

## Spanglish: A Controversial Dystopic or Utopic Language?

Controversial opinions abound about Spanglish making it a “sizzling topic” (Montes-Alcalá, 2009, p. 98) and “an emotionally charged issue” regardless of whether it is viewed as good or bad (Rothman & Rell, 2005, p. 516). There are diverse opinions on how to define it and what to call it given that the term itself is controversial. The editor of *Hispania*, the prestigious journal of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, states, “I cannot think of a more innovative research area than what I will dub ‘Spanglish Studies’” (Spaine Long, 2013, p.435). Indeed teachers’ interest in the influence of English on the Spanish language has increased as the number of immigrants and subsequent generations has increased the population of heritage speakers in our classrooms. However, outside of the academic environment, there is interest as well in how people use language daily and varying attitudes surrounding the issue. In the movie *Elysium*, released in August 2013, we are introduced to upper class individuals who live on a utopian habitat in space and speak flawless English, French, and Afrikaans, while those living on chaotic and dystopic Earth are depicted as criminals, dirty, and members of the lower class who speak Spanish mixed with English, or Spanglish. This movie, set in the year 2150, is a social commentary of our current society and its beliefs and practices. In this paper I will present varied opinions and definitions of Spanglish and arguments over what we should call this phenomenon, a linguistic analysis including some rules governing its usage, and issues related to speakers using Spanglish as an identity marker.

Three well-known figures in literature represent the dystopic view of Spanglish as a corruption of two languages. Octavio Paz, a Mexican Nobel Prize winner in literature, once described Spanglish as “...neither good nor bad. It’s abominable” (Stavans, 2007, p. 225). Ilan

Stavans (2007), who has been called “the forefather of scholarly Spanglish analysis” (Rothman and Rell, 2005, p. 520), refuted Paz’s declaration claiming,

Paz was utterly blind to the reality of Latino culture in the United States. The first chapter of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is nothing short of embarrassing. It is ironic that so enlightened an intellectual should be so blind to a crucial aspect of *la mexicanidad*. (p. 225)

José Saramago, another Nobel Prize recipient in literature from Portugal also spoke out against Spanglish claiming he hated it because “... it threatened to dilute the language of Cervantes into a broth that is fifty percent English and fifty percent Spanish” (p. 225). Roberto González Echevarría, a well-known Latin American literary critic, has said that Spanglish is a

...grave danger for Latino culture and the progress of Latinos in mainstream America...The sad truth is that Spanglish is basically the language of poor Latinos, many of whom are illiterate in both languages. They incorporate English words and constructions into their daily speech because they lack the vocabulary and training in Spanish to adapt to the culture that surrounds them. (Lipski, n.d.)

Stavans (2007) is not surprised, lending these negative attitudes to *rascuachismo* which is defined as “...an attitude that is lower class, impoverished, ...and shallow” (Hispanic, 2001). He states

there is a sense in Latin America...that nothing good or worthwhile will come out of Hispanic culture in the United States.... If Saramago and others who embrace a Marxist ideology paid closer attention to its social origins, they would embrace it wholeheartedly. (Stavans, 2007, p. 225).

One way to attempt to legitimize a language variety is to publish literary works in that variety. One of the most famous current works sprinkled with Spanglish is the Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *The Brief Wonderful Life of Oscar Wao* by Dominican born and US raised Junot Díaz (2007). Postma (2013) uses Díaz' work in a second year Spanish language and culture class. Students study his use of Spanglish as well as other codes to "...see the possibility of living in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts" (p. 443). This allows students to see Spanglish as a useful tool in showing group membership and for expressing self-identity (p. 443).

Many linguists do not view Spanglish as corrupted or as a threat to either language or to the Latino culture in the US. "...[I]n the linguistic sense there is no such thing as a "pure" language....[A]ll languages are equally capable of expressing whatever their speakers need or want to express. Hence, from a sociolinguistic perspective, languages don't "get corrupted"; they simply change" (Sayer, 2008, p.96). Sayer (2008, p. 95) points out that English today is rooted in Germanic, French, and Greek with many borrowings from other languages, and it is still changing as are all languages. Spanish has borrowed around 4,000 words from Arabic (Montes-Alcalá, 2009, p. 106). Salaberry (in Montes-Alcalá, 2009) ironically pointed out that, "language purists are caught between a rock and a hard place when they try to substitute the Anglicism 'renta' with the Arabism 'alquiler'" (p. 106) for "rent".

