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Linguistic Intolerance: The (e)Spanglish Debates[1]

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"Spanglish" is a hotly debated and widely misunderstood term, even more than 70 years after the word first appeared in a Puerto Rican newspaper article, "Teoría del Espanglish," by Salvador Tió on October 28, 1948. What does it refer to—a mish-mash of two languages, or a third language, or a style of speaking? Who uses it—proficient or deficient bilinguals? Is it a positive or negative label– are we harming speakers by using the term? These questions become more relevant as the 62 million Latinus (the universal u is my preferred inclusive gender marker) in the USA are en route to becoming the largest ethnic group in the country by 2045, when there will be no racial majority. But U.S. Latinus are very diverse: although 62% are of Mexican background, a total of eight countries each have over one million representatives, and another eleven countries have more than 75, 000 each. Latinus also differ in their views: a 2019 Pew Foundation study found the majority (54%) did not prefer the Hispanic or Latino label; 47% identified with their country of heritage (76% had not heard of Latinx and only 3% used it). And although all generations believed speaking Spanish was the most important part of their identity, that was true for a slight majority of the foreign born (54%); only 44% of the second generation and 20% of the third generation and beyond chose Spanish as most important.

Although the centrality of Spanish was highlighted by all generations, the fact is that the share of all Latinus who speak Spanish at home declined from 78% to 70% between 2000 - 2019; among the U.S. born, the number declined from 66% to 57%. It seems likely that Spanish will continue to be lost in future generations because of growing linguistic intolerance in the US, including increased verbal and physical attacks against Spanish speakers. The Republican congressman who was a candidate for the US Presidency in 2012, Newt Gingrich, argued against Spanish-English bilingual education "because English is the language of prosperity, not the language of living in a ghetto", and when fellow Republican Donald Trump campaigned for the presidency in 2015, he insisted "We speak English, not Spanish", and insulted Mexicans: "They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." Fueled by Donald Trump's comments, anti-Latino hate crime increased 176 % in major U.S. cities in the three weeks after

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his 2016 election. In 2019, the assassin of 22 Walmart shoppers in El Paso, TX —almost all Mexicans–spouted anti-immigrant hate.

For decades there has been a nationwide push to insist on English-only in the workplace, government dealings, and public education. Latinus have long been criticized for speaking Spanish, but our English is also disparaged, even by national policies; beginning in 1990 the Census Bureau insisted on labeling all those who did not speak English "very well" at home as "linguistically isolated", even if they spoke it "well". (By 2010 we convinced the Bureau to drop that insulting label, although their replacement– "limited English proficient" –remains unfair.) Our English and Spanish are belittled, and bilingualism itself has become an ideologically charged term; Potowski noted that "bilingual" was a "dirty word" in the 1990s unless it referred to middle class Anglo students. We find ourselves *entre la espada y la pared,* with no way out. Above all, our ability to speak in a way that reveals our bilingual dexterity is severely maligned.

So, what is Spanglish? Decades of rigorous research across the USA have documented that Spanglish is a rule governed, in-group and informal style of speaking that honors the grammars of both English and Spanish. It consists of adapted and un-adapted English loan words inserted in Spanish, as well as calques and switches between Spanish and English that can be both intra- and inter sentential. Even the 6 to11 year old children I studied in New York's Puerto Rican *barrio* honored both Spanish and English grammatical rules in 95% of 1,685 code switches to accomplish over twenty discourse strategies, including topic and role shifting, quoting, translation, mitigation, and aggravation of requests, often by switching complete sentences, e.g., when an 8-year-old reported, "We speak both. *Hablamos los dos*".

We do not know how many Latinus speak Spanglish, but it certainly is not true, as the linguist John Lipski claimed in 2007, that the term is "most commonly used by non-Latinos (or by Latinos who are openly critical of nonstandard language usage". When Professor Adam Schwartz and I asked our students on opposite coasts to interview 115 Latinus across the US (convenience sample, 2010) whether they favored the "Spanglish" label or not, most interviewees (71%) approved of it, 25% were against, and 4% were indifferent. The most significant background variable was whether the interviewee identified as a Spanglish speaker or not. The great majority (83%) of Spanglish speakers (n = 84) favored the label, whereas only 42% of the non-Spanglish speakers (n = 31) did so. Neither gender, nor level of Spanish proficiency, nor place of birth, nor roots in one of eleven different Latinu groups mattered significantly. Most important, most interviewees (94%) defined Spanglish in neutral or positive terms.

