Spanish, English, or Spanglish?
Truth and Consequences of U.S. Latino Bilingualism

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Introduction

When referring to racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, a number of words and expressions once used frequently and insensitively have fallen out of favor and are now shunned in favor of more accurate designations. Words once openly spoken in reference to African Americans, Jews, Italians, Asians, Native Americans, Latinos, and those with mental and physical disabilities, and found in radio and television programs, popular literature, films and public discourse in general are now socially and politically unacceptable. One particular subset of these terms refers to individuals or groups that result from racial or ethnic mixture, generally included in ersatz cover terms such as half-breed. Of the racial/ethnic terms that have survived the enhanced focus on civil rights and social conscience, only one refers simultaneously to language use and—by inference rather than by direct indication—to specific ethnic groups: Spanglish. An obvious blend of English and Spanish this word has become the less transparent espanglish in the Spanish-speaking world. Although Spanglish has at times been used to refer to a wide variety of phenomena (see Lipski 2004 for a representative survey), in the vast majority of instances Spanglish targets the language usage of Latinos born in or residing in the United

Fármacias de Similares. "Carrera por la vida." Las aventuras del Dr. Simi, Number 34, December 2004.
States. In a few instances, Spanglish is a strictly neutral term, and some U.S. Latino political and social activists have even adopted Spanglish as a positive affirmation of ethnonational identity. In the usual circumstances, however, Spanglish is used derogatorily, to marginalize U.S. Latino speakers and to create the impression—not supported by objective research—that varieties of Spanish used in or transplanted to the United States become so hopelessly entangled with English as to constitute a “third language” substantially different from Spanish and English. This “third language” in turn is seen as gradually displacing Spanish in the United States, thereby placing U.S. Latino speakers at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their compatriots in other countries, and ultimately resulting in the deterioration of the Spanish language.

Within the United States, the designation Spanglish is most commonly used by non-Latinos (or by Latinos who are openly critical of non-standard language usage), in reference to the speech patterns of resident Latino communities. The most frequent targets are the nation’s two oldest Hispanicophone communities, those of Mexican and Puerto Rican origin. In the southwestern United States, Tex-Mex is often used (by non-Latinos) as a synonym of Spanglish, as is pocho among Mexican-Americans: Spanglish is occasionally used to refer to Cuban-Americans and increasingly to resident Dominicans; rarely if ever does one hear Spanglish used in conjunction with expatriates from Spain or Southern Cone nations perceived as “white,” thus suggesting an element of racism coupled with the xenophobia that depletes any sort of linguistic and cultural hybridity.

Despite the lack of empirical evidence, the view that Spanglish constitutes a specific type of language is widespread; one can find dictionaries, grammar sketches, greeting cards, t-shirts, bumper stickers, and an enormous number of editorial comments and references in popular culture, all suggesting that Spanglish has a life of its own. One common thread that runs through most accounts of Spanglish is the idea that Latinos in the United States and perhaps in Puerto Rico and border areas of Mexico speak this “language” rather than “real” Spanish. Since upwards of fifty million speakers are at stake, the matter is definitely of more than passing interest. The ambivalence and ambiguity that shrouds all things Spanglish is nowhere better illustrated than in definitions found in two of the most widely used and presumably authoritative dictionaries of the English language. The *American Heritage Dictionary* (1666) gives the generic and neutral definition “Spanish characterized by numerous borrowings from English.” On the other hand, the prestigious and etymologically well-researched *Oxford English Dictionary* (v. XVI, 105) defines Spanglish as “A type of Spanish contaminated by English words and forms of expression, spoken in Latin America.” Thus, from the outset, we are confronted with the ever-shifting and potentially insidious manipulation of hybrid terms designed to undermine the credibility and human capital of internally colonized groups.

**In Search of the Origins of Spanglish**

A transparent linguistic blend such as Spanglish is likely to arise spontaneously whenever contacts between English and Spanish are under discussion, and therefore to assign the creation of this term to a single individual or event is unrealistic. Spanglish takes its place among a plethora of language-contact blends, including Taglish (Tagalog-English in the Philippines), Hinglish (Hindi-English in India), franglais (mixture of French and English), portuñol/portunhol (Portuguese-Spanish), guarañol (Guaraní-Spanish), and many others. Despite the unlikelihood that Spanglish has a unique parentage, the *Oxford English Dictionary* places the first known written attestation of this word—in Spanish rather than in English—in a setting that represents the quintessence of conflicting linguistic attitudes: Puerto Rico. The ambiguous status of Puerto Rico—at once a Spanish-speaking Latin American nation and a colony of the world’s most powerful English-speaking society—has provoked a level of concern about the purity of the Spanish language and an ambivalence towards the English language unmatched in the Spanish-speaking world. The number of popularizing works that purport to describe and decry the “contamination” of Puerto Rican Spanish by English is enormous; serious linguistic studies are much fewer, but a pair of prominent monographs have kept the debate alive.

