

# An Exploration of Mexican-American Spanglish as a Source of Identity

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## INTRODUCTION

Who might have imagined that two hallmark phrases, “*Hasta la vista, baby*,” and “*Living la vida loca*,” would in and of themselves engender one monumental controversy of our time that is stewing amongst politicians, artists, and academics; immigrants and natives alike. These Spanglish phrases made famous by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Ricky Martin have been introduced into modern American pop-culture and have implications far beyond the film and music industries. They represent a mixture of two languages, and by consequence two cultures, traditionally viewed as separate: Spanish and English. For many, this separation is null and void; it quite simply no longer exists. The result: Spanglish.

Regardless of the definition of Spanglish as well as its historical and political framework, it is an emotionally charged issue. One needs only examine recent newspaper clippings to underscore the heated tone present. One article entitled “Spanish in America Has a New Threat: Spanglish” insists that Spanglish is a grave danger to the Spanish language and, by consequence, to the collective Hispanic identity. The author argues that “nobody [is] deluded enough to think of it as a real language” (Hernandez, R. A10). Other articles cite the influential Mexican writer Octavio Paz, who insists that Spanglish is “neither good nor bad, but abominable” (Hernandez, D. A30). Others call it a “gutter language” (Pimentel 7B). In drastic contrast to this perspective, others call Spanglish a “dynamic fusion” of crashing cultures merging via language, serving to validate the existence of many bilingual speakers and the “nether world of language duality [they] grow up in” (Pimentel 7B).

If language may be the reflection of a group's identity, then Spanglish is intrinsically linked with being a bilingual Mexican-American and/or Chicano speaker. Indeed, the recent influx of Mexican immigrants coupled with the expansion of their community within the United States has created an unparalleled situation of language contact. It is the result of an effort to conserve Mexican traditions and to build a new Mexican-American and/or Chicano identity. It is the result of the struggle to preserve the mother tongue, while at the same time acculturate to mainstream American society, which has resulted in a variant of Spanglish that has received relatively little attention in the past in comparison with the Cuban and Puerto Rican cases. In this paper, I will examine the variant of Spanglish seen in the Mexican-American community and liken it to the bi-national identity under which this community thrives. It is an analysis that aims to validate the largest and fastest growing Hispanic group living in the United States, whose number has increased to more than 20.6 million (Guzmán 1). In fact, Spanglish is the identity under which 20.6 millions of Mexican-Americans live: a "cultural ambiguity" as evidenced through language (Hernandez, D. A30).

#### DEMOGRAPHICS

According to the 2000 census, 35.3 million self-described Hispanics live in the United States. This number comprises 12.5% of the overall population, rendering the Latino community the largest minority in the United States. Of all Hispanic groups represented in these figures, the Mexican community is not only the largest but also the fastest growing, with a population increase of 13.5 to 20.6 million between 1990 and 2000 (Guzmán 1). Of this 20.6 million, the great majority resides in the southwest region of the United States, and in particular, Southern California. While geographic proximity certainly contributes to the fact that 58% of Mexican immigrants chose California as their new home as of 1990, it is not the only factor (Durand, Massey, Charvet 8).

Historically, Mexican migration to the United States has been a continuous social process existing with significant numbers since the turn of the 20th century. This migration was largely temporal—occurring during agricultural harvesting or railroad constructions—and rarely resulted in permanent residence in the United States. However, Reagan's infamous 1985 reference to the United States losing control

of its borders initiated a drastic change from the once temporal migration of Mexicans to the United States (Durand, Massey, Parrado 3). With Reagan's words began the legislation and, soon after, the passing of the unprecedented immigration legislation entitled the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986. As a consequence, what was once a temporal, undocumented male migration due to labor demand needs during a prospering economy in the United States, converted to a legal and often permanent migration of entire families. While the borders tightened, a once symbolic border between Mexico and the United States became a very real physical border with more than thirty miles of fences standing between the two nations and the first major increase in the Border Patrol budget (Durand, Massey, Charvet 10).

