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Hispania Guest Editorial:
“Spanglish”: What’s in a Name?

This was the title of a paper I read in a session organized by the AATSP at the Modern Language Association’s convention in Los Angeles, in January 2011, before a substantial audience that engaged afterwards in a lively debate. At the end of the session, the participants left with a clearer idea about what Spanglish is and, in particular, is not. However, as people say in Spanish, una golondrina no hace verano, and there is still persistent confusion and apprehension about the exact meaning of the term and the appropriateness of its use, particularly in the academic world. (See, in this regard, Dumitrescu 2010, which includes, among other things, a lengthy discussion about the perception of and the attitudes towards Spanglish of California educators, most of them AATSP members who participated in a survey.) Horacio Peña’s (2009) words are representative of such apprehension: “Vilipendiado por unos, alabado por otros que lo consideran el idioma del siglo XXI, el Spanglish siembra en el corazón de algunos el miedo de la desaparición del español, el horror de ver algún día un letrero que diga: ‘Aquí se habla el español!’” (15).

Indeed, Spanglish, a derogatory term coined by the Puerto Rican journalist Salvador Tío in the mid-fifties, and frivolously used nowadays by the media in confusing and inaccurate ways, has stirred a strong controversy among its partisans and its detractors at both the political and the educational levels. The following quote from the Encyclopedia Latina: History, Culture and Society in the United States is representative of this polarization of opinions: “A controversial language, Spanglish is debated along ideological lines. In the United States, opponents argue that it is a block in the road to Latinos’ full assimilation into the melting pot. These opponents also believe that Spanglish is proof that bilingual education was a half-baked language-learning system. Supporters counter-argue that Spanglish is not an obstacle but, instead, the stepping stone to a new culture, part Latino and part Anglo” (Stavans 2005: 113; emphasis mine).

Many US Hispanics support this latter view. For instance, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) wrote that “for a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither español ni inglés, but both” (177). And Ed Morales (2002) claimed: “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” (3). Meanwhile, Ilan Stavans (2003) famously declared Spanglish “a new American English” and tried—with disastrous results—to translate the first chapter of Don Quijote in this new “language.”

By contrast, academics like Roberto González Echevarría (1997) believe that “politically, . . . Spanglish is a capitulation; it indicates marginalization, not enfranchisement” (A29), and that—as John Lipski (2008) wrote—the use of the term Spanglish is “as out of place in promoting Latino language and culture as are the words crazy, lunatic, crackpot, or nut case in mental health, or bum, slob, misfit, and loser in social work” (72).

Sociolinguists have convincingly demonstrated that we are not witnessing the birth of a new language, and that, in fact, what most people call Spanglish is actually code-switching, a well-known communicative strategy among bilinguals fluent in both languages, who alternate them for a variety of purposes, among which—contrary to popular belief—the lack of knowledge
of one (or both) of the languages, or some form of mental laziness, is practically never the case. Code-switching—motivated mainly by identity factors and/or expressive needs—occurs in all bilingual communities and is a normal result of language contact, which should not alarm educators, insofar as it does not lead to structural alterations within the two languages being switched. (Of course, I am not talking about what Lipski [2008] calls “vestigial and transitional bilingual speakers,” that is, second- and third-generation Hispanics who are simply experiencing trans-generational language attrition, and who are fundamentally different in their language skills and behavior from the members of a community defined by stable bilingualism.)

Another common misperception of so-called Spanglish is that it is a Spanish dialect plagued by unnecessary anglicisms, and hence incomprehensible to monolingual speakers of Spanish in other countries. Again, language contact situations—like the contact between English and Spanish in the United States or, for instance, Gibraltar—favor lexical borrowings (which many times are not gratuitous, but rather are due to the different sociocultural circumstances in which they are used, and have special connotations). Such lexical borrowing is idiosyncratic to the respective language variety, as opposed to all others, and is a normal part of diatopic variation. After all, how many speakers of Spanish who are not from Argentina readily understand all the lunfardo loans in the speech of porteños?

The third, and probably most pernicious, misconception is that Spanglish—understood mainly as code-switching—is the language variety spoken by Hispanics in the United States, when in fact it is, at best, only one of several sociolects, since the linguistic repertoire of US Hispanics is more complex, insofar as it often includes more formal varieties of both languages, and a large diversity of registers across generations. Let me quote Lipski (2008) again in this regard: “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” (39).

That is why, according to Otheguy (2009, 2010)—and I could not agree more—the term Spanglish, because of its derogatory and misleading connotation, should be discarded. After proposing, in the Enciclopedia del español en los Estados Unidos (2009), to replace it by “español popular de los Estados Unidos,” this author, in a recent article co-authored with Nancy Stern (2010), goes even farther: “The term Spanglish—he writes—is unnecessary and objectively inaccurate. In spite of the good intentions of those who support the use of the word, the term is not only technically flawed, but it also contributes to closing the doors of personal and economic progress to speakers who could be better served by thinking of themselves as speakers of Spanish. Whenever the term Spanglish is used to refer to the speech of Spanish speakers in the USA, it should be discarded. Academics and opinion makers should replace it by the plain and simple term Spanish or, if greater specificity is required, Spanish in the United States” (97).

As Lipski (2008) also wrote: “Urgently needed is a greater public awareness of the reality of the U.S. Latino language, and if Spanglish is allowed to creep into the (re)education of the American public, I fear the results of any remediation. . . . 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” (72).

The AATSP, alongside ANLE and other institutions devoted to the study of Spanish in the United States, has a great role to play in dispelling these myths and educating the public about the complex realities of the Spanish–English language contact situation in this country. Let us start by looking at the language varieties spoken by our bilingual students with more objectivity and tolerance (cf. Kozel 2004; Rivera-Jiménez 1984), and try to restore their linguistic self-confidence. One such attempt has been successfully made at New Mexico State University, where
the principal goal of a service learning component in a heritage language program is precisely “to develop students’ critical awareness that what they and their communities speak is not some inferior form of Spanish, or a broken mishmash known as Spanglish, but rather an important linguistic asset they have inherited from those communities” (Villa 2010: 122). Let us further continue by explaining to them, as well as to the members of the profession (and hopefully to the mass media, if they are willing to listen) that they are actually doing a disservice to the Hispanics in this country when they create the impression that these do not speak Spanish, but rather something radically different: this only can marginalize the many millions of Spanish speakers that live currently in this country. As Otheguy (2010) said, “in our globalized world, no one can benefit from repudiating their own knowledge of a major world language” (97).

In closing, I am pleased to invite you to attend a session that the AATSP has organized, for the 2013 MLA Convention in Boston, on “‘Spanglish’ and Identity within and outside the Classroom,” in which four distinguished speakers will address topics such as “Spanglish” in early California epistolary texts as a practice of “languaging” and “lingual memory,” the creative use of “Spanglish” in Chicano/heritage language learners of Spanish, the politics of teaching literature in “Spanglish,” and Gloria Anzaldúa’s linguistic discourse as a mestiza and queer writer.

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