The Spanish linguist Germán de Granda (1972), who resided briefly in Puerto Rico, described the *transculturación* of Puerto Rican Spanish in terms that would do credit to the spread of an epidemic. Granda is by no means a purist; his studies of Afro-Hispanic creole languages and the languages of Equatorial Guinea are legendary, as is his work with Paraguayan and Andean varieties, all based on rigorous fieldwork and a deep sense of appreciation and respect for the communities in which he lived. Granda’s perspective on Puerto Rican Spanish can therefore not be summarily dismissed as an elitist neocolonial diatribe, although few scholars of Puerto Rican sociolinguistics would agree with his portrayal. The exiled Cuban linguist Paulino Pérez Sala (1973), a professor at a Puerto Rican university, spoke of the *interferencia lingüística del inglés* in Puerto Rican Spanish. Such interference no doubt occurs, especially under
the avalanche of English-language advertising, technical language, and scientific discourse, but many of Pérez Sala’s examples are typical of English-dominant bilinguals, and not of the Spanish-dominant population of the island.¹

The term Spanglish (espanglish in Spanish) appears to have been coined by the Puerto Rican journalist Salvador Tío (1954), in a newspaper column first published in 1952. Tío—who certainly considers himself the inventor of this word (an opinion largely shared by others in Latin America)—was concerned about what he felt to be the deterioration of Spanish in Puerto Rico under the onslaught of English words, and waged a campaign of polemical and satirical articles over more than half a century. Tío (1954: 60) stated his position unashamedly: “No creo ni en el latín ni en el bilingüismo. El latín es una lengua muerta. El bilingüismo, dos lenguas muertas” (I don’t believe either in Latin or in bilingualism. Latin is a dead language, bilingualism, two dead languages). Many of Tío’s examples are legitimate borrowings from English—some in unassimilated form—that are found in modern Puerto Rican speech. Most refer to consumer products marketed in the United States or to aspects of popular youth culture, but Tío felt that Puerto Rican Spanish could suffer a far worse fate than simply absorbing foreign borrowings—which, after all, had been occurring in Spanish for more than a thousand years. Evidently not understanding that creole languages are formed under conditions far different from the bilingual borrowing found in Puerto Rico, he examined Papiamentu, an Afro-Iberian creole language spoken mainly in Aruba and Curacao and concluded that it was a degenerate form of Spanish. He warned that the same fate could befall Puerto Rican Spanish (Tío 1992: 91): “Si en ese estado de postración cayó el español de Curazao y Aruba, también podría ocurrir algo similar en Puerto Rico si no se extrema el rigor para evitarlo. Puede tardar más tiempo por muchas razones pero sí le ha ocurrido a otras lenguas en todos los continentes no hay razón para creer que somos indemnes al daño” (Tío 1992: 25) (If the Spanish of Curacao and Aruba could sink to such depths, something similar could occur in Puerto Rico if stiff measures are not taken to avoid it. This could take longer for various reasons, but if it has happened to other languages in every continent there is no reason to believe that we are exempt from this danger). Tío’s early article also contained humorous “Spanglish” words of his own invention, which were not used at the time and have not been used since, thereby creating some confusion between legitimate examples of language contact and sarcastic parodies. Although Tío had lived in New York City, and therefore had experienced first-hand true bilingual contact phenomena, he accepted uncritically others’ parodies of Spanish-English interaction: “[el español] se pudre en la frontera nuevo-mexicana donde, como dice H. L.

Mencken en su obra The American Language, dos nuevo-mexicanos se saludan con esta joya de la burundanga lingüística: ‘¡Hola amigo, ¿Cómo le do you da?’ ‘Voy very wellando gracias’” (Tío 1992: 91) (Spanish is roting on the New Mexican border[sic] where as H. L. Mencken says in The American Language, two New Mexicans greet each other with this gem of linguistic nonsense . . . ). This example, from Mencken (1962: 650–51), does not actually come from the latter author, whose other observations on Spanish in the United States and its influence on English are in general well-documented and factually accurate. Rather, Mencken quotes (uncritically, it appears) a “recent explorer” (McKinstry 1930: 336), whose concern for linguistic accuracy was highly questionable. McKinstry wrote during a time when Mexican-bashing was an acceptable literary pass-time, and although his witty anecdotes about his linguistic experiences on the U.S.-Mexican border suggest that he actually spoke Spanish, his factual account of borrowed Anglicisms stands in stark contrast to his mocking account of the language skills of Mexicans living near the border:

While the Mexican of the border appropriates the words of his neighbor in a truly wholesale manner, there is neither hope no danger that he will ever become English-speaking. It is only the bare words that are adopted. They are woven inconspicuously into a fabric of grammar and pronunciation which remains forever Mexican. Although every other word your Nogales or Juárez peon uses may be English, he could not, to save his sombrero, put them together into a sentence intelligible to an American, that is, beyond such simple household phrases as all right and goddam [. . .] This mongrel jargon of the border is naturally shocking to the ears of the well-bred Mexican of the interior.

