Who Soy Yo? The Creative Use of “Spanglish” to Express a Hybrid Identity in Chicana/o Heritage Language Learners of Spanish

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Who Soy Yo?: The Creative Use of “Spanglish” to Express a Hybrid Identity in Chicana/o Heritage Language Learners of Spanish

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This study explores 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 Chicana/o bilinguals. The analysis of linguistic features is based on creative pieces of writing produced by Chicana/o (and other Latina/o) college students in a class of Spanish for Heritage Learners. The functions and uses of Spanglish are examined within the students’ written discourse. It is argued here that Spanglish is a way for the students to deal with complex linguistic and ethnic identity issues in a creative manner. In a way, the use of Spanglish creates another level of meaning where the hybridity of the Chicana/o experiences are negotiated. In this sense, Spanglish is a way to construct and reconstruct a third space of Chicana/o identity, a linguistic *nepantla*.

Chicanas/os and Spanglish

The term Chicana/o was originally a derogatory term applied to the descendants of Mexican people in the United States. This term was later adopted as a term of ethnic pride and political consciousness during the civil rights movements of the 1960s. To identify oneself as Chicana/o as opposed to Mexican-American or Latino or Hispanic means reasserting a unique ethnic and sociopolitical bond. It means claiming a unique culture not just a “mixture” of two colonial pasts but rather something unique with its own history, aesthetics, music, and also with its unique linguistic expression. The Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa writes about this in her *opus magnum* Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza: “We don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicannes or Angloness” (1999: 85).

The term Spanglish is used frequently but is not easy to define since different people employ it to mean diverse things. Spanglish is sometimes used to refer to the varieties of Spanish or English spoken by Chicanas/os and other Latinos in US communities. Often, Spanglish is used to mean code-switching, that is, the moving back and forth between two languages in a single communicative exchange. Some researchers stay away from the term claiming that it confuses different linguistic realities, while others embrace the term proudly. Because of the controversial nature of the word “Spanglish,” I usually employ the terms “Chicana/o Spanish” or “Chicana/o English” or code-switching between these two.

Chicanas/os have a Spanish-linguistic heritage. To what degree Spanish is spoken and maintained varies greatly from community to community and from family to family. Most Chicanos in the communities I researched in Southern California are bilingual, although English is the dominant language. Speakers can function in Spanish, but their Spanish is a variety characterized by contact with English.

Contact Features

Among the linguistic phenomena that develop in language-contact situations, the transfer of features from one language into another is a common strategy used by bilinguals to cope...
with the task of using two different linguistic systems. Chicana/o Spanish is characterized by transfer due to the intense contact with English in the United States.

Among those contact features, lexical transfer is particularly salient. This study analyzes cases of lexical transfer classified as single-word switches to English (items that preserve English phonology) and single-word borrowings (items adapted to Spanish phonology). In this latter group, we differentiate between loans (the transfer of forms with their meanings for example *troca* “truck”), and calques (the transfer of meanings only; for example *carpeta* for “carpet” or “rug” with the meaning from English of “carpet”).

**Heritage Language Learners and “Spanglish”: Carving a Linguistic Nepantla**

The data presented in this study comes from the written creative pieces produced by Chicana/o heritage learners of Spanish. The students in this class are second generation Latinos (born in the United States) who identify themselves as Chicanas/os. These learners are bilingual but lack literacy skills in Spanish. They come to class with a vernacular that differs from the register required in academic settings. The work in this course is aimed at bringing linguistic and dialect awareness without negative judgments or prejudice toward their vernacular variety.

Heritage learners in this class produce a number of oral presentations and written pieces including compositions, reports, and creative writing. These written pieces allow us to examine how the unique hybrid code of Chicanas/os is negotiated in an academic environment that is, in principle, hostile to non-standard codes and behaviors. The following are examples from some of the students’ poems (published in the online literary magazine *InVerso*). These illustrate the creative use of contact features to create an identity space that defies clear boundaries between the “Anglonness” and “Mexicanness” that Anzaldúa wrote about.

My first words were *en español*  
English I mastered in school,  
Somehow mamá managed to make  
A Mexican-American out of me  
Mexican when I went to *mis*a every Sunday  
Seeking to be like *La Virgen de Guadalupe*  
American when we grilled burgers  
On hot July summers,  
As my National Anthem blasted through the speakers

¿De aquí o de Allá? ¿De allá o de aquí?  
Escucho corridos, norteñas y más  
El *rap* y el *hip hop* no me faltan jamás  
Escucho gooooool al mirar el futbol  
Escucho *homerun* al mirar el beisbol  
Me encanta un buen *hot dog*  
*With a side* of horchata  
Tortillas y *biscuits*  
Nunca faltan en casa  
¿De aquí o de allá? ¿De allá o de aquí?  
Allá soy de aquí. Aquí soy de allá.

**WORKS CITED**