Hannah Stortz

IS/LNGST 298

Prof. Cropsey

May 21, 2024

Spanglish: America's Most Misunderstood Language

"Spanglish" is a term that has been used for over a century in a variety of contexts to describe the linguistic practice of mixing or seeming to combine the Spanish and English languages. Negative stereotypes and misunderstandings about what it is and why it is used have surrounded Spanglish since it was first identified as a method of speaking. The purpose of the Independent Study LNGST 298: "Ideologies Concerning Spanglish" with Professor Cropsey was to synthesize current academic research on the subject in an attempt to arrive at a more specific definition of "Spanglish" as well as understand the internal linguistic process of speaking Spanglish. The semester culminated in a research project and questionnaire aimed at answering the question, What do people in the St. Olaf community think about the use and effects of Spanglish, and how do these opinions compare to the research that has been done on the subject? Through an overview of the major recent research that has been done on the topics of bilingualism and Spanglish as well as an analysis of my own survey results, I will demonstrate that Spanglish is a valid and skillful way of speaking and negotiating identity, and that a key indicator of positive opinions about Spanglish is extended meaningful contact with multiple languages.

The term "Spanglish" first appeared in print in 1948 as an English translation of "Espanglish," a word coined by Puerto Rican poet Salvado Tió (Zentella, "Spanglish" 1). In 1898, Puerto Rico became a U.S. territory, which accelerated the contact between English and

Spanish in the area. Other significant areas of English-Spanish contact in the U.S. are in Southern California and the Texas-Mexico border. Puerto Rico remains unique, however, because rather than being a border area, it was incorporated into the U.S. which meant that the English influence was stronger due to its legal and political reality. English became increasingly more common as the language of instruction in Puerto Rican schools and was imposed in other spheres of life, which led to younger generations having equal or greater skills in English versus Spanish. Tió's use of "Espanglish" was part of a commentary about his observations of the speech patterns of these younger generations who had a tendency to mix English and Spanish vocabulary within the same sentence. Tió believed that this indicated that the Spanish language was being compromised, and he heavily criticized those who spoke "Espanglish" (Zentella, "Spanglish" 1). From the outset, Spanglish has been a pejorative term used to denigrate its speakers. Despite its negative history, I have chosen to use the term "Spanglish" in an effort to reclaim the term, a decision which will be explained in more detail later.

Spanglish is typically defined broadly as a combination, mix, or switching between English and Spanish and usually refers to oral usage, although written text is certainly not excluded. In her acclaimed paper "Sometimes I'll start a sentence in Spanish Y TERMINO EN ESPAÑOL: toward a typology of code-switching," Shana Poplack provides a thorough description of different types of language switches. She calls the first category intra-sentential switches, which means that the speaker switches from English to Spanish or vice versa within a single sentence (Poplack 589). An example is the sentence, "I'm going to *una fiesta mañana* with some friends" [I'm going to *a party tomorrow* with some friends]. A second type is inter-sentential, or switching languages between rather than within sentences. An example is, "*Voy a una fiesta mañana.* Can you pick me up afterwards?" [*I'm going to a party tomorrow.*

Can you pick me up afterwards?]. The final category is the creation of new words in an attempt to synthesize the sounds and morphological patterns of both languages. For example, the English infinitive "to park" is translated as "aparcar" in Spanish, but the Spanglish word "parquear" is frequently used instead. The root "parqu-" is derived from the English word, and the Spanish infinitive ending is added. These three categories can be used to account for most if not all examples of Spanglish usage among balanced bilinguals, with the exception of tags (interjections, as in "Yuck, *no me gusta*" [Yuck, *I don't like it*]), which Poplack does not consider to be a true example of Spanglish.

In order to understand the concept of Spanglish and how it operates, it is necessary to first discuss the research that has been done on bilingualism, as speaking Spanglish requires one to be bilingual in both English and Spanish. The first difficulty in the discussion about Spanglish and bilingualism is that it is difficult to define what a language is. In her article *Keywords for Latina/o Studies*, linguist Ana Celia Zentella claims that "There is no language without politics" (Zentella, "Language politics" 14). What she means by this is that the difference between what is considered a language versus a dialect is often solely dependent on power dynamics. Furthermore, the idea of standardized languages is completely artificial and is based on a series of standards that do not reflect actual speech. As linguists Ricardo Otheguy, Ofelia García, and Wallis Reid observe in their paper "Clarifying translanguaging and deconstructing named languages: A perspective from linguistics", no one truly speaks a standard language (Otheguy et al., "Clarifying Translanguaging" 294). Furthermore, even those who are monolingual have different speech forms that are used in different contexts. For example, an American English speaker may use very formal technical language in the workplace and use slang or local varieties of English at home or among friends. Are they speaking "English" at all times, or are more

nuanced terms necessary? As this paper is primarily concerned with defining Spanglish and not bilingualism in general, it is sufficient to recognize the shortcomings and complexities of the ideas of language and multilingualism.

