English-Spanish Code-switching in Literary Texts: Is It Still Spanglish as We Know It?

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Encouraged by the success of the session on “Spanglish” organized by the AATSP last year at the MLA Convention in Boston (see the 2013 MLA Convention Feature in *Hispania* 96.3), the AATSP organized a follow-up session this year in Chicago, this time focusing on the use of code-switching between English and Spanish in literary writings rather than in oral interaction among bilinguals. Its title (which preserves the popular name of code-switching as “Spanglish,” to facilitate understanding) was “English-Spanish Code-switching in Literary Texts: Is It Still Spanglish as We Know It?”

One reason for focusing on this particular aspect of the US literature written by Hispanics is that, as Aparicio (1994) pointed out:

> While some prescriptive linguists, editors, and authorities in education would judge the interference of Spanish and English as a deficit, a postmodern and transcreative approach would validate it as a positively creative innovation in literature. Indeed, the most important contributions of US Latino/a writers to American literature lie not only in the multiple cultural and hybrid subjectivities that they textualize, but also in the new possibilities for metaphors, imagery, syntax, and rhythms that the Spanish subtexts provide literary English. (797)

The other, related reason (which the question in the subtitle of the session tries to answer) is that there has been a long debate about whether or not, or at least to what extent, literary code-switching is “authentic,” that is, reflective or mimetic, of what is taking place in the “real world” of the bilingual Hispanic communities in the United States. In the past, the prevalent positions (based almost exclusively on analyses of Chicano literary productions, in particular poetry) seemed to have been that “not only there may be but that there must be significant differences between literary code-switching and real life code-switching” (Keller 1979: 269), or that one can clearly distinguish between mimetic code-switching (which tries to mirror society) and literary code-switching (which pursues other goals of aesthetic nature) (Keller 1984: 178). More recent studies, however, emphasize the fusion of both types of code-switching, in particular in narrative texts. So, for instance, Montes-Alcalá (2012)—based on the careful examination of a selection of contemporary bilingual novels by Mexican-American, Nuyorican, and Cuban-American writers where Spanish and English alternate—claims that “the socio-pragmatic functions that have been traditionally ascribed to oral discourse” can also be found in a bilingual literary corpus, and she concludes that “code-switching in these texts may be considered authentic and not just purely rhetorical” (85). Therefore, as Torres (2007) has pointed out, in an often cited article:

> [A]n important contribution of these texts is that they continue to document the multilingual reality that exists in this country. Latino/a fictional texts are an example of a contact zone where English and Spanish confront each other and comfortably or uncomfortably coexist. (92)
The four papers presented in the aforementioned MLA session provide, each one in its own manner, insights into these issues. The first paper, by Covadonga Lamar-Prieto, documents the existence of code-switching in a written corpus of documents (including early Spanish local periodicals) from California’s nineteenth century. These documents prove the continuity (contested by some previous scholars) between the Californio dialect of Spanish and contemporary Spanish spoken in California. Moreover, it demonstrates that “many words and expressions that are considered ‘recent corruptions’ or the result of recent linguistic accommodation have, however, a very extensive history in the community,” and that “Spanish-English code-switching is not ‘something new’ that appears in contemporary times, but an inherent feature of the Spanish language spoken in Southern California,” and probably other states from the southwest, I should add.

The second paper, by Jorgelina Corbatta, was originally titled “Gloria Anzaldúa’s Discourse as a Mestiza and Queer Writer,” and it analyzed the concept of mestizaje in Anzaldúa’s theory of borderland identity as “a way of challenging binary thinking and being beyond either/or,” which includes a multiplicity of discourses, or speaking “Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent.” After commenting on Anzaldúa’s poem, “To Live in the Borderlands Means You,” Corbatta traced an interesting parallel between this iconic Chicana feminist and Julia Kristeva. It is this last part of Corbatta’s paper that we chose to publish in this *Hispania* issue because it shows how “from the Mexican border and the cosmopolitan Paris two feminist socialist writers and essayists come together in a multicultural approach as a mark of inclusion, increased consciousness and dialogue that evolved from an initial political revolution to become an interior revolution.”

The third paper, by Andrés Aluma Cazorla, is an analysis of the use of Spanglish in Ángel Lozada’s novel, *No quiero quedarme sola y vacía*. A gay Puerto Rican immigrant to New York, the protagonist expresses his failed struggle to overcome the hostility of his host city and to be accepted into its cultural and social environment through the use of a mixed discourse, which, in Aluma Cazorla’s opinion, is more of a parody than a linguistic transgression.

Finally, the fourth contribution, by Roshawnda Derrick, considers the English-Spanish code-switching employed by Chávez-Silverman in her text *Killer Crónicas* in comparison to other bilingual texts like Sandra Cisnero’s *Caramelo* and Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Her conclusion is that “radical bilingualism”—a term employed by Torres (2007) to designate texts that contain sustained sections of code-switching and can only be read by a bilingual audience—is achieved in different ways by each author, and that *Killer Crónicas* exemplifies “language fusion, which occurs as Spanish and English fuse together through the use of sustained code-switching and intra-word switches to create a completely hybrid text which can be only read by English-Spanish bilinguals.”

I would like to conclude by quoting Torres (2007) again with this interesting comment regarding the future of such texts in the United States. She states:

> As the number and power of Latino/as in the United States increases, it will be interesting to see if Spanish continues to muscle its way into what have been exclusively English language arenas. If radical bilingual literary texts prove to be viable in the market place, it is conceivable that in the coming years Spanish will appropriate more and more textual space in Latino/a fiction published by mainstream presses. (92)

This was written one year before Junot Díaz, another author of “fused” bilingual texts (Dumitrescu 2014) won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature.
WORKS CITED


