

This file contains two essays that appeared in *Anthropology News* in August and December, 2013. The first one, by Bonnie Urciuoli, comments on a paper by Ricardo Otheguy and Nancy Stern; the second one, by Otheguy and Stern, is a response to those comments.

Is Spanglish a Bad Term?

Bonnie Urciuoli

The question sometimes arises of appropriately naming a language: choosing endonym over exonym (Tohono O'odham over Papago), differentiating closely related varieties by nation (Hindu/Urdu, Serbian/Croatian), highlighting the major linguistic classification or the specific speaker group (French, Canadian French, or Québécois; AAVE or Ebonics); identifying distinct formal codes versus syncretic language practice (Mexicano and Castellano versus what speakers actually do).

The question of appropriate naming is raised by Ricardo Otheguy and Nancy Stern in their 2010 *International Journal of Bilingualism* (15:1) article "On So-Called Spanglish." Otheguy and Stern state, "The term Spanglish, used to refer to popular forms of the language of many Hispanics in the USA, is . . . a misleading term that sows confusion about the Spanish language and its speakers" (p 25). The authors take the position that "the language of Hispanics" is unequivocally Spanish. They characterize US Spanish as a set of forms. They document formal examples demonstrating parallels between US and other local varieties of Spanish in terms of formal features and processes, concluding that since the same kinds of internal and contact formal processes and patterns seem to take place in all varieties of Spanish, there is no objective basis for assuming the existence of a language variety whose forms specifically reflect a history of English contact. Therefore it needs no distinct name. Even if it did, Spanglish is referentially inappropriate, composed as it is of components of two language terms, implying that its referent is an unstructured 'mish-mash' of two languages. Furthermore, the authors see in Spanglish the reflection of long-standing North American attitudes of scorn toward Spanish-speaking immigrant peoples. They criticize its use by academics to denote bilingual practices and see no justification for anyone, however creative their motives, to claim it. Finally, they advocate Spanglish be replaced by Spanish or at least, Spanish (or popular Spanish) in the US, a usage that would be coherent with pursuit of a mastery of formal spoken and written Spanish as a path to advancement. By inference then,

the existence and use of Spanglish as a referent is causally related to an ethnic group's lack of advancement.

This piece nicely illustrates the salient assumptions underlying the metapragmatics of language naming. There is such a thing as a language. It is composed of forms. Languages can be named in objectively verifiable ways based on accurate assessment of those forms. Each named language is a bounded entity, objectively distinct from each other named language. Language names traditionally map onto political entities (e.g. the colonial heirs of English/England and Spanish/Spain), and can be further subdivided into local varieties. Linguistic authorities can verify the objective accuracy of all this and assign correct names which speakers should observe in order to avoid being stigmatized as incorrect.

From this angle, the question of whether a certain language name is acceptable is no simple matter of yes or no but a set of indexes about the nature of linguistic authority leading to further questions. When people name a language, what is being named? In what ways are people even imagining something nameable? How do people abstract the conception of a coherent set of forms from the perception of sounds coming out of mouths? All these points precede the question of how the namer's authority enters into the process of naming and how that authority is constituted. All these points also suggest how emergent and contingent a construction is a named language.

It might be instructive to glance briefly at the history of the term's use. Spanglish as pejorative referent for a contact variety of Spanish is first credited to Puerto Rican journalist and poet Salvador Tió in the 1940s who thus described linguistic habits of which he disapproved. This judgmental tradition continues to the present with the definition of *español* by the Dictionary of the Royal Academy of Spanish (DRAE): "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 (mode of speech of some U.S. Hispanic groups in which grammatical and lexical elements of English are mixed, deforming them in the process)." Spanglish as a positive referent was taken up in the 1970s by Nuyorican poets Miguel Algarín, Tato Laviera, Pedro Pietri, Luis Piñero, and others. More recently Bill Santiago has built comedy acts around it and Ilan Stavans has built a series of essays and a dictionary around it. So, to make a couple of sweeping generalizations, what we see on the one hand is pejorative reference to Spanglish as disciplinary strategy (stay within nation-state lines); and on the other, the deployment of elements identified as Spanglish as performance strategy (poetics, humor, academic production).

In contrast are all the bilinguals who claim Spanglish as “my language.” From the perspective of a semiotic linguistic anthropology, this is a register characterized by formal syncretism, especially code-switching, enacted as functionally complex social practice (who does what in what participant structures, how and why). Since all this is deeply indexical, none of it can be reduced to a list of forms and it has been abundantly documented by sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists in recent decades. Moreover, as Ana Celia Zentella has pointed out, from the perspective of speakers, this linguistic activity signifies an identity formed in a social experience that cannot be compartmentalized and separated into conventional cultural or linguistic slots. Such an identity emerges in ways of speaking because ways of speaking are cultural enactments. Obviously such sociolinguistic processes are not unique to any one demographic group. Equally obviously such processes take on meaning unique to their users, and that is what Spanglish means to them. While critics of Spanglish as an objectively inaccurate referent may seem to have speakers’ best interests at heart, they ultimately dismiss speakers’ own views as naïve folk theories. Speakers’ investment in their use of Spanglish deserves to be acknowledged, not judged or defined out of existence.