There are many definitions of Spanglish which are as varied as the attitudes toward it. The Real Academia Española (RAE) (Espanglish, n.d.) is the institution that governs the Spanish language. The RAE decided to admit the term "espanglish" into its 2014 dictionary print edition to the dismay of many language purists. The RAE defines Spanglish as a, "Mode of speech of some Hispanic groups from the United States, in which lexical and grammatical elements of Spanish and English are mixed and deformed" [translation mine]. Gerardo Piña-Rosales, the

director of the North American Academy of the Spanish Language, is bothered by the term “deformed” and lobbied the Spanish RAE to change the definition (Garsd, 2012). Stavans (in Garsd, 2012) says, “the definition indicates a lack of understanding of how language works. A nearsightedness, as if language is formed in one part of the world and deformed by the barbarians.” Stavans (2000) has criticized the RAE before, likening their motto “Limpia, fija y da esplendor” (“clean, standardize, and grant splendor”) to the concept of *limpieza de sangre* ‘purity of blood’ or ethnic cleansing in the Spanish Inquisition (p. B7). In a 2007 interview, Stavans claimed, “The RAE is stuck in the past” and goes on to say its motto “...sounds like a [laundry] detergent commercial” (p. 240). Stavans’ (2003) own succinct definition of Spanglish is, “The verbal encounter between Anglo and Hispano civilizations” (p. 5). John Lipski (2008), one of the most prolific modern-day Spanish linguists, sees Spanglish as a highly Anglicized variety, also known as dialect, of Spanish. He claims,

No variety of Spanish that has absorbed a high number of lexical Anglicisms is any less Spanish than before – nor is code-switched discourse a third language....In the world as we know it, Spanish and English will remain separate and distinct, although they will borrow and lend from each other whenever and wherever they come into contact. (p. 68-69)

It might be easier to define-what Spanglish is not. It is not what anthropologist Hill (in Montes-Alcalá, 2009) calls “mock Spanish” (p. 107) which are expressions such as “hasta la vista, baby” and “no problema” (p.107) and reinforce negative stereotypes through discriminatory humor and give Spanglish a bad name (p. 107). In reference to bad or wrong translations such as “Vea tu Paso” for “Watch your Step” on the subway (Montes-Alcalá, 2009, p. 108), Lipski (in Montes-Alcalá, 2009) contributes this phenomenon to the

...fact that millions of Americans study and learn Spanish as a second or foreign language in the U.S. and many of them, with limited proficiency in their second language, are the creators of these documents. Ironically, most of these grotesque translations are never done by either qualified bilingual translators or by authentic Spanish speakers. However, they also get mixed up under the general rubric of *Spanglish*, and contribute to spread the theory that Spanish in the U.S. is disintegrating (p. 108).

Spanglish is also not what our second-language students who have grown up in English-speaking homes are speaking when they use an English word for one they do not know in Spanish. They are code-mixing because of a lexical gap from never having known the word in Spanish. Their grammar mistakes occur because they are acquiring the language. Most Spanglish speakers are second and third generation Hispanics in the US and heritage speakers of Spanish (Otheguy & Stern, 2011, p. 87). Many heritage speakers in our university Spanish classes are bilingual but lack literacy skills (Sánchez-Muñoz, 2013, p. 441). They arrive in our classrooms with vernacular registers of Spanish or Spanglish. The aim of any heritage Spanish program should be to cultivate an environment free of linguistic prejudice and negative judgments (p. 441) while adding or promoting an additional dialect and register awareness to their already bilingual repertoire.

In addition to differing definitions and classifying who speaks Spanglish, what to call “Spanglish” is also controversial. In a 2009 debate on the use of the term “Spanglish” Ricardo Otheguy and Ana Zentella, two well-known linguists on matters of US Spanish, present their cases against and for the term. Otheguy (Discussion, 2009) argues in defense of the term Spanish or Spanish of the US, if we must label it, because Spanish in all countries possesses characteristics of the same type such as localized vocabulary (aquacate vs palta for avocado),

syntax, and morphology (juez vs jueza for judge). Other local varieties have borrowed from neighboring languages such as Quechua or Nahuatl but do not carry a separate name so, he argues Spanish in contact with English should not be differentiated. Otheguy's (Discussion, 2009) final argument is that second and third generation Spanish speakers in the US are convinced in a negative way that they speak a Spanish that is completely different than Spanish in other countries when it is not that different. Whereas Otheguy's arguments are more linguistically based, Zentella's are more sociocultural (Discussion, 2009). Zentella is in favor of the term "Spanglish" and argues that to classify it as the same as other local varieties of Spanish is to deny the linguistic oppression of its speakers and the subordinated position it holds in US society. She states that the term itself represents the conflict that its speakers have endured. She rallies for a semantic inversion so that the term will lose its negative connotations (Discussion, 2009).