Scholars have introduced competing views about how languages fit in the mental grammars of bilingual speakers. The two biggest camps are those who believe that a bilingual person is essentially two monolingual brains in one body, and those who believe that there does not exist a discrete distinction between languages in a bilingual person's internal grammar. The first is best described in "A translanguaging view of the linguistic system of bilinguals" by Otheguy et al., wherein they outline the "dual correspondence theory," which claims that bilinguals are able to internally differentiate between two linguistic systems that are completely separate and distinct (Otheguy et al., "A translanguaging view"). In the same paper, these prominent linguists criticize the idea that a person's linguistic skills can be completely compartmentalized, claiming that this has had harmful effects in educational settings where students are reprimanded for not speaking "just English." They claim that a bilingual person is not able to simply "turn off" one of their languages, but that both languages are active in the speaker's brain at all times. In response, they have proposed their own "translanguaging theory" founded on the idea that all people possess a unitary grammar which simultaneously contains every language a person speaks. These two schools of thought have contributed significantly to the two dominant theories about Spanglish: "code-switching" and "translanguaging" (both of which will be discussed in detail in a later section).

Regardless of how languages are indexed in the bilingual brain, bilingualism manifests itself on a spectrum of language capabilities. Terms such as "emerging bilingual" and "independent bilingual" are commonly found in second-language classrooms, and they

demonstrate how one could speak multiple languages at different levels. Research on Spanglish has historically focused on what are called “balanced” or “fluent bilinguals”, which refers to speakers whose competencies in English and Spanish are equal or near equal. The exclusion of learners of English or Spanish as a second language is necessary in order to conduct specific and consistent research, as factors such as incomplete acquisition or lack of knowledge about one of the languages’ grammars are negligible. Although there is room for studies about the linguistic practices of second-language learners, in this I will focus on fluent bilinguals in light of the aforementioned concerns.

Research and theories about Spanglish have come to conflicting conclusions, but most major papers on the subject seem to agree on four key concepts about Spanglish and its usage: its grammatical structure, the requirement for language proficiency, its prominence in community settings, and its role in identity construction. The first idea is that Spanglish is governed by grammatical rules. There is a common myth that Spaglish is a random mixing of English and Spanish words with no rhyme or reason. In 1980, however, linguist Shana Poplack published her research on the grammar of Spanglish in “Sometimes I’ll start a sentence in Spanish Y TERMINO EN ESPAÑOL: toward a typology of code-switching.” This paper is considered one of the foundational texts of Spanglish studies thanks to its thoroughness. Poplack studied the speech patterns of a group of Puerto Ricans living in a bilingual community in New York City (Poplack 590). When compiling the transcripts, she observed that there were certain areas in a sentence where intra-sentential switches seemed permissible, and others that did not occur at all. A chart on page 602 of her paper reveals the frequency of switches between different parts of speech. Poplack proposed an “equivalence constraint” to explain the permissibility of some switch locations over others, arguing that switches between languages “will tend to occur at

points in the discourse where juxtaposition of [English and Spanish] elements does not violate a syntactic rule of either language, i.e. at points around which the surface structures of the two languages map onto each other" (Poplack 586). In other words, switches are only permissible in areas that will not cause the violation of either language's grammatical rules. Blogger and Spanish professor Itzel Meduri Soto observes in her blog post "We Speak Spanglish ¿Y qué?" that "simply knowing both languages does not guarantee Spanglish proficiency," which means that there is some other grammatical knowledge governing the use of Spanglish (Soto).