Although heavy border patrolling began to prevent crossings of additional illegal Mexican immigrants, IRCA, in a show of amnesty, did allow for the legalization of more than 2.3 million undocumented Mexicans already working in the United States. As a result of naturalizing the 2.3 million migrant workers who were largely male and did not intend to permanently reside in the United States, the pattern of Mexican migration was radically altered. First, these newly documented workers were permitted to bring over family members, converting the traditionally male oriented migration into a paradigm that included men, women, and children and consequently triggered additional migrations. With the presence of family, the once temporal migration became quite permanent. Additionally, with naturalization papers being handed out liberally to workers under the amnesty provisions of IRCA, the black market for fraudulent documents soared (Durand, Massey, Parrado 9). Ultimately, according to Durand, Massey and Parrado,

although IRCA's primary purpose may have been to deter undocumented migrants, it does not seem to have made much progress in meeting that goal. Rather than slowing down the rate of undocumented entry, IRCA seems only to have succeeded in transforming a seasonal flow of temporary workers into a more permanent population of settled legal immigrants. (5)

As was pointed out previously, a large number of Mexican migrants settled in California, in particular, Southern California; many as a

result of the IRCA amnesty programs. Millions claimed Los Angeles, amongst other destinations in the region, as their new home and this changing geography has resulted in an unparalleled situation of language contact.

#### THE ISSUE OF MEXICAN MIGRATION RELATED TO SPANGLISH

In the words of Morales, "The 2000 census tells a story about the inevitability of Spanglish in California" (177). Yet, with the most densely populated Latino community as a result of Mexican migration, the issue of language contact and Spanglish within California has received relatively little attention, while the related but distinct issue of bilingual education has taken the front seat. In contrast, the Puerto Rican and Cuban strongholds, New York City and Miami, share a rich tradition of examining the Spanglish seen in their communities. One can go back as far as 1971 to Dr. Carlos Varo's work entitled *Consideraciones antropológicas y políticas en torno a la enseñanza del 'Spanglish' en Nueva York*. Here, the author argues that English is the language of the colonizer exerting its influence on the Spanish of Puerto Ricans in New York which results in a variant of Spanglish that should be considered "*una enfermedad crónica*" (47, 109). Others such as Álvarez, Aparicio, and Nash examine the Spanglish of New York from a more optimistic framework discussing its rich influence on the Puerto Rican immigrant communities.

The Cuban experience in Miami, resulting in one variant of Spanglish that some coin "Cubonics," has also been documented widely. Ribes-Gil suggests that many Cuban-Americans now consider Cubonics as "a necessary *third* language after English and Spanish" (14). Jongh goes so far as to publish an article entitled "Interpreting in Miami's Federal Courts: Code-Switching and Spanglish" in which she argues that standard, monolingual Spanish is not generally spoken in Miami. Rather, Spanglish is spoken and as a consequence, court interpreters must have a command of this variant of the language. "The ability to interpret Spanglish...is of prime importance in achieving the communicative competence which is so vital in the legal setting" (277).

Robert Friedman, in his article entitled "Language Purists Dismayed by Spanglish" argues that "each region [. . .] has its own Spanglish" and proceeds to discuss Cuban-Americans in Miami and New York Puerto Ricans but ignores the largest Latino immigrant population in the country: the Mexican population in Los Angeles

(196). Even David López, in a tour-de-force article on linguistic assimilation makes no mention of Spanglish. When speaking of the California situation, he does comment that Mexican-Americans comprise one-third of California's population, that "Los Angeles today is among the most linguistically diverse cities in the world" (213), and that "the implications for the use of languages other than English are profound" (214) but absolutely no mention is given to the mixing of Spanish and English. They are considered totally separate entities to the extent that López reviews census information, questioning which of the two, either Spanish or English, Mexican immigrants spoke in certain situations (215). Surprisingly, the author admits to the "complex Puerto Rican case" while failing to recognize Spanglish as an existing phenomenon in California (216).