By uncritically quoting this crude parody together with legitimate examples of borrowing and calquing, Tío (and Mencken) contributed to the false impression of a “mongrel” language teetering on the brink of total unintelligibility. Despite his affirmation of concern about the status of Spanish in Puerto Rico—and by extension in other areas where English threatens to overwhelm it—Tío offers his own version of Spanglish, a travesty of bilingual behavior that sets the stage for later debates on Spanglish. As an example, Tío creates new verbs based on whimsical convergences between Spanish and English:

Tree—árbol. To climb—trepar. To climb a tree—treepar un árbol. ¿Por qué no formar una palabra que exprese en ambos idiomas el mismo sentimiento? Para nosotros que somos bilingües la cosa es clara. Se acuña una palabra nueva y se atacña bien. Y ha nacido un nuevo idioma [. . .] Treepar. He aquí una palabra
llena de movimiento. Es una especie de taquigrafía lingüística cuya única dificultad consiste en que es más rápida que el pensamiento. Es una palabra que puede expresar, en dos idiomas a un tiempo, no ya dos palabras, dos oraciones completas. Y lo grande de esta idea, lo original, es que se pueden conjugar a un tiempo, no dos verbos, sino dos pensamientos completos en dos lenguas distintas. La lengua queda recogida en el verbo, y para decir: “Me subí a un árbol” (I climbed a tree), basta decir: treepé. (1954: 64)

(Why not form a word that expresses the same feeling in both languages? For us bilinguals it’s clear. You coin a new word and “rub it in.” And so a new language is born [...] Treepar. Here’s a word full of movement. It’s a kind of linguistic shorthand whose only problem is that it is faster than thought. It’s a word that can express in two languages at the same time not just two words, but two complete sentences. And the best part, the most original, is that one can conjugate at the same time not two verbs but two complete thoughts in two different languages. The language is contained in the verb, and, paradoxically, verbage is eliminated [...] To say “I climbed a tree” it’s enough to say treepé.)

Tío continues in this fashion, creating other neologisms via similar leaps of logic; for example:

Rocking chair—sillón. De ahí formamos el sustantivo: rollón y el verbo: rollar (to rock—mecerse) [...] y para decir: “I get up from the rocking-chair” (Yo me levanto del sillón), basta decir: “Yo me desenrollo.” (1954: 64-65)

(From this we form the noun rollón and the verb rollar [...] and to say “I get up from the rocking-chair” one just says “I unroll.”)

Tío then offers some lexical neologisms, for example from piscina/swimming pool come pipool, polina, swimicina; from mattress/colchón/colchoneta come machón/machoneta; the mixture of pull and influence gives opulencia; an so on. Tío—perhaps inspired by McKinstry’s grotesque parody—then illustrates what a dialogue in such Spanglish might sound like:


Yi is a blend of yes and sí; espiblar combines speak and hablar, and Minor is derived from Mister and Señor. Tío then echoes the affirmation that “anyone” can speak Spanglish by just making things up as one goes along. This xenophobic diatribe is frequently voiced in reference to creole languages such as Papiamentu, Lesser Antilles French Creole (known locally as patois), Philippine Creole Spanish (known as Chabacano), and so on i.e., that by simply “mixing together” two or more languages in a polyglossic free-for-all a new language is instantly created. For Tío:

Esto es un idioma que se aprende en tres lecciones. El resto lo pueden hacer ustedes por su cuenta. Por su cuenta y riesgo [...] Esta lengua que surge del choque de dos culturas es la única solución al problema de las Américas. No nos entenderemos mientras no hablamos el mismo idioma [...] Hay que crear una nueva lengua que no se preste a engafios. (1954: 65)

(This is a language that can be learned in three lessons. You can do the rest on your own. On your own and at your own risk [...] this language that arises from the clash of two cultures is the only solution to the problem of the Americas. We will never understand one another as long as we don’t speak the same language [...] we must create a new language that can’t be tampered with. For now this language only exists in theory, the “Spanglish” theory, the theory that will get rid of bilingualism in the name of bilingualism.)

