

Spanglish: an English Spanish Language Phenomenon

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Abstract

Spanglish is a mixture of English and Spanish that occurs as a language contact phenomenon in the speech of the Hispanic population of the United States of America, the population of Mexico living near the northern border, and also of the populations of other Central American countries. Hispanics make up the largest minority group in the USA; there were almost 47 million in 2008 (U.S. Census Bureau), 15% of the nation's total population. Most live in the southern part of the USA, but many live in bigger cities like New York and Washington.

This paper deals with the question of what kind of linguistic phenomenon Spanglish is. Is it a language, Creole, pidgin or another linguistic form? It is obvious that English and Spanish are in contact, and thus they form a mixture. Spanish is influenced by English and English is mixed with Spanish. There are no formal rules on how they mix; thus it is difficult for linguists to define what Spanglish actually is. Different linguists describe it differently. This paper deals with linguistic features that describe Spanglish.

Keywords: Spanglish, English, Spanish, phenomenon, borrowing, language, mixture.

The word Spanglish is a blend of the English language words for Spanish and English. It is obvious there is a language contact between them. "Code-mixing takes place to some degree everywhere that English is spoken alongside another language" (Crystal 115), and is actually a normal feature of bilingualism. Mixed varieties have blended names, which show their origin. For example, Wenglish is Welsh and English, Japlish is Japanese and English, Poglisch is Polish and English, Greeklisch is Greek and English and so on. Sometimes Spanglish is also called Espaninglish, Espanglish, Inglañol, el Spanish broken, Espan'glés or Espanolo, and sometimes it is known by its regional name. In Texas, for example, one can hear the name Tex-Mex and in Mexico the term Pochismo is used for Spanglish expressions. Salvador Tió was a Puerto Rican linguist who reportedly coined the term Spanglish in a newspaper column first published in 1952. Tió also coined the term Inglañol, a converse phenomenon in which English is affected by Spanish; the latter term did not become as popular as the former. (Lipski, 21).

Spanglish has not been formally recognized as a language, or as a particular linguistic phenomenon. From a linguistic point of view, it is difficult to say what Spanglish is. It is a mix of English and Spanish, which have been in contact for a very long time. In this paper I will discuss whether Spanglish can be defined as code-switching, code-mixing, borrowing, pidgin, Creole, language or any other language phenomenon.

Wardhaugh points out that the phenomena of code-switching is not "a haphazard mixing of two languages" (108, 109), but people who are involved know the community

norms and the appropriate occasions to use code switching; and those people are proficient in both languages. Gramley (221) describes code-switching as a phenomenon where the speaker begins a sentence in one language and ends in the other. The system, form or pronunciation of the languages is not changed. In code-switching, the change in the language occurs from one sentence to another, or when starting a new topic. The speaker starts an utterance in a given language, switches to another and then continues with the language he/she began with. Pountain describes Spanglish as mixing of Spanish and English by the Hispanic population of the USA. He provides an example of code-switching in Hispanic speech:

...yo voy comer allí poquito, y yo voy comer allá poquito so I can... so they can be happy. When we come here from California, we... I... eat beans over here and chilies — same thing like back home pero porque tienen papitas con chiles, papas — potatoes with chile and all that — they think we don't like it because it's [fixed] that way. (Timm in Pountain, 482)

Gramley describes code-mixing if “the speaker fluently interweaves English words in a Spanish sentence”, for example: “Dijo mi mama que I have to study” (221). In contrast to code-switching, when the change of the language is present at the end of topics or sentences, in code-mixing it occurs within the same sentence. Dussias provides an example taken from Poplack: “Siempre está promising cosas” (596). (He is always promising things.). Crystal (115) describes Spanglish as code-mixing, which takes place to some extent everywhere that two languages are spoken alongside each other. In contrast to code-switching, code-mixing takes place when a speaker uses small components of one language while primarily speaking another.

The exchange of words, or borrowing of vocabulary, is the most common way that languages influence each other. This is not a new phenomenon, since we know that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries many words from Latin and French came into the English language. Nowadays, many English words are borrowed by other languages, but it is not only words that can be borrowed; other linguistic features, such as morphology and syntax, can be the subject of borrowing. Spanish, like many other languages, borrows from English. For example, loanwords are words taken directly into one language from another, with little or no translation; another example is calquing idiomatic expressions. In this case the meaning or idiom is borrowed, not the lexical item itself.

The English word *email* or *e-mail* is often used in Spanish, although the term *correo electrónico* can be used as an alternative. The word *email* also has a verb form, *emailear*, which is sometimes used. Many Internet and other technology-related terms, and words from popular culture, have been borrowed from English. For instance, *software*, *web*, *bit*, *la laptopa* for *laptop* and *cliquotear* for *to click*. The language of technology and the Internet is also called Cyber-Spanglish.

