

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Is Spanglish a Bad Term?

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The question sometimes arises of appropriately naming a language: choosing endonym over exonym (Tohono O'odham over Papago), differentiating closely related varieties by nation (Hindu/Urdu, Serbian/Croatian), highlighting the major linguistic classification or the specific speaker group (French, Canadian French, or Québécois; AAVE or Ebonics); identifying distinct formal codes versus syncretic language practice (Mexicano and Castellano versus what speakers actually do).

The question of appropriate naming is raised by Ricardo Otheguy and Nancy Stern in their 2010 *International Journal of Bilingualism* (15:1) article "On So-Called Spanglish." Otheguy and Stern state, "The term Spanglish, used to refer to popular forms of the language of many Hispanics in the USA, is . . . a misleading term that sows confusion about the Spanish language and its speakers" (p 25). The authors take the position that "the language of Hispanics" is unequivocally Spanish. They characterize US Spanish as a set of forms. They document formal examples demonstrating parallels between US and other local varieties of Spanish in terms of formal features and processes, concluding that since the same kinds of internal and contact formal processes and patterns seem to take place in all varieties of Spanish, there is no objective basis for assuming the existence of a language variety whose forms specifically reflect a history of English contact. Therefore it needs no distinct name. Even if it did, Spanglish is referentially inappropriate, composed as it is of components of two language terms, implying that its referent is an unstructured 'mish-mash' of two languages. Furthermore, the authors see in Spanglish the reflection of long-standing North American attitudes of scorn toward Spanish-speaking immigrant peoples. They criticize its use by academics to denote bilingual practices and see no justification for anyone, however creative their motives, to claim it. Finally, they advocate Spanglish be replaced by Spanish or at least, Spanish (or popular Spanish) in the US, a usage that would be coherent with pursuit of a mastery of formal spoken and written Spanish as a path to advancement. By inference then, the existence and use of Spanglish as a referent is causally related to an ethnic group's lack of advancement.

This piece nicely illustrates the salient assumptions underlying the metapragmatics of language naming. There is such a thing as a language. It is composed of forms. Languages can be named in objectively verifiable ways based on accurate assessment of those forms. Each named language is a bounded entity, objectively distinct from each other named language. Language names traditionally map onto political entities (e.g. the colonial heirs of English/England and Spanish/Spain), and can be further subdivided into local varieties. Linguistic authorities can verify the objective accuracy of all this and assign correct names which speakers should observe in order to avoid being stigmatized as incorrect.

From this angle, the question of whether a certain language name is acceptable is no simple matter of yes or no but a set of indexes about the nature of linguistic authority leading to further questions. When people name a language, what is being named? In what ways are people even imagining something nameable? How do people abstract the conception of a coherent set of forms from the perception of sounds coming out of mouths? All these points precede the question of how the namer's authority enters into the process of naming and how that authority is constituted. All these points also suggest how emergent and contingent a construction is a named language.

It might be instructive to glance briefly at the history of the term's use. Spanglish as pejorative referent for a contact variety of Spanish is first credited to Puerto Rican journalist and poet Salvador Tió in the 1940s who thus described linguistic habits of which he disapproved. This judgmental tradition continues to the present with the definition of *español* by the Dictionary of the Royal Academy of Spanish (DRAE): "Modalidad del habla de algunos grupos hispanos de los Estados Unidos, en la que se mezclan, deformándolos, elementos léxicos y gramaticales del español y del inglés (mode of speech of some U.S. Hispanic groups in which grammatical and lexical elements of English are mixed, deforming them in the process)." Spanglish as a positive referent was taken up in the 1970s by Nuyorican poets Miguel Algarín, Tato Laviera, Pedro Pietri, Luis Piñero, and others. More recently Bill Santiago has built comedy acts around it and Ilan Stavans has built a series of essays and a dictionary around it. So, to make a couple of sweeping generalizations, what we see on the one hand is pejorative reference to Spanglish as disciplinary strategy (stay within nation-state lines); and on the other, the deployment of elements identified as Spanglish as performance strategy (poetics, humor, academic production).

In contrast are all the bilinguals who claim Spanglish as "my language." From the perspective of a semiotic linguistic anthropology, this is a register characterized by formal syncretism, especially code-switching, enacted as functionally complex social practice (who does what in what participant structures, how and why). Since all this is deeply indexical, none of it can be reduced to a list of forms and it has been abundantly documented by sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists in recent decades. Moreover, as Ana Celia Zentella has pointed out, from the perspective of speakers, this linguistic activity signifies an identity formed in a social experience that cannot be compartmentalized and separated into conventional cultural or linguistic slots. Such an identity emerges in ways of

speaking because ways of speaking are cultural enactments. Obviously such sociolinguistic processes are not unique to any one demographic group. Equally obviously such processes take on meaning unique to their users, and that is what Spanglish means to them. While critics of Spanglish as an objectively inaccurate referent may seem to have speakers' best interests at heart, they ultimately dismiss speakers' own views as naïve folk theories. Speakers' investment in their use of Spanglish deserves to be acknowledged, not judged or defined out of existence.

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