Despite the perpetual ignoring of the Californian case of Spanglish as a result of Mexican migration, some scholars have witnessed this trend and begun to expand on its implications. Morales entitles an entire chapter of his *Living in Spanglish* "California Dreamin'" which examines Los Angeles as the epicenter for Spanglish in the United States (177-223). Claudia Parodi also explores the magnitude of language contact in Los Angeles and offers the view that the Spanish of Los Angeles has become its own dialect, which she terms a *koiné* while noting that one fundamental part of this dialect is the mixing of English and Spanish (33). For if Spanglish is "significantly influenced by immigration" (Ribes-Gil 13) and the Mexican immigrant community is the largest Latino immigrant community in the United States by a landslide, this variant warrants further attention.

#### THE DEFINITION AND STRUCTURE OF SPANGLISH

In its most basic conception, Spanglish is just what its title indicates: a mixing of Spanish and English. Authors often describe it using terms such as "hybrid," "*mestizaje*," "fusion," "collage," and "eclectic." Ilan Stavans, who has published a Spanglish dictionary consisting of more than 6,000 entries as well as a controversial Spanglish translation of *Don Quijote*, defines Spanglish as "the verbal encounter between Anglo and Hispano civilizations" (*Spanglish: The Making* 5).

This encounter frequently results in the adaptation of English lexicon to the patterns of Spanish syntax as seen in *vacunar la carpeta* instead of *pasar la aspiradora* or *parquear* rather than *estacionar* (Llombart 3). Other commonly cited examples include *viaje redondo*

rather than *viaje de ida y vuelta*, *vamos a luncheare* for “let’s go to lunch,” *te llamo pa’tras* for “I’ll call you back” and *voy a ordenar la comida* rather than *voy a pedir la comida* (Sánchez 10). Examples of this nature abound. Furthermore, lexical elements also vary according to region, rendering vast the number of Spanglish dialects. Indeed, Stavans argues that “there isn’t one Spanglish but many” and that “the lingo spoken by Cuban Americans is different from the so-called Dominicanish and Nuyorrican Spanglish” (*My Love Affair* 136). To this list, of course, I would add Mexican Spanglish.

In addition to lexical adaptations and localisms, which result in dialectical variation, Spanglish also entails code-switching. Defined by Myers-Scotton in *Dueling Languages* as “the selection by bilinguals or multilinguals of forms from an embedded variety in utterances of a matrix variety during the same conversation” or, more simply, “the accessing of multiple languages” (5), code-switching is a feature of paramount importance in Spanglish. This alternation between Spanish and English has resulted in what many critics consider a haphazard, unstructured phenomenon. In contrast, linguists such as Zentella have shown that code-switching is a highly complex and structured occurrence composed of sociolinguistic strategies, which envelop a syntactic system with very real constraints. Zentella’s landmark work on Puerto Rican bilinguals in New York resulted in her classification of twenty-one separate and distinct categories for code-switching, all which offer further evidence that code-switching is not merely a random phenomena but rather a complex system composed of a variety of patterns and constraints (94-97).

Other authors agree. Numerous academics have cited the existence of formal rules and constraints seen in code-switching, regardless of the two (or more) languages in question. As Zentella remarks:

The notion that Spanish-English code-switching is a haphazard jumble of two languages has been rebutted by many analyses, principally Pfaf 1975; McClure 1977; Poplack 1980; Zentella 1982, Lipski 1985; Álvarez 1991; Torres 1992; Toribio and Rubin 1993. (116)