Although Tío offers this wry “if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em” pseudo-solution to language and culture clash, his bitter refutation of English comes through clearly. Tío’s many remarks about Spanglish—scattered across several articles and four decades—present an ambiguous picture. On the one hand, Tío shares with many other Puerto Rican intellectuals of the time the fear that United States cultural imperialism and the crushing weight of English would eventually displace a language that had landed with Columbus and had survived unaltered until only a few decades previously. After all, Tío could remember the English-only schools that arrived with the American occupation of Puerto Rico, and his first comments on Spanglish were written just after Puerto Rico had finally wrested from the United States government the right to elect its own governor and congress. By the middle of the twentieth century, world-wide Spanish already contained numerous well-integrated Anglicisms, and Puerto Ricans used even more, including those that had entered via the American school system, consumer advertising, American businesses located in Puerto Rico, and by the increasing tide of Puerto Ricans who emigrated to the mainland to work and returned with new English expressions. All these Anglicisms were either assimilated unaltered—except for the basic phonetic adaptations—(words like welfare, teacher, mister and miss) or were morphologically adopted...
to Spanish patterns (leak > liquiar, spell > espeitar). False cognates might become true cognates in a language-contact environment (whence aplicar could mean “to apply for a job” and registrar “to register for a class”), the use of the gerund or progressive verb tenses might be more frequent than in monolingual Spanish (e.g., le estamos enviando el paquete mañana instead of le enviamos enviarremos . . . ), and occasional idiomatic expressions from English might be calqued into Spanish—on the mainland but seldom on the island except among returning newyorricans (e.g. llamar para atrás “to call back”).3 Nowhere did one find—in Puerto Rico or elsewhere among Spanish speakers in contact with English—bizarre linguistic chimeras like treepar, rollón, pipool, or machoneta. Tío had clearly never heard such items, nor was there any danger of his ever doing so. He deftly avoided any discussion of true language-contact phenomena, which have enriched Spanish for at least thirteen centuries, in favor of creating a xenoglossic straw man emblazoned with the epithet Spanglish, with which to bludgeon those who might not share his abhorrence of Spanish-English bilingualism. Tío, like McKinstry and scores of nameless commentators before and since, deliberately invented pseudo-bilingual nonstiosities in order to denigrate legitimate bilingual speech communities individually and collectively. For McKinstry the prime motivation was racial supremacy: Mexicans were regarded as inferior to Anglo-Americans, hence incapable of adequately acquiring English but all too capable of losing their grip on their own native language once confronted—even at a distance and separated by a national border—with the English language juggernaut. Tío may well have harbored racist sentiments against Anglo-Americans—and his scorn for the Afro-American language Papiamentu provides a possible bit of evidence—but his harshest broadsides are directed at his fellow citizens for their failure to embrace monolingualism, for Tío a primordial virtue. Tío foreshadows a viewpoint that would later be taken up in the continental United States by expatriate intellectuals like Roberto González Echeverría (to be discussed next), namely that even educated Latinos willingly allow their language to be overrun by English in the mistaken view that this increases their upward social mobility.

Other Viewpoints and Definitions

Even within Puerto Rico, not all regard Spanglish with animosity. Nash offers a somewhat different definition and set of observations on “Spanglish” in Puerto Rico:

In the metropolitan areas of Puerto Rico, where Newyorricans play an influential role in the economic life of the island, there has arisen a hybrid variety of language, often given the slightly derogatory label of Spanglish, which coexists with less mixed forms of standard English and standard Spanish and has at least one of the characteristics of an autonomous language: a substantial number of native speakers. The emerging language retains the phonological, morphological, and syntactic structure of Puerto Rican Spanish . . . Spanglish as defined here is neither language containing grammatical errors due to interference nor intentionally mixed language. (1970: 223–25)

Most of Nash’s examples represent the sort of lexical borrowing found in all bilingual contact situations.

In a recent survey of attitudes and inquiries about Spanish in the United States, Fairclough (2003: 187) defines Spanglish as simply “la mezcla del inglés y del español” (the mixture of English and Spanish). Ódon Betanzos Palacios, president of the North American Academy of the Spanish Language is of the opinion that

El español y el inglés han sido y son dos problemas normales en comunidades donde conviven los de lengua española y los estadounidenses, comunidades en las que sus habitantes son monolingües y tienen necesidad de comunicarse. El de lengua española ha recogido palabras del inglés, de las que entiende su significado y, encielle, las españolizan; igualmente hará con las formas verbales y así, en su variedad de injertos, se aproximará a la comunicación con el de la otra lengua . . . el Spanglish es, sólo, medio de comunicación temporal . . . Creo que [los que promueven la enseñanza del spanglish] no se han percatado del enorme error que cometen al querer hacer de amplitudes y querer enseñar una jerga de comunidades que ni siquiera podrán entender otras comunidades de sus cercanías. (2001: 2)

Spanglish and Inglesol have been and continue to be two normal problems in communities where Spanish speakers and Americans live together. The Spanish speaker has taken those English words whose meaning is understood and, simply, has Hispanicized them; the same is done with verbal forms and with such hybrids, some approximation to communication in the other language will be achieved . . . Spanglish is only a temporary means of communication . . . I believe that those who promote the teaching of Spanglish are not aware of the huge mistake in teaching this jargon that cannot even be understood in neighboring communities.)

Adopting an anti-imperialistic stance and considering Spanglish to consist primarily of the use of Anglicisms by Spanish speakers, the distinguished
literary critic Roberto González-Echeverría laments the negative implications of Spanglish:

El spanglish, la lengua compuesta de español e inglés que salió de la calle y se introdujo en los programas de entrevistas y las campañas de publicidad, plantea un grave peligro a la cultura hispánica y al progreso de los hispanos dentro de la corriente mayoritaria norteamericana. Aquellos que lo toleran e incluso lo promueven como una mezcla inocua no se dan cuenta de que esta no es una relación basada en la igualdad. El spanglish es una invasión del español por el inglés. La triste realidad es que el spanglish es básicamente la lengua de los hispanos pobres, muchos de los cuales son casi analfabetos en cualquiera de los dos idiomas. Incorporan palabras y construcciones inglesas a su habla de todos los días porque carecen del vocabulario y la educación en español para adaptarse a la cambiante cultura que los rodea. Los hispanos educados que hacen otro tanto tienen una motivación diferente: algunos se avergüenzan de su origen e intentan parecerse al resto usando palabras inglesas y traduciendo directamente las expresiones idiomáticas inglesas. Hacerlo, piensan, es reclamar la calidad de miembro de la corriente mayoritaria. Políticamente, sin embargo, el spanglish es una capitulación; indica marginalización, no liberación.

