

# Using Spanglish in the United States: A Variety of Spanish or a Way of Building Identity? The Case of Heritage Language Learners in the Foreign Languages Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

The following paper looks at how users of Spanglish, a hybrid that was born from the interactions of those who live in an English-speaking country like the US and keep their Hispanic linguistic roots, might not be just using it because it's only natural, but they might be doing it in purpose as a way of enacting their identities. Special attention is taken to the case of students of Spanish as a Heritage Language, since they are the ones that seem to be using this register the most. In this case, it is discussed the teaching of the standard variety of Spanish to Heritage Language Learners (HLLs), and the incorporation and value of other forms of Spanish, even Spanglish.

Keywords: Spanglish, linguistic identity, heritage speakers, Spanish in the United States, foreign languages teaching, teaching heritage speakers.

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Andrade, M. "Using Spanglish in the United States: A Variety of Spanish or a Way of Building Identity? The case of Heritage Language Learners in the Foreign Languages Classroom". *Camino Real*, 11:14. Alcalá de Henares: Insituto Franklin-UAH. Print.

Recibido: 30 de noviembre de 2018; 2ª versión: 10 de abril de 2019.

## RESUMEN

El siguiente trabajo se enfoca en cómo los usuarios del *spanglish*, un híbrido que nace de las interacciones entre aquellos que viven en un país de habla inglesa como es EE. UU. y mantienen sus raíces lingüísticas latinas, podrían estar usándolo no solo porque les resulta natural, sino que estarían haciéndolo para visibilizar su identidad. Se le presta especial atención al caso de los estudiantes de español como lengua por herencia, ya que son ellos los que parecen estar utilizando este registro principalmente. En este caso, se discute el tema de la enseñanza de la variedad estándar del español a estudiantes de español por herencia, y la incorporación y valorización de otras formas de español, incluso de *spanglish*.

Palabras clave: *spanglish*, identidad lingüística, hablantes por herencia, español en los Estados Unidos, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, enseñanza de hablantes por herencia.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's media, it is not hard to find issues of policy and ideology regarding languages in general and of Spanish in particular. At the same time, finding evidence of the controversial coexistence that English and Spanish have in the United States is just a matter of browsing the news. It is not surprising that this language takes a big portion of the linguistic discussion in the media since, according to the United States Census Bureau, as of July 1, 2015, there are 56.6 million people of Hispanic origin, making it the largest racial minority of the country. In California alone, there are more Spanish-language radio stations "than in all of Central America together" (Stavans 14). Univision and Telemundo, two major TV stations broadcasting in Spanish and produced in the United States, are the fastest growing networks in the overall country.

This paper is focused on the linguistic variety that is born from the interaction of both languages: Spanglish and why it is part of this dispute. In an article by the *Chicago Daily Herald*, Arado describes Spanglish as "a slangy hybrid of English and Spanish that is hugely popular and increasingly controversial among Hispanics here in the suburbs and throughout the United States". What is it about this form of communication that provokes a debate among experts and non-experts?

Resisting change is not something uncommon for humanity in any field and languages are no exception. The popular perspective tells us that Spanglish is a threat to the pure forms of the language. According to Stavans, many intellectuals

from the Spanish speaking world have the view that Spanglish is an illegitimate, even wrongful language. At the same time, when browsing some of the literature available on Spanglish it is easy to get the impression that many consider it simply a broken version of English and Spanish; it is not one or the other. Gonzáles Echeverría even claims, it is “the language of poor Hispanics, many barely literate in either language.

On the other side of this controversy, we find scholars like Ilan Stavans, a professor at Amherst College, who advocates for Spanglish and proposes that we are on the verge of the birth of a new language. Many others suggest that this is a language that has simply and naturally emerged from the extended contact of Anglo and Hispanic civilizations and that it should be embraced as a part of the construction of a Latino identity.

## 2. SPANISH IN THE US

From a historical background, Spanish and English have a long history of cohabitation of more than 400 years. As early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish conquistadors established a foothold in the area that is now Florida. Even though the Spanish efforts to set colonies in this area failed to flourish, still many Spanish speakers made this land their home, linking the language and its culture forever. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Mexico gained independence from Spain, it offered “land to American settlers willing to raise cattle in the barren northern regions of the country (present-day Texas)” (Carter). No long after, Texas claimed its independence, setting forward the Mexican-American war which meant that Mexico lost control of almost half of country to the hands of the United States. All these territories already had a long history and culture influenced by the use of Spanish, which was transferred to a different political constituency, with a different language: English. Naturally, these communities began merging their languages as “speakers in bilingual communities do not keep their languages and dialects separate, but instead produce a hybrid ‘interlanguage’ as a composite single proficiency that blends features of the available communication forms” (Lo Bianco 143). The contact between English and Spanish kept growing in later decades as increasing amounts of Latin American immigrants began entering the United States. As mentioned before, today the Hispanics represent the largest immigrant community in the country.

