switching is not a language interference on the basis that it supplements speech. Where it is used due to an inability of expression, code-switching provides a continuity in speech rather than presenting an interference in language. Further, code-switching allows a speaker to convey attitude and other emotives using a method available to those who are bilingual and again serves to advantage the speaker. Utilising the second language allows speakers to increase the impact of their speech and use it in an effective manner’. (Skiba 1997)

As millions of first-, second-, and third-generation Hispanic-Americans take on more prominent roles in business, media and the arts, Spanglish is also becoming more prominent. The headlines of *Latina*, a glossy new magazine aimed at young Hispanic women, spout a hip, irreverent Spanglish. Young Hispanic rappers use it in their recordings, and poets and novelists are adapting it to serious literary works.

Ms. Haubegger, the publisher of *Latina*, also believes Spanglish is a good business. Her magazine peppers its stories and headlines in Spanglish: “When he Says *Me Voy* ... What Does He Really Mean?” (*me voy* means “I’m leaving”). Ms. Haubegger says that “if we were an English magazine, we would just be a general market. If we were a Spanish-language magazine, we would be Latin American. We are the intersection of the two, and we reflect a life between the two languages that our readers live in”. The magazine has been so successful that nowadays it’s published every month.

There is also more than little talk about introducing a Spanglish curriculum in schools, universities and a demand that Spanglish shou be accepted in workplaces (Spanish-English Hybrid is Spoken with no Apologies). Code-switching might also be integrated into the activities used for the teaching of a second language (Skiba, 1997).

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13 “The Sounds of Spanglish.” Taught by Ilan Stavans, a Spanish professor at Amherst College.
But for now, because of the growing number of Hispanics, you could say for sure that their
culture, language and traditions are going to have a greater influence on the United States every
day. And at the same time there will be a growing number of people who - if they want to - are
able to speak Spanglish. Spanglish is gaining a continually stronger foothold in the USA. Might it
even be the future language of the United States?

“A linguistic and cultural study of the Latino population in the United States through its
language. The course spans almost five hundred years, from 1521 to the present. It starts
with the Spanish explorers to Florida and ends with today’s rappers and poets. Novels, plays,
and film will be used as primary texts. The various modalities of Spanglish, spoken by,
among other groups, Nuyoricans, Chicanos, and Cuban-Americans, will be compared. The
development of Spanglish as a street jargon will be compared to Yiddish, Ebonics, and other
minority tongues. The course will also discuss the rapid changes of Spanish, under strong
pressure from English, in the Southern Hemisphere. Works by Dr. Samuel Johnson, Antonio
de Nebrija, and Fernando Ortiz will be used. Conducted in English”.

“The Sounds of Spanglish” trip off tongues in a four-credit course at Amherst College14, (as
printed in The spread of Spanglish Copyright˝ 2001 Nando Media Copyright˝ 2001 Scripps
Howard News Service)

Among those who have turned Spanglish into a crusade is Giannina Braschi. Not too long ago, I
heard her pronounce aloud at Harvard University what was described as “a bilingual manifesto.15
Parts of it read:

El bilinguismo es una estetica bound to double business. O, tis most sweet when in one line
two crafts directly meet. To be and not to be. Habla con la boca llena and from both sides of
its mouth. Esta con Dios y con el diablo. Con el punto y con la coma. Es un purgatorio, un
signo gramatical intermedio, entre heaven and earth, un semicolon entre la independencia y
la estadidad, un estado libre asociado, un mararrancho multicultural.

14 http://archive.nandotimes.com/noframes/story/0,2107,500299269-500477758-503265397-0,00.html
15 “Spanglish: tickling the Tongue.06/01/00, World Literature Today by Illan Stavans, Summer 2000.