

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Scholars and Citizens

Ricardo Otheguy
Nancy Stern

Judging the Unfortunate Term “Spanglish” (Response to “Is Spanglish a bad term?”)

In order to respond to Bonnie Urciuoli’s fair and thoughtful critique (“*Is Spanglish a bad term?*” *AN*, SLA Section News August 2013), we are forced to make explicit what we had taken as obvious, namely that a responsible scholar is often also a committed citizen. The citizen in us often embraces conceptual frameworks, like the one that trades on named discrete languages, that the scholar in us knows to be incoherent. The high-wire balance of the scholar-citizen is difficult to maintain, and we are grateful to Professor Urciuoli, and to this venue, for the chance to once again attempt that perilous walk.

The burden of our paper (“On so-called Spanglish”, *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 2010, 15:1) had to do with a label. It urged the avoidance of the term Spanglish. But we did not question the existence, or the legitimacy, of the bilingual practices of US Latinos, which we have studied extensively. Nor are we innocent of the fact that both linguistic practices and language naming involve, in addition to formal features, social dimensions and indexical values related to identity and self-definition. And we are quite aware that the objective verification of the name of a language on formal grounds is untenable, for the simple reason that a discrete language whose boundaries it is feasible to establish, let alone establish on formal grounds, is a chimera.

We thus reject the reading of our paper as an exemplar of benighted assumptions about what linguists can achieve on questions of language names using the tools of their trade. We know full well that such debates cannot be settled on technical linguistic grounds. But we cannot help it that laymen will rush in where scholars know better than to tread, and we have chosen offering guidance over standing on the ivory sidelines. For the stance of the scholar who notices the term and quietly accepts it is itself a judgment—an endorsement of a pernicious label whose origins are in the academy and that still finds in academic precincts its most active proponents as well as very likely its most frequent users.

We are making what we think is an important point, and are willing to accept the theoretical risks involved in order to make it. The formal English-origin elements of the Spanish of Latinos (borrowings, calques, codeswitches) are parallel to the exogenous elements found in most contact Spanishes (therefore, in most Spanishes). The material absorbed by those Spanishes from, for example, Nahuatl, Quechua, Catalan and Euskara (just to name two from each continent) has motivated neither academics nor community leaders to coin or sponsor any new compound terms that enjoy much dispersion or success in Latin America or Spain. Our paper stresses that we fail to see any reason why matters should take a different turn in the US.

But academics and leaders aside, what about the speakers themselves? Readers should be at ease that we are not engaged in the unsavory business of denying speakers the right to name their speech ways using any label they want. We agree that many Latinos have accepted the academic initiative (seconded by sectors of Hollywood, the literati, and the press) to refer to some of their ways of speaking as Spanglish. But many Latinos reject the term, using it seldom or never, and objecting to its perceived derogatory tone as much as we do. The scholarly stance would call for qualitative and quantitative research that would determine what the facts of community usage are, rather than for unwarranted assumptions about the spread of a term that, to our knowledge, is far from firmly or widely established.

Both of us have for many years taught linguistics to urban, mostly working class Latino college students in New York City. We have derived from this experience the conviction that the term Spanglish does more harm than good. It is not that we wish to imply, as Urciuoli writes, that there is a causal connection between the term Spanglish and social disadvantage; no such thing has ever been implied in our writing. But we do take as extremely relevant here the fact that, in literate cultures, named forms of unmonitored speech bear a most tenuous and indirect connection with the forms of formal speech and writing that are often given the same name. In the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia, etc the popular unmonitored speech of majority speakers is quite distant from formal monitored speech and writing, yet they’re both called English. When we communicate with people (of all ages, though frequently adolescents and young adults) who are trying to master standardized features, we do much harm by telling some of them that their speech is called English while telling others that theirs is to be called something else. The obvious conclusion arrived at (and frequently expressed) by many learners in the latter group is defeatist: Others are more entitled to those formal features than I am; they own them because they speak them, but I don’t, because I speak something else, something that warrants a different name. The same applies to US Latinos. We want their unmonitored speech to be called Spanish because, absent compelling justifications to the contrary, that name paves the bridge to literacy and to other benefits attained by those who master standardized varieties, while the term Spanglish fills that bridge with barriers. And for us, Spanish formal proficiency and literacy for US Latino bilinguals is no less a central goal for its being attained much less

frequently than we would wish. The term invented by Professor Tió, which still rings with the disparaging views it was created to describe, is good for neither the scholar nor the citizen and should be discarded.

Ricardo Otheguy is professor of linguistics at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. **Nancy Stern** is the chair of the department of childhood education and associate professor of bilingual education and TESOL at the City College of New York (CUNY) School of Education.

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