This condemnation of Spanglish as a manifestation of defeat and submission by Hispanic communities in the United States recalls Odón Betanzos Palacios’ lament (Betanzos Palacios, n.d.), when he speaks of “el problema de algunos hispanos en Estados Unidos, de los que no han podido ni tenido la oportunidad de aprender ninguna de las dos lenguas (español e inglés)” (the problem of some Hispanics in the United States, who have not had the opportunity to learn either of the languages [Spanish or English]). In another

Commentary on Spanglish, the Spaniard Joaquim Ibarz offers the following observation, which clearly confuses regional and social dialects, youth slang, and language contact phenomena:

Hablar medio en español, medio en inglés, no es tan descabellado si se piensa en la mezcla de las culturas, las migraciones y todas las circunstancias que han hecho que estos dos idiomas puedan combinar... La lengua resultante del mestizaje entre español y el inglés, conocida como ‘spanglish,’ es hablada por más de 25 millones de personas a ambos lados de la frontera entre México y Estados Unidos, zona en la que residen cerca de 40 millones de latinos. La mayoría utiliza formas diferentes de este dialecto, que cambia según el país de origen de quién lo utiliza, como el cubonics de Miami, el nuyorrican de los puertorriqueños de Manhatan y el caló pachuco de San Antonio. (2002: 3)

(Speaking half in Spanish, half in English, isn’t so crazy if we think about cultural mixture, migrations, and other circumstances that have brought these two languages together... the language resulting from the mixture of Spanish and English, known as ‘spanglish,’ is spoken by more than 25 million people on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border, an area in which some 40 million Latinos live. Most use some variety of this dialect, which varies according to the country of origins, like Cubanics in Miami, Nuyorican for Puerto Ricans in Manhattan and Pachuco calo of San Antonio.)

Another Spaniard. Xosé Castro gives a similar appraisal:

El espanglish tiene una lógica forma de ser y un origen explicable y comprensible. Su función es claramente comunicadora, pero sólo puede darse cuando existe una carencia de vocabulario en alguna de las dos partes que forman un diálogo. Cuando existe alguna duda o algo que obstaculice la comprensión, se echa mano de la versión inglesa, idioma que ambos interlocutores comprenden, y la comunicación, por fin, se completa... la marginalidad del espanglish... excluye al hispano que no entiende inglés, y al angloparlante que no entiende español. Se restringe, por tanto, a una reducida comunidad de hablantes. (1996: 3)

Spanglish has its own logic and a logically explained origin. It serves as a clear communicative function, but it can only occur when one of the dialog partners lacks a vocabulary item. When in doubt, to eliminate any obstacle to communication, one reverts to the English version, understood by both interlocutors, and communication takes place... the marginal status of spanglish... excludes Latinos who don’t understand English and English speakers who don’t understand Spanish. It is therefore restricted to small speech communities. We must acknowledge that New
York Spanglish has little to do with its Los Angeles counterpart. Therefore we are not speaking of a single language but rather of a group of dialects as varied as the speech communities it represents.

For the Cuban linguists Valdés Bernal and Gregori Tomada (2001: 5), Spanglish is in essence a phenomenon peculiar to Puerto Ricans living in New York, but these linguists (unable to travel to Miami to observe the situation first hand) assert that “el spanglish queda para los puertorriqueños en sus barrios neoyorquinos. Sin embargo esto ya es historia, y el spanglish, como era de esperar, ha hecho su aparición en Miami entre la nueva generación de los cubanoamericanos—los yacas—quienes se ‘divierten’ hablando esta variedad de lengua ‘en parte español anglosanizadado, en parte inglés hispanizado, y en parte giros sintácticos, que usan niños y adultos, a veces casi sin darse cuenta’” (Spanglish was for Puerto Ricans in their New York neighborhoods. But this is now history, and spanglish, as might be expected, has made an appearance in Miami among the new generation of Cuban-Americans—yacas—“mess around” speaking this dialect “part Anglicized Spanish, part Hispanized English, and part syntactic combinations used unconsciously by children and adults). Most of the cited examples include code-switching, but in some cases the results of language erosion among increasingly English-dominant bilinguals is taken as an indicator of Spanglish (for example the use of the familiar pronoun tú in conjunction with deferential address forms such as señor alcalde ‘honorable mayor’).