The word “Hispanic” represents an ethnicity but is also used as a political term which at its center includes a myriad of Spanish speaking cultures that have different ways of enacting Spanish and creating communities of practice. At the same time, these people come from different regions and therefore contribute with their geographic variation of the language. It is only natural that people who live closer to each other

share a more similar way of speaking than those who are more apart, even if it is still the same language. In the same line, the United States has an extension big enough that allows for the existence of different varieties of Spanglish: Cubonics, Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex, Pachuco, Dominicanish, among others (Stavans).

### 3. SPANGLISH –THE VARIETY VS. PRACTICE DEBATE

From a sociolinguistic point of view, “Spanglish is defined as a communicative practice which involves code-switching, code-mixing, and lexical borrowing among bilingual speakers in US Latino communities. In popular parlance, Spanglish is considered an autonomous (hybrid) language—a cross between Spanish and English” (Neumann 1). When interviewed by PBS on the topic of American Varieties, Stavans provides a definition for this hybrid that reflects more on the ways of practicing the language when he says that Spanglish is “the way of communication where one starts in one language, switches to the other back and forth or perhaps coins a few new words or thinks in one language and reacts in another one. It is a very creative jazzy way of being Latino in the US today” (Suarez). From an academic point of view, Wardaugh & Fuller (2015) suggest that borrowed words from English into Spanish simply represent one of the influences for language change that is promoted by the contact of both languages (Wardaugh and Fuller).

Language changes all the time, borrowing one from another if they are in contact and ultimately becoming another or splitting into others. Change is an inherent characteristic of languages as they do so over time they may or not become other language or simply stay as a variety of the main, standardized version. Many fear that Spanglish may overcome the standard version of Spanish in the US and others even fear Spanish may overcome English. What is evident today in the United States is that there is a big portion of the population that account for Spanish as their first language in a country where the mainstream language is English. This influences communication in multiple ways: For many perhaps less educated Hispanics, Spanglish represents their transition to the mainstream because many times they lack a proper education in English and Spanish. For others, Spanglish represents “a positive manifestation of the Hispanic spirit” (Stavans 17).

What we see here is the core of this debate: is Spanglish a variety of the Spanish spoken in the United States, or is it more of a practice of an ethnic group, a way of identifying with a certain community of practice? Can it be both? It seems that through this linguistic variety, Spanish-English bilinguals in the US have found a resource for self-construction of a Latino identity that is enacted by many representations, of which language is only one more.

## 4. THE FOREIGN LANGUAGES CLASSROOM<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1. *Spanglish compared to standard Spanish*

According to Fernández Vítóres, today there are more than 21 million students of Spanish as a Foreign Language around the world. These students are learning the standardized version of Spanish, where the varieties are taught as part of the culture of other countries where Spanish is spoken. In the US, this is also the favored version as it enjoys greater prestige in the Spanish-speaking world and is most likely the one to be used when communicating with a native speaker.

Education is the way speakers of any language learn the standardized version that is used in government, media, formal and educational settings in particular and in the mainstream in general (Yule). Spanish is no exception and therefore, heritage language learners (HLLs) of Spanish in the US, whose familiar version is most likely Spanglish or another variety of Spanish, should learn at school the standardized version. In Arado, Hernandez, an assistant professor of Spanish at Harper College in Palatine says that Spanglish “should not be accepted as an alternative to formal Spanish”, because it is a mix of English roots with Spanish morphemes, not a language in itself, and he even adds that by using Spanglish “It’s getting to the point where we’re murdering our language” (Arado).

According to Instituto Cervantes, almost 500 million people that have Spanish as their native language can communicate thanks to the existence of a common standardized version of Spanish. It is with much pride that Spaniards created earlier in the 18<sup>th</sup> century an academy (RAE) to preserve a version of Spanish that would be promoted over vulgar versions and so to ensure the existence of a Spanish that could be understood by anybody living in their former colonies. A *lingua franca* that serves as the “the vehicular language of a society”<sup>2</sup> (Provencio Garrigos and Martínez Egido)<sup>3</sup>, which standardized version is used in the mainstream in the 23 countries in 3 continents where Spanish is the official language. For this reason, many see Spanglish as a threat to “español drecho”<sup>4</sup> and to centuries of joint efforts to keep a standard variety. Classrooms are an essential part of keeping the standard version in use and from that perspective Spanglish has no place in it.

### 4.2. *Spanglish as a marker of identity*

According to Yule, “nonstandard varieties are felt to be the province of the less educated” (9) and therefore are considered to have no place within the classroom because the classroom is, per se, the place of those seeking an education. But, if Spanglish is a marker of the Latino identity, should it not be incorporated into US

language classrooms? Reyes mentions that “language classrooms are perhaps obvious sites where questions of language and ethnicity become central” (416). Therefore, ethnic characteristics should be promoted within the classroom. Latino ethnicity can be embraced by exploring the creativity of students and integrating their available linguistic repertoires to perhaps a more formal parlance. Once they are aware of this speech, they can find particular uses for it and expand the limits of their communication beyond their speech community (Wardaugh and Fuller).