Some outspoken critics of the label are linguists who acknowledge the bilingual strengths of Spanglish speakers but insist that the term misrepresents those skills by suggesting a mishmash or hybrid language; Ricardo Otheguy prefers "popular Spanish in the United States". In my view, that alternative capitulates to the ignorant critics who attack the label AND the way of speaking, playing into the hands of those who privilege uniformity, imposing it via strategies that result in exclusion. And it does not capture our reality. "Popular Spanish in the US" includes many varieties from throughout the Spanish speaking world, and their speakers may or may not engage in speaking Spanglish. For those of us who speak it with each other, in addition to speaking Spanish with monolingual Spanish speakers and English with monolingual English speakers, "Spanglish" is a graphic way of saying "we speak both because we are both." Whitney Chappell attributes the disagreement over the label to distinct poles on an ideological continuum, i.e., those who favor a structuralist and generative grammar approach that isolates

language from its social context reject " Spanglish" in favor of focusing on the linguistic properties of Spanish, whereas those of us who study the life of language in communities go beyond a focus on the structure to include WHY and HOW those structures are culturally employed, as well as speakers' positive semantic inversion of a negative label. The label itself forces us to confront the way language is used as a smokescreen to impose national and cultural boundaries and to disguise racial and ethnic prejudices; it invites us to discuss the specific socio-historic, cultural, economic, and racial contexts that give rise to Spanglish.

Misconceptions concerning Spanglish contributes to the reproduction of inequality and encourages attacks against those considered speakers of "the tongue of the uneducated" that is "a hodgepodge," with "barbarisms . . . and is "deformed, perverted". These insults appear in a book devoted to Spanglish by a Professor of Spanish of Mexican background, Ilan Stavans. Not only did Stavans fail to cite any of the linguists who have studied Spanglish syntax, his dictionary of 2,073 words (collected because they were overheard three times) includes many lexical items that are either standard Spanish, such as fiesta ['party'], doña ['madam'] , Sr., and Sra. ('Mr. and Mrs.'), or improbable loans, such as loadear < "loiter" and deservear < "deserve." Only 16% of the dictionary's items had been heard or used by 80 self-identified Spanglish speakers, yet Stavans was widely cited in the press, including in Spain.

The insistence on maintaining strict borders between English and Spanish, as if bilinguals were two monolinguals joined at the tongue, has encouraged what I refer to as *LA MIGRA BILINGUE*, i.e., critics who attack bilinguals for crossing language borders, like the Border Patrol that pursues immigrants trying to enter the USA. Latinus are not alone, this complex language practice occurs in other language-contact situations, e.g., Franglais in Montreal, and Portuñol/Portunhol along Portugal's border with Spain and Uruguay's border with Brazil. As if the opprobrium of leading academics, educators, politicians, and the general public were not enough to convince young bilinguals that they should join *La Migra Bilingüe*, the Real Academia Española (RAE), the arbiter of Spanish norms in the world for over 300 years, added fuel to the fire with its definition "espanglish" in its official Diccionario in 2014.

> : *26 Artículo nuevo. Avance de la vigésima tercera edición espanglish. (Del ingl. Spanglish, fusión de Spanish 'español' y English 'inglés'). m. Modalidad del habla de algunos grupos hispanos de los Estados Unidos, en la que se mezclan, deformándolos, elementos léxicos y gramaticales del español y del inglés.*

This definition was met with outrage in many circles, and petitions by Professor Jose' del Valle and myself secured over 400 signatures. My letter to ANLE read, in part:

> "la *definicion va en contra de los resultados obtenidos por los lingüistas que han investigado este estilo de comunicación… constituye una falta de respeto para los hablantes del español en los Estados Unidos….va en contra de "la visión policéntrica" que tanto predica la RAE, pero que reiteradamente deshonran*."

The international response ultimately forced the RAE to drop the word "*deformándolos*", although they refused to re-write the entry.

Such misinformed and misguided attacks are decried by many, including poets who express pride in their communities' Spanglish. In Los Angeles, Mexican American Olga Angelina García Echeverría's poem, "Lengualistic Algo", declares:

Qué quieren conmigo los puristas,
all tongue-tied
& sitting proper
behind fat stoic dictionaries?
I've already eaten the thin white skeletons
of foreign words
choked on the bones of Inglés Only,
learned the art of speaking in codes
and code switching…
….Aquí se usa lo que sirve,
el rascuache, el mestizaje,
las left-overs y lo yet to be born,
Aquí cada palabra está viva. Respira.
Los académicos me ignoran
los puristas dicen que contamino,
Webster y el Pequeño Larousse
no me conocen y Random House me escupe.
No manchen!….

And from New York City, Tato LaViera provided a Puerto Rican perspective in "español" [sans accents]:

… now we-gente de sangre gorda,
continental travalenguas
enmixturadas cocinandose metiendole miedo a tu real academia….
….we existed before we discovered colon…
…but alas i love you Spanish
half of my lengua
part of my tongue
i'm gonna fight for you siempre
i am your humble son
que tragedia
que contra
diccion.

These poets express bilingual joy and pain, in the hope that our future children will be proud of their people and their English, Spanish, and Spanglish. As we embrace the languages of our families, we also learn to respect all other languages and cultures. Advocating linguistic tolerance is increasingly urgent, given the sad fact that 50% of the 6,000 languages currently spoken in the world are likely to disappear within the 21st century. We have an excellent opportunity to foreground this issue every February 21st, declared International Mother Language Day (IMLD) by UNESCO in 1999 to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and promote multilingualism. This worldwide observance was formally recognized by the United Nations General Assembly in 2002; will you encourage your community to celebrate every IMLD?