Universally, these researchers have demonstrated that code-switching repeatedly occurs at particular points in conversation, and conversely cannot occur at other specific junctures in discourse. Perhaps one

of the most widely recognized studies in this regard is Sankoff and Poplack's "A Formal Grammar for Code-Switching." Here, the researchers discuss the concepts of the free morpheme constraint as well as the equivalence constraint. The free morpheme constraint prohibits the intra-word mixing of morphemes while the equivalence constraint suggests, "the order of sentence constituents immediately adjacent to and on both sides of the switch point must be grammatical with respect to both languages involved simultaneously" (5). They conclude that code-switching is "governed by a well defined set of syntactic rules" (39). Certainly, the mere existence of these constraints suggests that there is a formal and structural component to code-switching. In essence, "code-switching is not distributed randomly in the sentence but rather it occurs at specific points" (*One Speaker, Two Languages*, Muysken and Milroy 177).

The argument that Spanglish is unstructured and haphazard is hence of little value. The omnipresent code-switching seen in Spanglish is not only structured, but, more significantly, a mark of bilingual competence that enables a particular group of people to select one language or another in order to increase effective communication (Zentella 135). Stavans echoes this comment, noting that Spanglish is "not a haphazard jumble of words [. . .] but [. . .] it is fixing its own morphosyntaxis" (*My Love Affair* 144). This "selection" of dual-language use accompanied by lexical adaptations serves as the creation of not only an individual identity but also a community identity. It is precisely this dual identity that the term "Spanglish" itself encompasses.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP OF SPANGLISH TO IDENTITY

The platform on which Spanglish stands, that of code-switching and lexical adaptations, serves as the basis for the discussion of how Spanglish relates to identity, in particular within the Mexican immigrant community. In its most basic function, language often expresses identity, for identity may be seen as language itself. Per Gloria Anzaldúa, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (qtd. in Soler 276). Most would argue that one cannot truly *be* Chinese, meaning identify oneself as Chinese, without speaking Chinese, French without speaking French, or Mexican without speaking Spanish. Yiddish, a language frequently related to Spanglish in its origin and development, serves as a primary example of the stringent relationship between language and the identity of those who speak it.<sup>1</sup> The

term “Yiddish” translates to “Jewish,” marking the strict relationship between the language spoken and the ethnic group speaking it and further demonstrating that in this case the name of the language encompasses the identity of those who speak it.

It is for this very reason that languages often take on the name of the country or region associated with them. As Ávila claims, “La identidad de una nación—entendida como grupo étnico—tiene como un atributo fundamental, sin duda, el idioma que se aprende” (40). In the less frequent case where the language does not overtly mark the location where it is spoken within its name, such as Spanish, which can denote the language of someone from Spain, Venezuela, Mexico, Paraguay, or a myriad of other countries possibly including the United States, problems arise with terminology. The United States Census Bureau, aware of this issue, has consistently been forced to modify terminology for questions regarding the race of those who speak Spanish in the United States. For many years, the term “Latino” sufficed, but currently, many terms include “Latino,” “Hispanic,” “Chicano,” “Puerto Rican,” “Mexican,” “Cuban,” “Other Hispanic or Latino,” and others (Durand).

It is not surprising, therefore, that Spanglish is the term most commonly denoted to refer this variant. The term itself incorporates two languages, Spanish and English, and by consequence, two cultures. “Spanglish” is identity. It is the reality under which the more than 20 million people of Mexican origin in California find themselves living. For this reason, Morales entitles his book about the identity of Spanish speakers living in the United States *Living in Spanglish* and Stavans reaffirms that the separation of Spanish and English no longer accounted for the new identity under which he was living as a Mexican in the United States: “expression came with a price. I felt inhabited by another self, another identity” (*My Love Affair* 130). This “other self” is Spanglish. Other writers, such as Soler, express this same sentiment: “This new identity, [a] source of cultural strength and survival, needs a new language” and Spanglish is the result (275).

