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Syncretism

Today we recognize that all utterances—not just obvious examples of borrowing and code-switching—are in a certain sense "mixed." They are multivocalic, simultaneously evoking the complex and often highly charged histories of each element of their component pronunciations, words, and expressions. We recognize this when moderates struggle to say "family" without aligning themselves with the political right, or when the use of the syllable *nig-* especially when stressed in words like *niggardly* and *niggling*, starts a battle between strict-constructionist etymologists (who argue that the words are from Scandinavian roots that have no common source with forms meaning "black" that originated in the Romance languages) and anti-defamationist activists (who argue that to use words that so closely resemble a racist epithet is insensitive and insulting). Why are some of these histories retrievable and contestable by particular interlocutors in particular interactional moments, while others are not? Today we seek answers to this question by examining the active practice of speakers and interlocutors, as they attempt to control what utterances will mean.

One way to think about mixing and multivocality is by using the concept of "syncretism," imported from the history of religion into linguistics by the Indo-Europeanist Jerzy Kuryłowicz, who defined it as "suppression of a relevant opposition under certain determined conditions." This definition admits that interlocutors may wish, variably, either to highlight or to obscure some dimension of the way that they understand the histories of their utterances, in order to construct some new synthesis. Kuryłowicz's definition contains several terms that are useful for a theory of such syncretic practice. By "opposition" we refer to culturally situated systemic relations that are meaningful. While the classic case is that of phonological opposition, the oppositions can be identified at all levels of semiosis. For instance, one might recognize a difference between "Mexicano" and "Castellano," or between "African American" and "White" English. Thus one analytic step in

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the analysis of syncretic practice is the identification of "relevant oppositions" that are at stake in a moment of utterance, and the way in which particular linguistic elements are associated with those. The second term, "suppression," implies that syncretism is a *practice*, a form of social work through which speakers may render obscure the retrievable histories of particular expressive modalities. Finally, Kuryłowicz speaks of "certain determined conditions" that must be identified as the third step in the ethnography of syncretic practice.

Studying usage among speakers of Mexicano, a Uto-Aztecan language of central Mexico also known as Nahuatl, I recognized syncretic practice at all levels of linguistic production—in syntax, in phonology, in lexical choice, in text construction, and in vernacular etymology and other kinds of metalinguistic talk. Through this work speakers constructed the Mexicano language as a "syncretic project" that drew on a range of semiotic materials. The syncretic project creates a continuum from "more Mexicano" to "more Spanish" utterances. The poles—known as *legítimo mexicano* "real Mexicano" and *castellano*—are unobtainable: speakers will assert that all their talk is marred by mixing (in reference to legítimo mexicano) and by error (in reference to castellano). Yet while these speakers represented themselves as defeated by structure, it was clear that they were manipulating it at every turn. For instance, the diversity of verb classes within Nahuatl permitted speakers to treat Spanish infinitives as a new type of verb stem, which could be thematized and inflected within a Mexicano system. Thus speakers could code-switch to a Spanish form, like *depende* "it depends," or create quite a different effect by saying *dependerihui* [dependeríwi] in the same meaning. They could exploit the flexibility of the preverbal complex in their verb-initial language to incorporate many Spanish sentence adverbs, such as *entonces* and *cuando*. Their phonological manipulations of Spanish loan words were especially notable. For instance, the Spanish word *cajón* "coffer, chest" could be pronounced in Mexicano as [kaxón], or it could be shifted toward the Mexicano end of the syncretic continuum by shifting the stress to [káxon], reflecting the invariant penultimate stress of indigenous Mexicano words, or, even further, by pronouncing the [x] as [•], reflecting the phonological pattern of the earliest borrowings from Spanish. Thus [ká•ón] might be a self-conscious performance of indigenous identity, especially on the part of a young or middle-aged male speaker, while [kaxón] might be an equally self-conscious gesture of political potency and forward-looking urbanity.

Another set of examples can be drawn from the relations between English and Spanish. In the Southwestern United States, from Texas to California, arid conditions required that Anglo-American cattlemen borrow ranching techniques from Mexican herders who had managed stock in these desert environments for two hundred years before the Anglos arrived. A rich Spanish lexicon for this complex of techniques and equipment entered English, but the Spanish source of words like "lasso," "lariat," "chaps," "mustang," and the like is today completely unknown except among specialists. Instead, these words are considered to be peculiarly "American," evoking not Mexican culture, but the rich history of the western cowboy. Much evidence

suggests that the current situation owes much to the syncretic practices of the early Anglo settlers, who preferred parodic and hyperanglicized pronunciations of the Spanish words. This linguistic erasure was accompanied by ferocious economic and military suppression of the original Mexican pioneers in the region. Today, however, the Southwestern tourist industry has found that evocation of a Hispanic aura can be lucrative, so Spanish linguistic materials are often unexpectedly foregrounded, as when streets in Southwestern subdivisions are designated as *avenidas* rather than "avenues," or when a popular bicycle race in a hilly Arizona town (notable as the point of origin of a dramatic expulsion of "Mexican" miners from the United States in the 1930s) is called *La Vuelta de Bisbee.* Another case is that of "Mock Spanish," where English speakers make jokes and insults by producing Spanish words, tag lines, and morphological materials as with "Hasta la vista, baby," "no problemo," and "el cheapo." Here, complex pragmatic effects are created by making a "Spanish" history obvious, while parodization and broad English pronunciation simultaneously make it clear that we are in the presence of an English-language voice. Mock Spanish seems to draw on a history of anti-Latino racism while in the same moment reproducing its terms.

In summary, "syncretic" linguistic projects are active and strategic efforts by speakers, who draw on their understandings of the historical associations of linguistic materials to control meaning and to produce new histories by variably suppressing and highlighting these histories through linguistic means.

(See also *contact, crossing, endangered, heteroglossia, style, switching, variation*)

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