Many people think that Spanglish is a haphazard mixture of English and Spanish with the speaker not dominating either language. However, scholars who have conducted linguistic studies on Spanglish over the years have found that it is rule-governed just as Spanish and English are. Many of the characteristics of Spanglish also occur as natural linguistic processes in other varieties of Spanish. A few of these linguistic characteristics are briefly discussed below.

Two main characteristics of Spanglish are borrowing lexical items (words) from English and code-switching which is using both languages in the same discourse. Ardila (2005, p. 68-69) hypothesized eleven principles of word borrowings into Spanglish. A few of those principles are that a word will be borrowed if there is no exact match in meaning (driveway, prom), it has a "cultural salience in one culture but not in the other (suit as in a legal suit in the US)", it has regional variations in Spanish with different shades of meaning so English will be used, "the

English word is more phonologically simple”, and it is a technical word. Words that are used frequently in Spanish such as ‘casa’ (house) and ‘mano’ (hand) are never borrowed and words used often in English may be borrowed such as ‘lunch’ (Ardila, 2005, p. 69). Many borrowed words are adapted morphologically and phonologically as in the Spanglish words ‘luncheat’ (to eat lunch), ‘telefonar’ (to phone), and ‘chequear’ (to check) (Rothman & Rell, 2005, p. 522). When new verbs are introduced into both Spanish and Spanglish they are brought in under the – ar category of verbs with the ending [-ear] (p. 522).

Otheguy and Stern (2011, p.88) point out that every region has their own lexical items that may not be understood by others such as “*bildin* ‘buidling’ and *jáiscul* ‘high school’ ... of popular North American Spanish, [and]... *trusa* ‘bathing suit’ and *guagua* ‘bus’ ... of popular Cuban Spanish” (p. 88).

Code-switching is a complex linguistic process. Ghirardini (2006) says, “Code switching is not a naive phenomenon because it requires fluency in both languages...” (p.19). Faltis and Zentella (in Sayer, 2008) agree and add that, “...speakers draw on two linguistic codes and shared bicultural understandings simultaneously” (p.108). Therefore, Sayer (2008) claims Spanglish, “...has greater semantic and pragmatic meaning potential. Hence, [it] has greater expressive power” (p. 108). However, while the linguistic community argues that codeswitching is not only a rule-governed natural human language, but also a mark of a truly proficient bilingual” (Rothman & Rell, 2005, p. 523), popular belief is that Spanglish is spoken by people who do not know either language well.

Sankoff and Poplack conducted the first well-known linguistic studies with Spanglish speakers in the 1980s and, as a result, proposed the Free Morpheme Constraint and the Equivalence Constraint in code-switching. The Free Morpheme Constraint prohibits the mixing

of morphemes in a word and “...states that a switch may ... take place at any point within a particular discourse at which it is possible to make a surface constituent cut and still maintain a free morpheme....[T]he following [is] not grammatical: \*Estamos talk-ando (we are talking)” (Rothman & Rell, 2005, p.523-24). –Ando is not a free morpheme, but rather a bound one which means it cannot stand alone or must be attached to another morpheme. Therefore the code switch cannot occur between “talk” and “ando”.

The Equivalence Constraint states that “the order of the sentence constituents immediately adjacent to and on both sides of the [language] switch point must be grammatical with respect to both languages involved simultaneously” (Ghirardini, 2006, p. 17). Rothman and Rell (2005, p. 524) offer these examples of violations of the Equivalence Constraint for “I gave him/to him the present”: \*I gave *le un regalo*; \*Le I gave *un regalo*; \*Him/to him *di un regalo*; \*Di him/to him *un regalo*. However, “I gave him *un regalo*” is acceptable because it maps, or conforms, to the grammar of both languages. This constraint has counter evidence unlike the Free Morpheme Constraint.