### TRANSNATIONALISM

Within the fields of sociology and anthropology, “transnationalism” is a term associated with the status of Mexican immigrants. While scholars argue about the definition of “transnationalism,” its etymology—“trans” meaning across or between and “nationalism” meaning pertaining to a nation—succinctly describes the situation of Mexican

immigrants, that of the meshing of two cultures, and by consequence two languages. As previously discussed, many Mexican migrants remained in the United States permanently after the passing of IRCA. Thus, this vital Mexican identity brought with the Mexican immigrants as seen in their language use—most being monolingual Spanish speakers upon arrival—encountered North American culture and the English language. That the language used by Mexican immigrants has reflected their “cultural reality” (Vivanco Cervero 233) or been a “manifestation of culture” (Llombart 4) is not shocking.

Upon arrival to the United States, a new self begins to emerge which reflects the immigrant’s dual identity that is constantly reforming. Often this identity is problematic as most migrants want to retain at least part of their heritage. As one recent immigrant struggling with her identity proclaims, “I’m not turning my back on what I came from” (Álvarez 487). However, most also want to assimilate to the country and culture in which they now live. The outcome is a “mishmash [of] what Latino identity is about [and] the verbal *mes-tizaje* that results from a transient people” (Stavans, *Spanglish: The Making* 54). Soler even dedicates an entire section of her analysis to “code-switching as an expression of identity conflict” (276). Here, she argues that immigrants are searching for a linguistic model that accurately represents and expresses their experiences and that Spanglish validates the shared experience of Mexican immigrants living in Los Angeles and elsewhere as the language itself incorporates mixing and a “sense of rootlessness under which transnationals must survive (276). When describing the Chicana experience, she asserts:

Chicana identity is the result of a synergy of cultures. Chicanas or Mexican-American women live in the borderlands, at the crossroads of different and often contradictory cultures. They are considered neither white nor black nor fully Indian; they are not viewed as Spanish or Latin Americans, and they are definitely not “real” Americans. They suffer from a painful struggle of identities. (271)

This synergy of cultures and struggle with identity is reflected in language use and results in the mixing of Spanish and English, which is quite possibly the only way to linguistically validate the experience of the Mexican migrant living in the United States.

The struggle with identity after migration has recently been reflected in the poetry of many immigrant writers. As Aparicio comments in his article entitled “*La Vida es un Spanglish Disparatero*,” Spanglish is the linguistic code used to mark the incoherence and bilingual nature of the writer’s identity as it offers a “solution to this linguistic dilemma [with] a reconciliation in [the writer’s] acceptance of Spanglish as his tool of expression and as an identity marker” (157). Stavans echoes this sentiment in illustrating Tato Laviera’s poem:

i think in Spanish  
i write in English

i want to go back to puerto rico,  
but i wonder if my kin could live  
in ponce, mayaguez and carolina

tengo las venas aculturadas  
escribo en spanglish  
abraham en espanol  
abraham in English  
tato in Spanish  
“taro” in English  
tonto in both languages

how are you?  
??como estas?  
i don’t know if i’m coming  
or si me fui ya (“Spanglish: Tickling the Tongue” 556).

In this poem, Laviera chooses not to capitalize certain words such as “i” and “puerto rico” in an effort to more fully reflect his struggle with this dual identity which has resulted in an often incomplete and bifurcated self that can only be justly expressed in Spanglish.

#### SPANGLISH AND THE MEDIA

Poetry is not the only reflection of Spanglish outside of speech circles within the immigrant community. Currently, there are at least three national networks whose main language for broadcasting is Spanish: *Univisión*, *Galavisión*, and *Telemundo*. Additionally, in many major

metropolitan areas within the United States, people have access to many more Spanish local channels, in many of which, local or national, Spanglish serves as a common second language and is employed with the explicit intent of identifying with or capturing the attention of a particular demographic. The media and entertainment capital of the world, Los Angeles, frequently reflects this dual identity that Spanglish encompasses. Nely Galan, the president of the Los Angeles television and film company Galan Entertainment, argues, "Spanglish is the future" (Álvarez 483). Whether it be television, radio, film, newspapers or magazines, Spanglish is present. Spanglish is frequently seen on television programs such as *Cristina* and *Sábado Gigante* (Stavans, *Spanglish: The Making* 14). Even *Saturday Night Live*, in a satire of the variety show *Sábado Gigante*, a popular variety show that uses Spanglish, which aired on March 6, 2004, performed a skit mimicking the Spanglish seen in this program (*Saturday Night Live*).

