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Becoming Bilingual, Becoming Ourselves: Archival Memories of Spanglish in Early Californian Epistolary Texts

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In the early 1960s, Dr. George I. Sánchez, a pioneer in the education of Mexican-American students explained that acculturation means that Mexican-Americans have the obligation to become Americanized and “Anglos have the obligation to become Mexicanized gringos” (Salazar and García 1995: 90-91). Sánchez’s comment is ironic in the ideologically monolingual English-speaking United States following the conquest and annexation of the Mexican Spanish-speaking territories of North America in the nineteenth century. However, there was a time when Anglos living in California, Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico routinely became—and in fact, embraced becoming—Spanish-speaking Anglos who communicated freely in Spanish with Spanish-speakers and in richly bilingual practices with other “Mexicanized gringos” or “Mexicanized Yankees.” Examining letters written in the 1830s and 1840s, here, I explore the bilingual language practices (“Spanglish”) and identities of two prominent Anglo immigrants in Mexican Los Angeles, Hugo Reid, and Abel Stearns.

This study is part of a larger project to reassemble the historical presence of Spanish in what has always been complex multilingual ecologies of language use, policy, and ideology in California. In order to re-establish the place of Spanish, language educators and linguists need to rethink Spanish and Spanglish beyond English-centric memory. Language use in California has always been about complex contact between speakers with diverse and different practices of language, culture, and identity. In an ever-changing “contact zone” (Pratt 2008), Spanish speakers in California inhabit complex ecologies (van Lier 2004) that extend well beyond the common-sense ideology of discrete language-community-identity and beyond notions of bilingual language-identity-culture practices that would conceptualize Spanglish as the mixing of supposedly pre-existing unitary “English” and “Spanish” languages and cultures.

English-speaking immigrants began coming to Alta California upon Mexican independence from Spain in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Most early immigrants like Reid and Stearns became naturalized Mexican citizens and Catholics, which enabled them to do business, marry into propriety-owning Mexican families and hold elected office. Juridically, linguistically and culturally, for example, Hugh Reid, an immigrant from Scotland, became Mexican using his baptismal name of Perfecto Hugo Reid.

This archival evidence suggests that the languages we learn are deeply connected to shifting spaces of speakership and personhood. Despite the thinness of the archival record from the Mexican national period of prestatehood California, Spanish appears to have been the lingua franca among immigrants. Official correspondence in Mexican California was a sort of Spanish-only zone in which Mexicanized gringos demonstrated their skill in successfully navigating monolingual conventions of Spanish written genres as they wrote letters, both in their official capacities as elected officials and as citizens, directed to Mexican governors and other officials. Education was almost synonymous with bilingual, even multilingual, competence and literacy, which was highly valued throughout the Spanish and Mexican periods. This bilingual competence was grounded in literate practices, as well as spoken communication, that opened doors to engaging in commercial ventures and holding public office where knowing how to read and write in Spanish was required by law. This highly valued bilingual competence and multilingual literacy extended into the very early years of US statehood.

In addition to their monolingual-like command of Spanish, the Mexicanized gringos used their highly skilled bilingual or multilingual abilities in their routine interactions with each other. In letters to Stearns, Reid demonstrates his dexterity in switching modalities of code-switching from marked to unmarked as a powerful communicative resource for bilinguals. Reid also apparently chose to point to his shared bilingualism and identity as a Mexicanized gringo by switching, for example, to a bilingual closing in one letter: “y oblig.[ingly] your’s.” This instance is markedly different from the Spanish-only-zone staked out in documented official correspondence and shows correspondence between Reid and Stearns as a bilingual language use space that indexes bilingual social relationships. Reid highlights the multilingual languaging of place that was part and parcel of being a Mexicanized gringo.

The past is a very different place. Spanish and Spanish speakers, whether native speakers or Mexicanized gringos in the Alta California of the 1830s, occupied a fundamentally different position in society than current-day California. However, 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. Rather, my current study suggests that these bilingual language practices are sites of interaction between “linguistic individuals” (Johnstone 1996) and “multilingual subjects” (Kramersch 2009) engaged in contingent practices of “languaging” and “lingual memory” (Becker 1995) in complex ways involving “the subject’s being encountered by the languaging of place” (Spivak 2010). A central lesson to be learned from the past is an understanding of the complexity of language use in lives of Spanish speakers in California across ever-shifting boundaries between monolingual and bilingual-multilingual contact zones and ecologies of use and identity. Prevalent concepts of language and speakership (e.g., native, non-native, and heritage) do not necessarily capture these complexities. There is real work to do in redesigning Spanish for a critically humanistic language education centered on understanding and respecting the complex identities and language practices of our students and ourselves, who come to Spanish in multiple ways, from diverse experiences, and for a variety of reasons.

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