Many professional educators have viewed terms like Spanglish with alarm. Milán specifically recommended that researchers and educators [in New York City] refrain from using the term “Spanglish” and use instead neutral designations such as “New York City Spanish” (2002–2003). Acosta-Belén observed that “Speakers of the non-defined mixture of Spanish and/or English are judged as ‘different,’ or ‘sloppy’ speakers of Spanish and/or English, and are often labeled verbally deprived, alingual, or deficient bilinguals because supposedly they do not have the ability to speak either English or Spanish well” (151). On the other hand the linguist and Latina activist Zentella (1997: 82) has demonstrated that younger Puerto Ricans in New York and other cities of the Northeastern United States are beginning to adopt the word “Spanglish” with pride, to refer explicitly to code-switching: “…more NYPR’s are referring to ‘Spanglish’ as a positive way of identifying their switching.” She concludes that “Contrary to the attitude of those who label Puerto Rican code switching ‘Spanglish’ in the belief that a chaotic mixture is being invented, English-Spanish switching is a creative style of bilingual communication that accomplishes important cultural

**Latino Activism and the New Spanglish**

The evolving social and political identity of the U.S. Latino communities and the upsurge in dialog between intellectuals and activists has resulted in a rebirth of the notion of Spanglish in new guises. Just as Chicano has vastly different connotations and implications than this word had in Mexico and the southwestern United States a few decades ago, so has Spanglish been deliberately rephrased as linguistic and cultural patrimony, albeit with no single unifying thread. To illustrate the range of ideas and viewpoints encompassed by “neo-spanglish,” the writings of two well-known protagonists will be examined. Ed Morales takes a politically-grounded stance, linking Spanglish with the notion that:

Latinos are a mixed-race people … there is a need for a way to say something more about this idea than the word “Latino” expresses. So for the moment, let’s consider a new term for the discussion of what this aspect of Latino means—let us consider Spanglish. Why Spanglish? There is no better metaphor for what a mixed-race culture means than a hybrid language, an informal code; the same sort of linguistic construction that defines different classes in a society can also come to define something outside it, a social construction with different rules. Spanglish is what we speak, but it is also who we Latinos are, and how we act, and how we perceive the world. It’s also a way to avoid the sectarian nature of other labels that describe our condition, terms like Nuyorican, Chicano, Cuban American, Dominican-Yourk. It is an immediate declaration that translation is definition, that movement is status quo. (2002: 3)

While acknowledging that many observers—particularly from other Spanish-speaking nations—regard Spanglish as “Spanish under siege from an external invader” (5), Morales goes on to celebrate the emerging Latino language as an affirmation of resistance and the construction of a powerful new identity. The remainder of his work deals with manifestations of the Spanish-English interface in literature, popular culture, and political discourse, and represents the most eloquent manifesto of Spanglish as an originally derogatory term that is being co-opted by its former victims as a badge of pride and courage.
A very different perspective comes from the self-declared admirer and promoter of Spanglish Ilan Stavans, an expatriate Mexican writer now teaching in Massachusetts, whose prolific popular writings on Spanglish and putative specimens of this “language” have made him a lightning rod for polemic as well as a widely-cited source among international scholars unfamiliar with the reality of Spanish-English bilingualism in the United States. Rather than applying Spanglish to an already existent discourse mode or sociolinguistic register (as done, for example, by Ed Morales or by the New York Puerto Ricans cited by Zentella 1997), Stavans invents his own mixture of Spanish and English, loosely modeled after true intrasentential code-switching typical of U.S. Latino communities. Stavans initially defines Spanglish innocuously as “The verbal encounter between Anglo and Hispano civilizations” (2003: 6). His anecdotal accounts of learning Spanglish upon arriving in New York City from Mexico reveal an often less than affectionate reaction: “But to keep up with these publications [Spanish-language newspapers in New York City in the 1980s] was also to invite your tongue for a bumpy ride. The grammar and syntax used in them was never fully ‘normal,’ e.g., it replicated, often unconsciously, English-language patterns. It was obvious that its authors and editors were americanos with a lo connection to la lengua de Borges” (Stavans 2003: 2).

While perhaps initially offended by varieties of Spanish that seemed exotic to one coming from Mexico and by the frequent code-switching, loan translations and assimilated Anglicisms characteristic of these typical bilingual environments, Stavans came to profess a deep admiration for code-switch discourse, which for him forms the essence of Spanglish. Stavans appears to regard all code-switching as a deliberate act of creativity, whereas most linguists who have studied code-switching—in a wide variety of language-contact environments throughout the world—analyze spontaneous code-switching in spoken language as a loosely monitored speech mode circumscribed by basic syntactic restrictions but largely below the level of conscious awareness. Only in written language, particularly in creative literature, is deliberate manipulation of code-switching to achieve specific aesthetic goals a viable option. Beginning in the 1970s, the use of code-switching in U.S. Latino literature has become increasingly common, first in poetry and eventually in narrative texts as well. Such writers as Alurista, Tato Laviera, Roberto Fernández, and Rolando Hinojosa have fine-tuned the language of U.S. Latino communities to create a striking “third language” in their innovative literary texts. Even in their most creative flights of fancy, these writers almost always adhere to the syntactic and pragmatic rules that govern spontaneously-produced bilingual speech. The most general restriction on mixing languages within the same sentence is that no grammatical rule in either language be violated, and in particular that the point of transition be “smooth” in the sense that the material from the second language is in some way as likely a combination as a continuation in the first language. Fluent code-switching may therefore produce combinations in which, e.g., a switch occurs between article and noun, between a complementizer and a subordinate clause, between a conjunction and one of the conjuncts, and so on. Spontaneous code-switches not accompanied by hesitations, pauses, or interruptions, are normally unacceptable in the following circumstances: 1) between a pronominal subject and a predicate; 2) between a pronominal clitic and the verb; 3) between a sentence-initial interrogative word and the remainder of the sentence; 4) between an auxiliary verb (especially haber) and the main verb; and 5) adverbs of negation are normally in the same language as the verbs they modify. The restrictions reflect the general need to maintain the grammatical rules of each language, following the linear order both in English and in Spanish, and to retain easily identifiable chunks of discourse.

