Spanglish: A Synthesis of Cultural Identity and Creativity

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It is no secret that the term “Spanglish” is often seen as a derogatory title for the language habits of Hispanic individuals within the United States. Confusion also exists as to whether Spanglish is a language or simply a practice of speech patterns. A detailed explanation will be offered later in this essay; for now, to state it simply, Spanglish is a form of speech that combines Spanish and English. In addition, this paper assumes that Spanglish is a set of practiced speech patterns, but not a language. Despite the stigmatization that goes along with it, the term “Spanglish” is used throughout this essay to refer to the practice of combining English and Spanish in an attempt to bestow positive connotations on a complex and compelling set of language phenomena.

In Borderlands/La Frontera, Gloria Anzaldúa epitomizes the general opinion of Spanglish when she states “we are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration… Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically…we speak an orphan tongue” (80). Anzaldúa’s declaration summarizes several aspects of the controversy surrounding Spanglish. First, she acknowledges the stigmatization that Spanglish incurs from both English and Spanish speakers. Second, she demonstrates the connection between Spanglish and the cultural identity of Hispanic individuals. In addition to observations regarding Spanglish and cultural identity, Anzaldúa’s book is a proclamation and cry for the acceptance of Spanglish and Chicano individuality. However, before the topic of cultural identity in relation to Spanglish can be addressed, its definition and history must first be explored. This paper aims to define and offer examples of Spanglish while exploring its place within art and literature and the effect of Spanglish and bilingualism on the overall conception of a Latino cultural identity within the United States. As the evidence will show, the popular belief that the use of Spanglish is an indicator of language incompetence proves to be false; in
actuality, Spanglish is a rich, creative practice that enhances and emphasizes the bicultural community while allowing for new experimentation within literature and communication.

On the most basic, elementary level Spanglish is a combination of English and Spanish. Despite this fact, many native English speakers are not even aware of the existence of Spanglish due to the fact that it is spoken predominantly by Hispanic individuals and is consequently a significant element of Latino identity. In his article “Spanglish: An Anglicized Spanish Dialect” Alfredo Ardila acknowledges the controversy as to whether Spanglish is “an interlanguage, a Spanish dialect, a Creole language, or a pidgin language” (65). Ardila goes on to describe the dominantly observed and documented “superficial phenomena” of Spanglish, which includes borrowing and code-switching. Borrowing from English into Spanish generally occurs for a plethora of reasons that include the absence of a word that corresponds “exactly to the borrowed word,” the chance that “in Spanish, there are several potentially correct words, but none has the exact meaning,” or “when a word has been learned in English first, the meaning is more directly accessible in English than in Spanish” (Ardila 68-9). In addition, words may be borrowed if “the borrowed word is compatible with Spanish phonology,” “when the English word is phonologically simpler than the corresponding Spanish word,” and for technical words or frequently used English words (Ardila 68-9). On the other hand, Ardila states that code-switching “means that at a certain point, the speaker changes the language, and continues talking in another language” while code-mixing indicates “that within a single sentence, two languages are mixed and may alternate” (70). It is important to acknowledge that neither of these practices indicates a completely new language; instead they seem to suggest that two languages are simply being combined. Along with superficial phenomena, Ardila outlines his idea of “deep
phenomena” within Spanglish; however, for the purposes of this essay a definition of Spanglish as comprised principally of code-switching and borrowing will suffice.

Before the tree of cultural identity and literature can be investigated, it is necessary to examine the roots, origins and definition of Spanglish in order to construct a complete and well rounded image of this linguistic phenomenon. In his essay “The Gravitas of Spanish” Ilan Stavans dates inception of Spanglish at some point between 1803 and 1848 with the Louisiana Purchase and the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, respectively. Stavans states that the in-pouring of Anglos into previously Mexican land “created a dialogue between English and Spanish” and started “a tentative merging of the two tongues.” In addition, Stavans cites the Mexican-American War as the cementing factor for replacing Spain with the U.S. as the dominant global power. According to Stavans, these events appointed English as the prominent political language and instigated contact between English and Spanish that was conducive to creating a “vital social code whose sheer bravura is revolutionizing both Spanish and, to a lesser extent, English.”