Pountain gives some examples of calquing. *Tener un buen tiempo* means *to have a good time* (standard Spanish would be *divertirse* or *pasarlo bien*). One of the best known examples is the expression *llamar para atrás*, which comes from English *call back*; standard Spanish is *devolver la llamada* (return the call) (Encyclopedia II).

False friends are very common when comparing languages. For instance, the word *carpeta* exists in the Spanish language and it means folder. In Spanglish, its original meaning has changed from “folder” to “carpet”, following the English meaning of the word carpet. Another example is the word *chequear*, which comes from the English verb *to check*. *Chequear* replaced the Spanish verbs *verificar* or *comprobar*. In some areas this word has been changed in spelling and appears as *checar*. In Spanish, *aplicación* means *use of* or *appliance* and is now used for a job or school application, whereas the Spanish word *solicitud* should be used. The Spanish word *aplicación* and English *application* are false friends (Encyclopedia II).

Gramley (221) provides a case study of English words in Puerto Rican Spanish. English has a greater influence on Spanish rather than vice-versa, especially on the border of the USA and Mexico. English has influenced Spanish and so the Spanish *maquina* (English car) has become *carro*, and *blumes* (English panties, knickers) have become *pantis*. *Ay te wacho* comes from the English verb *to watch*; *Se esta liqueando el rufo* means *The roof is leaking*. We can see that the word is taken from the English language and a Spanish ending is added. On the other hand, English has borrowed from Spanish, too, but those words (banana, alligator, avocado, burrito, macho, margarita, and rodeo, to name a few) have existed in English for a longer period of time and are not considered to be Spanglish.

A pidgin is a language with no native speakers. This means that it is no one’s first language but is a contact language. Pidgin arises for the purposes of communication between people who do not have a common language. It happens in a multilingual situation in which those who wish to communicate must find a simple language system or improvise. This definition of pidgin may explain the origin of Spanglish (although not necessarily), but it does not apply to its use, since most Spanglish speakers are bilingual.

A Creole is a pidgin that has become the first language of a new generation of speakers, so that it has native speakers. Creoles are used in a wide range of domains (like family, friendship, religion, education, and employment) for several functions. A small number of Spanglish speakers fall under this category since they cannot use English or Spanish, because they have a lack of training, but most Spanglish speakers are fluent in both English and Spanish, and are actually bilingual, so we cannot generalize that Spanglish is a Creole.

Roger Hernández describes Spanglish as a street dialect, explaining that it would not work elsewhere, for example if it were used on a business meeting or lectures at the university. On the other hand, Spanglish is already used in magazines and on television. Dr. Ilan Stavans, a professor at Amherst College, has translated the first part of the Spanish classic *Don Quixote de la Mancha* into Spanglish.

Although Spanglish has existed for a long time, it has not been formally recognized as a language. Encyclopedia II, in an online article, points out some common misconceptions about Spanglish. One is that Spanglish is a language. Spanglish has never existed as a language in a certain place and then spread to other regions. Different varieties (for example, Spanglish in the USA or Panama) developed independently. Each variety is a unique example of English influence on Spanish language.

The estimated Hispanic population of the USA in 2008 was 47 million. Many Americans have learned Spanish as a second language, either through formal education or life experience. Many have the opportunity to use Spanish on a daily basis. Since Spanish in the USA is often used, it has started to appear on different notices, signs, and documents, but unfortunately, people who knew some Spanish and were not qualified translators or even native speakers often made these translations. This is why these translations sometimes fall into the category of Spanglish, but actually these are only bad translations.

There is no exact definition of Spanglish. Different authors and linguists present it differently. *The American Heritage Dictionary* gives two definitions of Spanglish: “Spanish spoken with a large admixture of English, esp. American, words and expressions,” and “Spanish characterized by numerous borrowings from English.” Can Spanglish be characterized technically as Creole, pidgin, code-switching or any other linguistic feature? Spanglish definitely contains a lot of code-switching, but Spanglish is used by bilingual speakers who speak to other bilinguals. They are not aware when they change languages; they just do it. There are no instructions on how to learn Spanglish, and when to code-switch. The same can be said of code-mixing, which takes place to some extent everywhere two languages are spoken alongside each other. Both of these features are normal for bilingualism. Borrowing has been common for centuries. Nowadays, most languages borrow vocabulary from English, mostly vocabulary connected to computers and the Internet, or popular culture. The words may be borrowed because they are often used or if there is no equivalent in the other language. Vocabulary is not only borrowed from English by other languages, but English has also borrowed from other languages. For example, Japanese (bonsai, haiku, origami), French (academy, bayonet, empire), Dutch (apartheid, bazooka, tulip) and many other languages. English has remained English, but it contains many borrowed words. Similarly Spanish, which contains many Anglicisms, is still Spanish. Spanglish is more of a continuum of the mix between English and Spanish. Spanglish cannot be characterized only as a pidgin or Creole, because most Spanglish speakers are bilingual; there is a small proportion of those who use Spanglish because they do not know how to speak one language properly (English or Spanish). Spanglish is not even recognized as a language, since it has not been developed in a certain place and then spread to other regions. Different varieties exist in different countries, such as the USA, Panama, Cuba, Puerto Rico and others. Nor is Spanglish an interlanguage. This is a language which is often spoken between linguistic borders. Spanglish is spoken not only on the borders of the USA and Mexico (speaking geographically), but also in New York, Los Angeles and other parts of the USA. Spanglish has some of the features mentioned above, but none of them completely. We can describe it as a mixture of English and Spanish language, used simultaneously within the same conversational event. The function of Spanglish is communicative; when a speaker needs new words to fit new ideas, he or she uses another language. Spanglish originated on the streets as a hybrid of two languages, and since it is informal it is difficult to characterize it academically, as Angelica Guerra Avalos of the University of Guadalajara, Mexico points out.