Although surrounded by bilingual discourse since arriving in the United States, Stavans reports on a particularly apocryphal experience that revealed the creative potential of written code-switching. During an early teaching assignment, some Latino students frustrated with the treatment of Latinos by the American “system” expressed their alienation by rendering the Pledge of Allegiance, the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence into a humorous but obviously non-authentic mixture of languages:

(a) Yoplégiav alianza a la bandera de los United Esteits de América . . .

(I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.)

(b) Nosotroso joldeamos que estas truths son self-evidentes, que todos los hombres son creados equally, que están endawdeados por su Creador con certain derechos inalienables, que entre estas están la vida, la libertad, y la persura de la felicidad.

(We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.)

(c) We la gente de los Unaited Esteits, pa’ formar una union más perfecta, establis­heamos la justicia, aseguramos tranquilidad doméstica, proveeamos pa’ la defensa comun, promovemos el welfer, y aseguramos el blessin de la libertad de nosotros mismos y nuestra posterity, ordenando y establisheando esta Constitución de los Unaited Esteits de America.
Spanish, English, or Spanglish?

Stavans has offered a purported “translation” of the first chapter of Don Quijote into Spanglish:

In un placete de La Mancha of which nombre no quiero remembrearme, vivfa, not so long ago, uno de esos gentlemen who always tienen una lanza in the rack, una buckler antigua, a skinny caballo y un grayhound para el chase. A cazuela con más beef than mutón, came chopped para la dinner, un omelet pa los sábados, lentil pa los viernes, y algún pigeon como delicacy especial pa los domingos, consumían tres cuarters of su income. El resto lo empleyaba en una coat of broadcloth and y anes ketes de velvet pa los holidays, with sus slippers pa combinar, while los otros días de la semana él cur a figura de los más finos cloths. Livin with él eran una housekeeper en sus forties, una sobrina not yet twenty y un ladino del field y la marketa que le saddleaba el caballo al gentleman y wieldeaba un hookete pa pordear. El gentleman andaba por allí por los fiỳy. Era de complepción robusta pero un poco fresco en los bones y una cara leaneada y gaunteada. La gente sabfa that él era un early riser y que gustaba mucho huntear. La gente say que suo apellido was Quijada or Quesada—hay diferencia de opinion entre aquellos que han escrito sobre el sujeto—but acordando con las muchas conjecturas se entiende que era really Quejada. But all this no tiene mucha importancia pa nuestro cuento, providiendo que al cuentarlo no nos separemos pa nada de las verdad. (2002: 5–6)

This text contains numerous syntactic violations of code-switching, together with phonetically unlikely combinations (e.g., saddleaba), and hints of popular or uneducated Spanish (e.g., pa < para ‘for,’ verdad < verdad ‘truth’) which implicitly reinforce the notion that only uneducated people speak Spanglish. That Stavans’ Quijote is not simply a foreigner’s innocent attempt to mimic authentic bilingual speech is amply demonstrated by his considerable proficiency in producing realistic code-switched language in his expository prose writings (e.g., Stavans 2000, 2003). Regardless of Stavans’ motivations, his Quijote rendition has been widely cited—always disapprovingly—as “evidence” of the deplorable state of Spanish in the United States.

Spanglish: Who Needs It?

The bibliography of empirical research on varieties of Spanish in the United States is vast and continually growing, and all results converge on a single inclusion: there is no “third language” or cohesive Spanglish to be found anywhere in this country, nor can extrapolation from contemporary language contact environments project such a language in the foreseeable future. Each
Latino speech community retains the major dialect features of the countries of origin, together with the inevitable dialect leveling in urban areas where several regional varieties of Spanish are in daily contact. In the aggregate, Spanish speakers living in the United States use more Anglicisms than their monolingual counterparts in other Spanish-speaking countries; these include loan translations, false and partial cognates, and assimilated borrowings. However in no cases are basic grammatical principles of Spanish violated among fluent speakers of Spanish, although patterns of usage may vary. Only among second- and third-generation English-dominant speakers is it possible to find combinations that would be grammatically unacceptable in fully fluent Spanish. This, however, is not Spanglish but rather the natural consequence of the LANGUAGE SHIFT > LANGUAGE LOSS trajectory typical of most immigrant speech communities. The implicit failure to distinguish between fluent bilinguals and semifluent heritage language speakers is partially responsible for misleading statements about the prevalence of Spanglish among U.S. Latino communities.