One of the most defining aspects of Spanglish is the stigmatization placed on it by both English and Spanish speakers. Possibly the most generic and commonly heard comment regarding Spanglish is that it is a “bastardization” of language. Spanish speakers view the mixing of Spanish with English as the beginning of a complete loss of Spanish and cultural identity, while English speakers fear that Spanglish foreshadows a complete societal takeover on the part of the Hispanic people. In addition, Aída Hurtado and Luis A. Vega, authors of “Shift Happens: Spanish and English Transmission Between Parents and Their Children,” cite P. G´andara for observing that “the use of Spanish by Latinos in the United States has been identified as a social problem leading to increased economic and social isolation” (138).
Although this quote does not refer directly to Spanglish, it nevertheless demonstrates the effect that Spanish has on Spanglish due to its stigmatized status. It is possible that a form of code-switching that involved two prestige languages (which is slightly difficult to conceive due to the fact that languages generally mesh when a stigmatized language and a prestige language are placed in close contact) would not be frowned upon as much as Spanglish, which utilizes the English prestige language along with the stigmatized language of Spanish. Yet another reason for the stigmatization of Spanglish is the fact that many individuals are under the misconception that Spanglish is a random mishmash of two different languages. However, as Almeida Jacqueline Toribio states in “Spanish/English Speech Practices: Bringing Chaos to Order,” “it is by now well-established among researchers in linguistics that intra-sentential code switching is not a random mixture of two flawed systems; rather, it is rule-governed and systematic, demonstrating the operation of underlying grammatical restrictions” (137). The fact that an acknowledged set of rules exists offers the possibility of a certain amount of credibility for Spanglish. In addition, these rules support the assertion that the use of Spanglish indicates a high rate of proficiency in both English and Spanish rather than a lack of competence in either.

Perhaps one of the best pieces of evidence supporting a standardized use of Spanglish is Toribio’s essay “Spanglish? Bite Your Tongue! Spanish-English Code-Switching among Latinos.” This essay describes a study in which participants were asked to describe their Spanglish usages habits while also evaluating and making value judgments about examples of Spanglish. One participant in the study, Yanira, was asked to compare and contrast two texts written using considerably different types of code-switching; one text was written with “switching at boundaries shown to violate code-switching norms” while the other text was constructed using code-switching “at those boundaries that are thought to serve as common
switch sites in bilingual speech” (Toribio 119). In her responses to both texts, Yanira showed a clear preference for the text that conformed to code-switching norms. She stated that in one text “too much switching made it confusing” while in the other text she “didn’t get stuck on the switches” because it was coherent and had a pattern (Toribio 121). As Toribio acknowledges, “Yanira drew on her knowledge of English and Spanish—her linguistic competence” and was “able to discern the differential status of the code-switching patterns presented” (121). Yanira’s comments indicate that she has a comprehensive knowledge of both English and Spanish, which she uses in order to evaluate the use of Spanglish. This observation works against the theory that Spanglish speakers are incompetent in English and Spanish while also proving that Spanglish speakers have rules or at the very least “a shared knowledge of what constitutes appropriate, grammatically sanctioned code-switching” (Toribio 119).

In addition to shared beliefs about code-switching, Spanglish is arguably a means through which Hispanic Americans find a shared cultural identity and a medium for creative, artistic expression. In her article “Don Quixote in Spanglish: traducttore, traditore?” Lourdes Torres discusses Ilan Stavans’ translation of a section of Don Quixote into Spanglish as a pioneering artistic pursuit aimed at legitimizing Spanglish. Torres defends Stavans’ translation (against the language “purists [who] responded with horror and disapproval”) by declaring that “new translations of classic texts are appropriate because language is constantly evolving” and by noting that “Cervantes himself was fascinated with code-switching” (328-9). Reinterpreted into Spanglish by Stavans, the first sentence of Cervantes’ famous work reads “In un placete de La Mancha of which nombre no quiero remembrearme, vivía, not so long ago, uno de esos gentlemen who always tienen una lanza in the rack, una buckler antiquo, a skinny caballo y un greyhound para el chase” (qtd. in Torres 332). The fascinating feature of Stavans’ translation is
that it takes a text, Don Quixote, which is renowned within the Spanish speaking community, and transcribes it into the language pattern of a group of people who are often feel that they belong to the proverbial borderlands, forever stuck between two cultures and worlds. As a result, Don Quixote is reassigned to Hispanic Americans through linguistic means and in a manner that strengthens Hispanic culture (through the presence of Spanish) while also acknowledging the influence of the United States on Latino identity (through the use of English within Spanglish.)