Spanish courses designed for heritage language learners is the territory of transculturation (García), where students have the alternative to look at their identities closer and develop a greater sense of them. Language is one powerful resource for identity construction, and many times the use of Spanglish is not denoting a lack of education: instead, many educated Spanish speakers deliberately choose this non-standard variety because it means integration into the Hispanic community. Identifying when and where to use the right variety expands the alternatives learners have for operating in the linguistic marketplace (Wardaugh and Fuller). With this, students increase their chance of successfully interpreting which language variety to use depending on the interlocutor.

## 5. SCHOOL POLICIES AND PEDAGOGY

When a heritage language learner takes lessons in Spanish, a language he/she already knows to some extent, the message that should be understood from the school is very clear: this is a student who is interested in preserving his/her culture and is looking forward improving the understanding of the ways of communicating with those in his/her community.

Many times, I have felt, as a teacher of Spanish as a Heritage Language, that I am ridiculing my students because of how the curriculum is telling them that all they know of Spanish is wrong. This is a harmful statement since most of the language HLLs know has been passed from their close relatives. For many HLLs in the US, Spanglish represents their familiar version of communication. However, since the language of the establishment is English, there is no push for speaking a higher version of Spanish but rather the tendency is for the language to mutate towards English. Today this familiar version is suppressed in the classroom, favoring the RAE version, even when the most common form of Spanish in the US is Spanglish and its varieties, not standardized Spanish.

Reyes advocates for an emergence model, which proposes a response to ethnic differences in the languages classroom that would fit the need that HLLs have for

discovering new ways of being creative with the intersections of the languages they use. She argues that “speakers are not confined to a set of inherited speech norms but may draw instead from wide repertoires and various interactional strategies in the performance of ethnic identities” (414). This model of self-reflection allows for students to bring their identities to the classroom and, within that safe space, explore the possibilities that their varieties of speaking have within the language.

At the same time, world languages teachers should strive for understanding ethnicity as a marker in constant shape and adaptation because failing to do so “not only can [it ] lead to local misjudgments about student behavior, but also it can contribute to the reproduction of social inequality in education” (Reyes 419). There tends to be prejudice involved in the use of less prestige variants like Spanglish. For this reason, understanding and accepting this constant adaptation is the key to a friendly classroom environment towards HLLs.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Spanglish is a growing way of communication in the US and it is not exempt from controversy. The fact that it borrows words from English and that it does not follow one language root makes many uncomfortable. It is distant from the standard variety of Spanish that is embraced by native speakers of Spanish, but it is also true that, in the US, it is not necessarily the language of native speakers but more of heritage speakers that embrace it as a marker of identity. It is the language of an ethnicity, a cultural group, which may not comply with the rules of a formal variety but also may not necessarily need to do so.

For centuries the RAE, as many other national academies, has been preserving a prestige variety of language, known as the standard version. In the case of Spanish, this is the version preferred to be used in the mainstream in Spanish speaking countries. Spanish is the most spoken second language in the US, but it is still not a Spanish speaking country. As a result, it seems to be that without the constraints of the need to use a standard version for communication, speakers of Spanglish are freer and have more tools available to address the dynamic of speaking. Everybody modifies their speech to meet their interlocutor’s expectations, and this is especially true in a bilingual context like the one Spanish speakers face living in the US. This does not mean that the standard variety of a language has no value and should be discarded, but what it is important is to not forget that the actual ways people speak form their identity and therefore should be taken into consideration when thinking of Spanglish or any other ethnic speaking.

This becomes especially important in the world languages classroom, where educators should embrace creativity in the language and be aware of the nuances of the language. It is not uncommon for people to refer in pejorative ways to the dialects of a language. For this reason, students could be treated as inferior for not using standard varieties or even for using accents and other variations. Thus, particularly those educators of heritage learners should be equipped with sociolinguistics tools that will allow them to understand that the construction of an ethnic identity depends on the understanding of linguistic practices.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Foreign languages classroom and World Languages Classroom are used here as synonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Translation from Spanish to English provided by the author. Original quote: "No cabe duda de que, con Alfonso el Sabio, la prosa castellana adquiere carta de identidad como lengua vehicular de una sociedad. (Provincia Garrigos & Martínez Egido).

<sup>3</sup> "Español drecho" is a term coined in the 13th century to distinguish between a more formal, standardized version of Spanish for public and international affairs, the culture and arts from the Spanish spoken by the people.

<sup>4</sup> Parenthesis added by me for a better integration of the quote.

<sup>5</sup> There are many authors whose work is of main relevance to this topic and that have indirectly served as inspiration for this work. Among these, Silvia Betti (2008, 2010, 2015a/b, 2016, among others) and Ana Celia Zentella (1997, 2003, among others), who have worked on this topic for most of their careers, including Zentella's groundbreaking work from 1997. Others that I would like to mention are: Ed Morales (2002), Marta Fairclough (2005), Ilan Stavans (2003, 2004, 2008, 2011), John Lipski (2008, 2010a/b, and many others), Alfredo Ardila (2005), Ricardo Otheguy (2010), Francisco Moreno Fernández (2008, 2018 among others), Antonio Torres (2004, 2015, 2016 among others).