In the realm of radio, where there are more Spanish language radio stations in California than in all of Central America, Spanglish abounds. The following is one excerpt from a local station: "*Recuérdales que hoy, esta tarde, vamos a estar en vivo in Dilliards, broadcasting live from 3 to 5, with your chance to win some cool KXTN prizes. Acompañen a sus amigos*" (Álvarez 485). Not only the discourse of the disc jockey, but also the music played, incorporate Spanglish. Mexican *raperos* such as Latin Alianza, Chicano 2 Da Bone, Latin Lingo, and Dr. Loco's Rockin, Jalapeño Band all compose music stemming from the dialect of Chicano Spanglish. Spanglish is not only embraced by local radio stations that serve the needs of the greater Los Angeles Hispanic community, but can also be heard on the English channels in the form of commercials and public service announcements. In fact, one of the highest rated talk radio stations in Los Angeles, KLSX 97.1, an Anglo oriented channel, is the proud provider of Los Angeles' only Spanglish talk radio show entitled "*Reyes and Solís.*" While callers and hosts alike are encouraged to speak any language they prefer, the most common vernacular heard is undoubtedly Spanglish.

The genres associated with printed press, newspaper and magazine alike also reflect the Spanglish identity of their subscribers. The publisher of *Latina*, speaking on behalf of her Spanglish magazine and others such as *Generation ñ*, argues that "we are the intersection of two and we reflect a life between two languages and two cultures that our readers live in" (Alvarez 485). Finally, the more formal segment of

media, the newspaper, has not escaped the influence of Spanglish either. Indeed, *La Opinión*, the Los Angeles newspaper founded in 1926 and the largest circulating Spanish language newspaper in the nation, incorporates Spanglish. This is recognized by Zaro Ruiz who wrote an entire article dedicated to the use of Spanglish in *La Opinión* and entitled the "Influencia del inglés en el español del periódico *La Opinión*."

It seems apparent that the media as well as the economic interests that fund its existence have converged on the same conclusion as far as the Hispanic community and Spanglish is concerned. Not only are they aware that the Hispanic community is a crucial consumer group whose collective buying power rivals that of any other minority group, but they also realize that a key part of reaching and identifying with this community is through Spanglish itself. In essence, through the medium of mass communication, from comedy shows and talk shows to nightly news, from magazines and newspapers to movies and music, we find evidence that Spanglish is an important vehicle of communication as well as a way to identify with a community that truly lives between two cultures.

## CONCLUSION

Stavans claims "Only dead languages are never changing" (qtd. in Friedman 196). Languages change and evolve to meet the needs of those who speak them and with the significant increase in Spanish speaking Mexican immigrants to the United States, and California in particular, Spanglish is far from dead and constantly changing. Therefore, Spanglish meets the needs of its speakers in that it allows for the expression of the dual identity that is the essence of the immigrants' being. Scholars and politicians may find it repugnant but "language cannot be legislated; it is the freest, most democratic form of expression of the human spirit" (Stavans, *Tickling the Tongue* 557). Linguists and anthropologists may find it enlightening, but Spanglish will elude us while it continues to expand the notion of language contact as never before. Language and identity are intrinsically related and for this reason, we cannot deny the linguistic reality *de los hispanos*, a group whose population is expected to more than double in California by 2025 (Campbell 18). Whether Spanglish, including the variant spoken in California, will flourish and become a solidified language is yet to be seen, but for now, acknowledgment of this linguistic variety is inevitable for as Sánchez concludes, "*hablamos como hablamos*" (11).

## Notes

1. Please see Stavans *Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language* (2003).

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