Ghirardini (2006) has proposed other constraints. One of these is the Constituents Order Constraint which explains what happens when the parts of speech are ordered differently in the two languages. “...[W]hen there is a rule that does not break any of the two grammars, this rule is to be preferred over an unmarked [more productive] rule of the matrix [the main] language” (p. 20). For example, ‘*Ponte los zapatos red*’ is less acceptable than ‘*Ponte los red zapatos*’ for ‘Put on the red shoes’ because in Spanish the construction “adjective + noun” is sometimes acceptable and is acceptable in English, whereas in English “noun + adjective” is not accepted, therefore Spanglish adopts the English construction ‘*Ponte los red zapatos*’ (Ghirardini, 2006, p. 20).

Ghirardini's (2006) 3<sup>rd</sup> Person Constraint affects subject-verb code-switching. A Spanish subject + English verb is only allowed in the third person singular because the English verb must contain "...the morphosyntactic information needed by the Spanish structure" (p. 22). For example, '*El chico* reads the newspaper' 'The guy reads...' is acceptable whereas '\**Los chicos* read the newspaper' is not acceptable because in Spanish 'los chicos' needs a plural verb and the English verb 'read' is not marked for plural whereas 'reads' is marked for singular conforming with the Spanish rule as well (p. 21).

The last constraint discussed here is the Article-Noun Constraint which states that "...in constructions with an identical word order in the two languages, it is ungrammatical to switch from an English definite article to a Spanish noun because of the lack of morphosyntactic information on the article" (Ghirardini, 2006, p. 22), thus '\*The *casa*' is unacceptable because 'the' does not carry the gender and number information required of '*casa*'. '*La* house' is acceptable because 'la' carries the grammatical information required of 'house' in Spanish (Ghirardini, 2006, p. 22).

Montes Alcalá (2009) summarizes the literature on code-switching and concludes that the majority support that "...it does follow several grammatical restrictions" (p. 104) and that "...code-switching serves specific social and pragmatic functions" (p. 104). Many sociolinguists believe that Spanglish is a linguistic expression equivalent to the mixture of two cultures in which its speakers live. Rothman and Rell (2005) claim, "...a person who literally finds himself between two cultures...will encounter ...[a] division within themselves as they search for an identity that represents their bicultural existence" (p. 527). Soler (in Rothman & Rell, 2005) claims, "This new identity, a source of cultural strength and survival, needs a new language and Spanglish is the result" (p. 527). One Spanglish-speaking research subject expressed the

following, “Spanglish can be very touchy and personal. . . . You have to trust [who you are talking to] to be able to [code]switch” (p. 530). Many Spanglish speakers often feel ridiculed for speaking a variety that comes naturally to them and is a part of who they are and how they have grown up.

In conclusion, Spanglish is here to stay, at least for a while. It is inevitable because of the contact situation between English and Spanish in the United States. A Pew Hispanic Center study shows that among new immigrants 22% use code-switching most of the time while 47% use it occasionally (Dumitrescu, 2013, p. 533). In the second generation, these numbers rise slightly to 26% using it most of the time, and 53% use it occasionally (Dumitrescu, 2013, p. 533). It is often looked down upon but linguistically is grammatically rule-governed just as Spanish and English are. When Stavans (Stavans & Albin, 2007) was asked if he was “pushing for reconsideration of Latino identity” (p. 226) by promoting Spanglish, he replied, “Sure. There is nothing wrong with Spanglish. It is a legitimate form of speech. English is the only ticket to success in the United States. Every Latino needs to be fluent in it. But not at the expense of Spanglish. Why can’t the two – or better, the three, [Spanish, English, and Spanglish]...-coexist” (p. 226)?

On the Utopian habitat Elysium we hear pure English, French, and Afrikaans, none of which are mixed with the others. In the real world, which is much more like the planet Earth portrayed in the movie *Elysium*, pure languages do not exist for they are constantly changing and on borders and other areas where people from different languages mix for varied reasons we hear code-switching in many forms. This is a reality which purists may view as a Dystopia, but for sociolinguists it is perfect, a linguistic Utopia where we have a plethora of linguistic data and innovative individuals who balance their lives and their languages in a diverse society that may

not be so forgiving of what they see as a world of chaos. There is an expression “the person who speaks two languages is worth twice as much.” John Lipski (2007) comments, “[This expression] does not admit qualifiers, and neither should our acceptance of the nation’s largest bilingual community” (p. 215).

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