“Spanglish” and Identity within and outside the Classroom

Domnita Dumitrescu

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The session that the AATSP organized at this year’s MLA Convention in Boston (held on January 4, 2013, from 10:15 to 11:30 am) was dedicated to a topic that has been the object of constant debate in the past decades: the use of “Spanglish” as a marker of identity among US Latinos. I put “Spanglish” into quotation marks because, as I explained in my Guest Editorial from September last year, the term is controversial and is best to be avoided. However, since it is widely used in the US discourse in both academic and nonacademic environments, I included it in the call for papers so that potential presenters knew what it was that I expected them to focus on. It was our tacit understanding that we were all going to refer to what one of the authors calls the “various linguistic strategies that characterize what is commonly referred to as ‘Spanglish’; namely code-switching, code-mixing, borrowings and other language contact phenomena commonly employed by . . . bilinguals” (Sánchez-Muñoz).

The three presenters that participated in this session (which was well attended and included a lively discussion at the end) tackled the issue of “Spanglish” from a variety of perspectives. Robert Train from Sonoma State University introduced the audience to the fascinating world of early nineteenth-century California and the bilingual language practices of some prominent Anglo immigrants to Mexican Los Angeles. These immigrants, whom Train calls “Mexican-ized gringos,” demonstrated, as archival evidence attest, “their highly skilled bilingual and multilingual abilities in their routine interactions with each other,” in addition, of course, to their mastery of Spanish, which appears to have been “the lingua franca among immigrants” in the California prestatehood period. They used code-switching as a powerful communicative resource, and Train’s hope is that “language professionals today can connect these historical memories and identities to our present-day context in order to reconsider a prevalent misunderstanding of Spanglish as a mixing of two distinct languages, communities and identities.” “A central lesson to be learn from the past,” he adds, “is an understanding of the complexity of language use in lives of Spanish speakers in California across ever-shifting boundaries between monolingual-bilingual-multilingual contact zones and ecologies of use and identity.”

Returning us to present-day California, Ana Sánchez-Muñoz from California State University–Northridge examined the functions and use of “Spanglish” (as defined in the quote from her paper given above) in creative pieces of writing produced by second-generation Chicana/o (and other Latina/o) college students in a class of Spanish for Heritage Speakers. For Sánchez-Muñoz, “Spanglish is a way for the students to deal with complex linguistic and ethnic issues in a creative manner” insofar as it “creates another level of meaning” for negotiating the hybridity of the Chicana/o experiences, constructing and reconstructing “a third space of . . . identity, a linguistic nepantla.” The examples she gave from some students’ poems demonstrated “the creative use of contact features to create an identity space that defies clear boundaries between that ‘Angloness’ and ‘Mexicanness’ that Anzaldúa wrote about.”

The third presentation by Regan L. Postma from The College of Idaho raised the important issue of the use of bilingual texts in literature courses as a means of engaging students in dialogues considering “larger issues of language, culture and identity such as the dynamic and contextual nature of language, the politics and power of language choice, and the creative possibilities of negotiating linguistically and culturally in multiple and hybrid rather than in singular modes.” She illustrated her approach to these issues by analyzing her students’
reactions to Sandra Cisneros’s short story “Little Miracles, Kept Promises,” and Junot Díaz’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (an author on which I am currently writing an article myself and whose most recent book will be reviewed in the next issue of this journal).

Upon noticing the interest that this session raised, I decided to continue exploring this topic at the upcoming 2014 MLA Convention in Chicago by organizing another session on behalf of the AATSP dedicated entirely to the study of code-switching and code-mixing in literature following the steps of Postma’s presentation this year in Boston. The title of the session is “English-Spanish Code-Switching in Literary Texts: Is it Still Spanglish as We Know It?” and I invite you all to attend.