The ability to form these hybrid but grammatical sentences at a normal speaking pace requires a high degree of proficiency in both English and Spanish, which illustrates the linguistic abilities of Spanglish speakers. In the same study, Poplack observed that "there were virtually no instances of ungrammatical combinations of [English and Spanish] in the 1,835 switches studied" (Poplack 600). This observation has been corroborated by Jeff MacSwan, who in a 2017 study found that certain sentence constructions such as "the white *casa*" are consistently preferred by Spanglish speakers over constructions such as "the *casa* white" due to an inherent understanding of the noun-adjective placement rules of each language (Burns). It is here that the distinction between fluent and non-fluent bilinguals is necessary. Many second-language learners substitute words from their native language in target-language sentences due to lexical gaps. This is not considered true Spanglish but rather evidence of incomplete language acquisition. When balanced bilinguals switch languages, however, it does not indicate deficiency but rather a stylistic choice that follows grammatical rules. So in the case of balanced bilinguals, speaking Spanglish indicates a high level of linguistic competence and an intimate internal knowledge of the grammars of both languages.

The third core observation that linguistic research reveals about Spanglish is that it is often used in community settings. Spanglish flourishes in communities that are highly bilingual, and as Poplack notes, Spanglish is even the norm in some communities (Poplack 8). Linguist Erman Boztepe published a paper titled "Issues in Code-Switching: Competing Theories and Models" in which he claims that "[Spanglish] functions primarily as a symbol of group identity and solidarity among members of the speech community" (Boztepe 17). Both Poplack and Boztepe observed that in conversation, interlocutors would change their speech habits depending on who they were speaking to and whether they considered that person as a member of the community. Boztepe describes this practice as "we-code" versus "they-code" (Boztepe 17). In other words, fluent speakers of English and Spanish tend to only speak Spanglish among peers or those who they see as members of their own community. A stranger who speaks Spanglish would likely be responded to in either English or Spanish, which is why researchers such as Poplack have had to make sure that at least one team member can gain access to the community they are studying if they want to collect data in Spanglish (Poplack 595). Even within the community, Spanglish may be abandoned for English or Spanish depending on the formality of the situation (for example, someone might speak purely English or Spanish to their boss at work, and then speak to the same person in Spanglish while hanging out on the weekend).

Though somewhat related to the role of Spanglish in community, the fact that Spanglish is used by speakers to navigate and negotiate their own personal identities is the fourth significant point of agreement between linguists and scholars. Antonela Bakić and Sanja Škifić conducted research in an attempt to determine the relationship between language choice and emotional expression, of which their findings are published in "The Relationship between Bilingualism and Identity in Expressing Emotions and Thoughts." In this paper, they observe that

"different factors influence the choice of a particular language, and all those factors contribute to the process of identity construction" (Bakić & Škifić 50). Zentella pushes this claim further, stating that it is not just the choice between languages that is significant, but also the act of combining languages; in her words, "We speak both because we are both" (Zentella, "Spanglish" 8). Especially in the context of Spanglish, the language contact has resulted from shifting political realities which have had a significant impact on ideas about "good" citizenship and "proper" language use. Many members of bilingual communities are pressured to speak Spanish in the home and English in the workplace or at school, to be both Hispanic/Latinx and American, and Spanglish has been their powerful attempt to reconcile these two identities.

Despite these four key areas of agreement, linguists' proposals for how Spanglish operates differ. The most popular theory of Spanglish is that of "code-switching," an alternate term aimed at highlighting its relationship with dual correspondence theory, that is, the idea that languages exist as two separate entities in a bilingual's mind. The idea is that multiple distinct grammars are represented in the bilingual brain, and the Spanglish speaker alternates between these two languages in a way that follows the overall grammar. Poplack and Boztepe are both major proponents of this theory. As already mentioned, Poplack's research is valuable because it attempts to provide rigorous cognitive and linguistic explanations for the rules governing these switches. Furthermore, the thoroughness with which she describes her research and results means that the study can be replicated and peer-reviewed, which adds weight and credibility to the theory. Although less data-driven than Poplack's work, Boztepe also provides a thorough overview and explanation of major theories about code-switching, providing detail and nuance to the theory. Furthermore, both Poplack and Boztepe take care to emphasize the skill that Spanglish speakers display when they code-switch, which helps reverse harmful stereotypes that

have been used to denigrate Spanglish speakers and make them feel inferior about their language usage. Nevertheless, code-switching theory has gained criticism for relying too heavily on the idea that named languages are a linguistic rather than socio-political reality. Identifying something as a language shift requires the ability to state definitively that there is no overlap between the two languages, which can create gray areas, especially as single-word intra-sentential switches become increasingly integrated and approach the realm of borrowing.