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Scholars and Citizens

Ricardo Otheguy
Nancy Stern

Judging the Unfortunate Term “Spanglish” (Response to “Is Spanglish a bad term?”)

In order to respond to Bonnie Urciuoli’s fair and thoughtful critique (“[Is Spanglish a bad term?](#)” *AN*, SLA Section News August 2013), we are forced to make explicit what we had taken as obvious, namely that a responsible scholar is often also a committed citizen. The citizen in us often embraces conceptual frameworks, like the one that trades on named discrete languages, that the scholar in us knows to be incoherent. The high-wire balance of the scholar-citizen is difficult to maintain, and we are grateful to Professor Urciuoli, and to this venue, for the chance to once again attempt that perilous walk.

The burden of our paper (“On so-called Spanglish”, *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 2010, 15:1) had to do with a label. It urged the avoidance of the term Spanglish. But we did not question the existence, or the legitimacy, of the bilingual practices of US Latinos, which we have studied extensively. Nor are we innocent of the fact that both linguistic practices and language naming involve, in addition to formal features, social dimensions and indexical values related to identity and self-definition. And we are quite aware that the objective verification of the name of a language on formal grounds is untenable, for the simple reason that a discrete language whose boundaries it is feasible to establish, let alone establish on formal grounds, is a chimera.

We thus reject the reading of our paper as an exemplar of benighted assumptions about what linguists can achieve on questions of language names using the tools of their trade. We know full well that such debates cannot be settled on technical linguistic grounds. But we cannot help it that laymen will rush in where scholars know better than to tread, and we have chosen offering guidance over standing on the ivory sidelines. For the stance of the scholar who notices the term and quietly accepts it is itself a judgment—an endorsement of a pernicious label whose origins are in the academy and that still finds in academic precincts its most active proponents as well as very likely its most frequent users.

We are making what we think is an important point, and are willing to accept the theoretical risks involved in order to make it. The formal English-origin elements of the Spanish of Latinos (borrowings, calques, codeswitches) are parallel to the exogenous elements found in most contact Spanishes (therefore, in most Spanishes). The material absorbed by those Spanishes from, for example, Nahuatl, Quechua, Catalan and Euskara (just to name two from each continent) has motivated neither academics nor community leaders to coin or sponsor any new compound terms that enjoy much dispersion or success in Latin America or Spain. Our paper stresses that we fail to see any reason why matters should take a different turn in the US.

But academics and leaders aside, what about the speakers themselves? Readers should be at ease that we are not engaged in the unsavory business of denying speakers the right to name their speech ways using any label they want. We agree that many Latinos have accepted the academic initiative (seconded by sectors of Hollywood, the literati, and the press) to refer to some of their ways of speaking as Spanglish. But many Latinos reject the term, using it seldom or never, and objecting to its perceived derogatory tone as much as we do. The scholarly stance would call for qualitative and quantitative research that would determine what the facts of community usage are, rather than for unwarranted assumptions about the spread of a term that, to our knowledge, is far from firmly or widely established.

Both of us have for many years taught linguistics to urban, mostly working class Latino college students in New York City. We have derived from this experience the conviction that the term Spanglish does more harm than good. It is not that we wish to imply, as Urciuoli writes, that there is a causal connection between the term Spanglish and social disadvantage; no such thing has ever been implied in our writing. But we do take as extremely relevant here the fact that, in literate cultures, named forms of unmonitored speech bear a most tenuous and indirect connection with the forms of formal speech and writing that are often given the same name. In the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia, etc the popular unmonitored speech of majority speakers is quite distant from formal monitored speech and writing, yet they're both called English. When we communicate with people (of all ages, though frequently adolescents and young adults) who are trying to master standardized features, we do much harm by telling some of them that their speech is called English while telling others that theirs is to be called something else. The obvious conclusion arrived at (and frequently expressed) by many learners in the latter group is defeatist: Others are more entitled to those formal features than I am; they own them because they speak them, but I don't, because I speak something else, something that warrants a different name. The same applies to US Latinos. We want their

unmonitored speech to be called Spanish because, absent compelling justifications to the contrary, that name paves the bridge to literacy and to other benefits attained by those who master standardized varieties, while the term Spanglish fills that bridge with barriers. And for us, Spanish formal proficiency and literacy for US Latino bilinguals is no less a central goal for its being attained much less frequently than we would wish. The term invented by Professor Tió, which still rings with the disparaging views it was created to describe, is good for neither the scholar nor the citizen and should be discarded.

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