What is the future of Spanglish? Will it continue to be the whipping-boy for purists and xenophobes or will it emerge into the sunshine as the positive affirmation of U.S. Latino identity? To address these questions within an academic essay is to engage in mere speculation, but some factual points may be brought to bear. First, despite the enormous bibliography of empirical research on U.S. varieties of Spanish, spanning nearly a century of scholarship and nearly every Spanish-speaking community residing within the United States, little of this knowledge has penetrated elementary and secondary education, the mass media, the entertainment industry, or the diplomatic service. Although there is greater reluctance to employ offensive terms in public discourse, popular notions about the language of U.S. Latinos differ little from those in vogue more than half a century ago. At the university level matters are much more salutary; courses on U.S. Latino culture and literature and Spanish language courses designed for native and heritage language speakers are encouraging portents, but seldom does this enlightenment penetrate the “town vs. gown” barrier. It is therefore difficult to envision an eventual widespread acceptance of Spanglish as a proud affirmation of ethnolinguistic identity. In the history of U.S. sociocultural discourse, no term has risen from bigotry to splendor. It is true that within Mexico chicano has often been used as a negative stereotype for Mexican-Americans, but the word itself is simply a retention of the archaic pronunciation of mexicano. No racial or ethnic slur has been transformed into a favorable epithet across wide sectors of American society. Items like African American, physically challenged, Asian, Native American, domestic partner, and the like are modern usages that bear no resemblance to the host of ugly tags once found in common parlance. If Ebonics survives unscathed—and this is very much up for grabs—it will be at least in part due to its lack of similarity to any of the popular or academic terms previously used to designate these language varieties.

Urgently needed is a greater public awareness of the reality of U.S. Latino language, and if Spanglish is allowed to creep into the (re)education of the American public, I fear for any remediation. Spanglish is as out of place in promoting Latino language and culture as are crazy, lunatic, crackpot, nut case in mental health care, or bum, slob, misfit, loser in social work. From the perspective of a linguist who has spent more than three decades studying the Spanish language in its U.S. setting, Spanglish will always be a signpost on the wrong road, a road whose many way-stations range from misunderstanding to intolerance. The expression el que habla dos lenguas vale por dos (the person who speaks two languages is worth twice as much) does not admit qualifiers, and neither should our acceptance of the nation’s largest bilingual community.

Notes

1. Spanglish has even made its way into children’s literature, for example, in a humorously didactic novel by Montes (2003) in which a Puerto Rican girl is teased by her English-only classmates. The cover blurb sets the stage:

Maritza Gabriela Morales Mercado (Gabí for short) has big problemas. Her worst enemy, Johnny Wiley, is driving her crazy . . . Gabí is so mad she can’t even talk straight. Her English words keep getting jumbled up with her Spanish words. Now she’s speaking a crazy mix of both, and no one knows what she’s saying! Will Gabí ever make sense again? Or will she be tongue-tied forever?

The book provides a touching lesson in cultural sensitivity and a few examples of realistic code-switching, although the idea that bilingual speakers ‘jumble up’ their languages when they become angry is unlikely to score any points in the bilingual education arena.

2. Similar viewpoints have been expressed by the journalists Llorens (1971) and Varo (1971). See Lipski (1975, 1976) for a different viewpoint.


4. The literature on the syntactic constraints which govern code-switching is vast and
still growing. Summaries of relevant theories and approaches are found in Lipski (1982, 1985a) and Toribio (2001a, 2001b).


6. It is true that nigga has positive attributes in African-American hip-hop culture, but this term is not freely available for use by non-members of this community and is rejected by more conservative African-Americans. Queer has become accepted in academic circles (to wit queer studies, queer theory), but "on the street" it retains the traditional locker-room flavor.

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In 2002, Ilan Stavans caused an international uproar with the publication—in the Barcelona newspaper La Vanguardia—of his translation into Spanglish of Part I, Chapter 1 of Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quixote of La Mancha. A scrutiny of the debate that ensued revealed the opposing sides: the foes, linguistic purists and prescriptivists who believe Spanglish heralds the ruin of the Spanish language in the United States; and the endorsers, who trust that the sizable Latino minority north of the Rio Grande is a new mestizo civilization in the making. Among the former were those who accused Stavans of being an agent provocateur who stepped beyond his own scholarly boundaries, and posed that a philologist should explore the transformations a language undergoes in history without attempting to accelerate those changes; and the latter proffered accolades for his bridging the gap between knowledge and action. For both camps, Stavans became a symbol. Yet for those who had followed his intellectual journey, the uproar was but one more endeavor in Stavans’s wide-ranging activities as a daring man of letters.

The San Francisco Chronicle once described Stavans as a twenty-first century Octavio Paz, approaching Hispanic culture as a vortex where a wide array of historical, social, economic, and religious forces coincide. Indeed, Stavans, the Lewis-Sebring Professor in Latin American and Latino Culture

### Language and Empire: A Conversation with Ilan Stavans

Ilan Stavans and Verónica Albin