The theory of translanguaging has been proposed in response to the apparent shortcomings of code-switching. Its major proponents include Otheguy, García, and Reid, all of whom have published a number of papers explaining and defending translanguaging. As mentioned in the discussion on bilingualism, the main argument of translanguaging theory is that everyone possesses a single unitary grammar. What we know as named languages, then, do not occupy discrete spaces in a speaker's mind, but rather serve to expand a person's linguistic repertoire. Otheguy et al. claim that "the practices of bilinguals are acts of feature selection, not of grammar switch" (Burns). This means whenever a person speaks, they are simply selecting features from their idiolect, regardless of whether they are "monolingual" or "multilingual." García in particular focuses a lot on the effects that language ideologies have on education and students' experiences. In 2017, she participated in the Multilingualism & Diversity Lectures and gave a talk titled "Translanguaging," in which she claimed that viewing speech as feature selection rather than language selection diminishes the idea of hierarchy of language competence (García). If students are encouraged to speak however they desire instead of being told they are deficient in one language or being pressured into speaking one language only even if it is more natural for them to use elements from multiple languages, they may have more positive views about learning and about their own linguistic abilities. While the emphasis on creative choice and

encouraging students to feel confident in their speech patterns is admirable, proponents of translanguaging have yet to propose a rigorous explanation of the rules governing these supposed feature selections in the way that code-switching theorists have.

Two other significant ideas about terminology emerged in my research. The first is the idea that Spanglish should not be treated so much as a unique phenomenon, but should be understood in the greater context of English-Spanish contact. Ricardo Otheguy and Nancy Stern published a paper titled "On so-called Spanglish" in which they argue that instead of talking about Spanglish as a hybrid way of speaking, we should talk about "Spanish in the United States" (Otheguy & Stern). The argument is that the presence of English vocabulary in Spanish and vice versa occurs in bilingual communities in the U.S. as a natural result of the contact between the two languages and simply represents local alternatives for standard words (Otheguy & Stern 4). For example, while people from Spain, Mexico, and Argentina all speak "Spanish," they have different words for "car" (*coche, carro,* and *auto*, respectively), and yet we use the same word "Spanish" to describe all of their speech (Hola Spanish). Additionally, many words used by Spanish-speakers in Peru derive from the Quechua language, and yet we do not call Peruvians speakers of "Spanchua" or "Quechish." While this attitude aids in the reduction of stigma surrounding contact between English and Spanish and allows it to be considered a valid and dynamic variety of Spanish, it does little to account for language shifts that are longer than a single word. Furthermore, calling Spanglish simply a regional variety of Spanglish undermines the amount of skill it takes to combine the two languages so fluidly, and it ignores the socio-political realities and experiences of Spanish speakers in the U.S. who have had to struggle to create an identity for themselves in the face of pro-monolingual pressure from peers and superiors.

The second significant attitude involves a movement to reclaim the term "Spanglish," an effort which has been undertaken in this paper through the insistence on the use of the term. While not an explanation of how Spanglish functions, this movement nevertheless demonstrates the non-linguistic power of Spanglish in building community and identity. Supporters believe that it is important to reclaim the term that has been used for so long to denigrate its speakers, just as the term "queer" has been reclaimed and used with pride (Zentella, "Spanglish" 7). Furthermore, this attitude is very flexible and can be used either in tandem with or in opposition to academia. A scholar may choose to use the term "Spanglish" in order to help it gain prestige, or someone may use "Spanglish" as a way of self-determination and rebellion against scholars who have a tendency to prescribe new terms that are deemed "better" than existing ones. Zentella also points out that the hybrid term underlines the unique position of multicultural people, stating "We speak both because we are both" (Zentella, "Spanglish" 9). The most significant critique, however, is that scholars stopped using the term in the first place because it was too broad and was used as an umbrella term to describe a variety of linguistic phenomena (code-switching, borrowed terms, substitution due to lack of language proficiency, etc.). So although it is important that the Spanglish-speaking community feel empowered to choose their own terms of self-identification, exercise must nevertheless be cautioned in academic settings to define terms clearly enough to facilitate productive discussion.

In an attempt to gain an understanding of whether popular beliefs about Spanglish have evolved since its first published usage, as well as to compare these attitudes to scholarly theories and observations, I created a questionnaire that I shared with the St. Olaf College community. The survey consists of 38 questions divided into three sections. The first section collects demographic information, the second and largest one asks respondents about their own personal

beliefs and opinions, and the final section is about attitudes and behaviors that respondents have observed. Most questions require an answer on a 5-point scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” with a few opportunities to provide short-answer explanations of answers. The questionnaire was shared with St. Olaf students, faculty, staff, and administrators, and responses were collected anonymously.