While the translation of Don Quixote into Spanglish offers readers an example of a fairly traditional story placed within current speech patterns, it does not demonstrate the manner in which contemporary writers and poets are utilizing Spanglish to their artistic advantage. In his article “What is “Minor” in Latino Literature,” Rolando Pérez asks “how is Latino literature as a minor literature, revolutionary?” (91). In order to answer his own question, Pérez first points to the conflict Latino writers face when deciding whether to write in Spanish or English. Pérez asserts that this conflict “for many Latino writers literally means ser o no ser... And whether 'tis nobler to write in one or the other, or even in both, can only provoke anxiety” due to the fact that “ultimately, the question of language choice has a lot more to do with self-concept and one's affective relations to a language than with linguistic competence” (91). Pérez acknowledges here that language choice often has less to do with capability and more to do with identity and the idea that individuals have a relationship with language. In her article “Spanish/English Codeswitching: A Syncretic Model,” Kristin Becker backs up this idea when she cites Zentella as affirming that “when bilingual speakers...shift from one code to the other in the same conversation, they are in effect saying, ‘I belong to two worlds and can function in either, but I am most at ease when I can shift back and forth from one to the other’” (1).
Various individuals, such as Pérez, have observed that Latino writers often make up for “the feeling of being attached to and torn between two languages” by utilizing Spanglish in various forms of writing (91). He eloquently describes the use of Spanglish by Latino writers who “understand that language is primarily affective, and, as a result, often switch back and forth from English to Spanish in a way that makes English ‘vibrate’ in a certain kind of way (93). A fantastic example of Spanglish in poetry appears in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s poem *Las Malas Lenguas*, which Pérez cites in his article. Although Cofer claims that she is not capable of *writing* in Spanish, she does have enough oral background to enable her to borrow words into her English poems and stories. In *Las Malas Lenguas*, Cofer writes “It happened to a plump fair daughter / of an honest campesino / who was caught on her knees pledging her soul / and her body to the devil” (qtd. in Pérez 93). Although only one word is borrowed in this selection, it nevertheless offers an example of the fact professed by Ardila, that individuals will code-switch when no other word offers exactly the same meaning. In this example, Pérez asserts that neither “farmer” nor “peasant” would suitably work in place of “campesino” due to fact that using one of the first words would take Cofer’s poem out of its Puerto Rican context (93). Also, emphasis should be placed on the fact that within this excerpt, borrowing does not detract from the overall meaning, but rather adds depth and flavor while promoting Cofer’s Puerto Rican heritage.

Despite assertions that Spanglish is an undesirable practice that degrades language and depicts the language incompetence of those who use it, it appears that Spanglish is actually a vibrant vehicle for expression and cultural identity. The intentional use of Spanglish in writing appears to stem partially from the Latino individual’s desire to simultaneously assimilate with the culture of the United States while also retaining some sort of Hispanic heritage. In addition, Spanglish provides bilingual speakers with a creative, varied and enhanced mode of written
communication and expression. The use of Spanglish by bilingual writers is especially monumental, or revolutionary, due to the fact that putting this practice “in print lends legitimacy to the Latino community’s ways of speaking and serves to validate Spanglish as a linguistic code worthy of literary expression (Torres 331). This statement emphasizes the importance of Spanglish within literature due to the fact that within many societies, literature plays a large role in creating cultural identity. In this case, Spanglish as it is used in literature allows individuals to express their unique identity from within the perspective of biculturalism. However, what is perhaps even more important than the language Latinos write in, is what they have to say about their distinctive societal experience. Perez Firmat perhaps best sums up this issue in his poem “Turn the Times Tables” by proudly declaring “I am what is left / after the subtraction of my languages. / I am the division that resists / the multiplication of my languages. / I am the number that won't square, / the figure you can't figure, / the remainder of my languages.” (qtd. in Pérez 99).
Works Cited