I hypothesized that a significant percentage of respondents would have positive attitudes towards speakers of Spanglish but that they would think the use of Spanglish is indicative of deficient language skills, regardless of whether they viewed the ability to speak multiple languages positively. Example questions include, “Speaking ‘Spanglish’ indicates a lack of proficiency in English and/or Spanish” and “People who speak mixed languages such as ‘Spanglish’ stand out to me in a negative way.” In writing questions, it was necessary to be as specific as possible and to include different scenarios to gauge whether attitudes were general or specific situations. For example, I asked respondents to indicate how they felt about non-English language use generally, in school, and in the workplace. Additionally, I had to be careful with my wording in order to not skew results by forcing answers; for example, the question “Speakers of ‘Spanglish’ are unintelligent” would not have been appropriate as it is too broad and emotionally charged, whereas questions about whether people who speak Spanglish are harming their language acquisition skills are worded more neutrally and require specific reflection.

In total, I received 76 responses, the vast majority of which were from domestic students. Results were quite similar, with most questions having >50% of respondents answering on the same side of the spectrum (“Strongly Agree”/“Agree” or “Strongly Disagree”/“Disagree”). Fewer than half (43.4%) of respondents identified as speakers of Spanglish, while 72.1%

identified as speakers of Spanish (all respondents spoke English). Attitudes towards the use of non-English languages and language-mixing were very positive overall.

One significant result from the survey is that while almost 100% of respondents do not believe that speaking Spanglish indicates a lack of proficiency in English and/or Spanish, almost half believe that the term "Spanglish" itself carries negative connotations. This is possibly due to the fact that roughly 71% of respondents reported having heard someone else use the term "Spanglish" in a derogatory way, which demonstrates how negative experiences can damage perceptions of a word or concept, regardless of personal opinions on the matter. This result also serves as an example for why it may be important to reclaim the term "Spanglish."

Another important correlation is that about 95% of respondents do not harbor negative feelings about the usage of mixed language such as Spanglish, and roughly 86% of respondents believe that language and identity are closely related. This ties back to the idea that language is a tool to navigate and negotiate identity, and thus demonstrates an awareness among respondents that individual linguistic practices should be respected as a valid form of self-expression.

The results were somewhat skewed in the sense that more than 80% of respondents speak a second language and have taken a Spanish class, so overall they have a lot of contact with non-English languages. Although further research is necessary to make any conclusive statements, it is possible that this fact is directly related to the overwhelmingly positive views about Spanglish and multilingualism, suggesting that extended and meaningful contact with a variety of languages may be key to reversing harmful stereotypes surrounding its usage.

There was one notable outlier who stated that they believed Spanglish was both indicative of and caused deficiencies in English and/or Spanish, and that speaking Spanglish was not necessarily a valuable skill. In their words, they "do not like that [Spanglish speakers] have

diluted and changed what was originally so beautiful," sharing Tió's sentiment that combining English and Spanish represents a threat to the Spanish language. Ironically, this respondent also identifies as a speaker of Spanglish. This response demonstrates that while the vast majority of responses were generally positive towards Spanglish and its speakers, the beliefs and misinformation about the harms of speaking Spanglish are deep-seated.

Studying Spanglish is a worthwhile endeavor in the context of pure linguistic curiosity, but also because accurate information about Spanglish may help free its speakers from the negativity and ridicule they have historically experienced. After all, as Soto points out, "languages are not meant to be respected – people are" (Soto). Otheguy, García, and Reid were right to point out the psychological effects that language ideologies can have on speakers and the positive effects that acceptance and celebration of linguistic diversity can have on personal emotional well-being. At the same time, the rigorous research done by Poplack, Boztepe, and others sheds light on the complexity of this speech form and highlights the skill required to switch between English and Spanish in everyday conversation. As my questionnaire results seem to demonstrate, there may be a strong correlation between education and contact with other languages and positive beliefs about the use of multiple languages, as well as the awareness that language and identity are intertwined. Although there is some overlap between Spanglish and other areas of language contact, Spanglish is unique in its historical background and the way that its speakers have had to figure out how to be, as Zentella puts it, "both."

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