The word *Spanglish* became a popular term for an English Spanish contact. Linguists warn that it is not the best one, since it groups together things that do not necessarily

belong together. We know that in this phenomenon, different features like code-switching, loanwords, code-mixing, language contact and bilingualism are involved. According to Encyclopedia II, the speech of a fully bilingual Spanish/English speaker in the USA who switches between Spanish and English phrases spontaneously in the middle of the sentence is very different from the speech of a Spanish monolingual in Puerto Rico who uses many words and expressions that come from English. Both are labeled as Spanglish, although they are different. Spanglish is not the same for all speakers. Some live in Spanish speaking countries (Puerto Rico, Panama, Cuba and other Central American countries), while others live in the USA. Code-mixing and code-switching are common in the USA, while Spanish monolingual Puerto Ricans use English expressions. All these are considered as Spanglish.

Spanglish occurs as a language contact phenomenon in the speech of the Hispanic population of the USA and the population of Mexico living near the northern border. These people are exposed to English and Spanish. Since many Mexicans migrated to different parts of the USA, Spanglish occurs not only on the border and in the southern part, but also in the major cities in the USA. Some people of Hispanic origin who settle in the USA continue to speak Spanish as their only language, while other learn English or other languages. Some speak primarily English, but the Spanish influence remains present. Spanglish is also spoken in Gibraltar and in some countries of Central America, like Cuba, Panama, and Puerto Rico. Monolingual Spanish of Panamanians or Puerto Ricans, for example, is also called Spanglish if people use also English words in their speech, but we have to be aware that these Spanglishes are different from one another, since they developed separately.

Thus we can talk about different Spanglishes or about the varieties of Spanglish. The syntactical structure can be either Spanish or English-based, depending on the area that it comes from. The vocabulary also varies from community to community and from region to region. Some varieties have their own names and we will discuss the three mentioned most often, Tex-Mex or Chicano, Cubonics, and Nuyoric.

Chicano English is considered to be a dialect of American English used by Chicanos. Chicanos are Americans of Mexican origin who live mostly in Texas. This is why Chicano is sometimes named Tex-Mex. Bayley and Santa Ana define ChcE (Chicano English) as

an ethnic variety of English spoken by people who acquired English as their first language, who acquired English and Spanish simultaneously, or who began to acquire English when they enrolled in elementary school (so around the age of five). (Bayley and Santa Ana, 376)

The same authors describe the status of Chicano English, which has been stigmatized for the past forty years. Chicano English is considered to be the mispronounced English of Spanish speakers who are learning English as their second language. Chicanos often have problems in school, because they are taught Standard English in school, but their parents speak Spanish accented English. Teachers give lessons to linguistically inhomogeneous classes. Some believe that Chicanos should stop speaking Spanish and learn English better, but the problem is that many of them do not speak Spanish. Speakers of Chicano

English may or may not speak Spanish as well as English; although most live in communities where Spanish is spoken, they know it only passively.

Most speakers of Spanglish in the USA are fluent in both English and Spanish languages. Because of their fluency they know when it is appropriate for them to speak Spanglish. On the other hand, not all speakers of Chicano English know how to speak Spanish, but most understand at least some of it.

Cubonics is spoken by Cuban Americans living in Florida. Cubonics is a mix of Cuban idioms and English language. The term itself is rather new, but the phenomenon has existed since the first Cuban refugees arrived in the USA in the late 1950s and early 60s. Cubans used literal translations, but they did not mean the same in the USA. For example, *Tu madre* is a common insult in Cuba, but when the Cubans said *Your mother* in the USA, it did not serve its intention.

Here are some examples from online forums:

The Original Spanish Saying	CUBONICS	The Intended English Meaning
No me importa un pito	I don't care a whistle	I don't care at all
Me importa tres pepinos	I care three cucumbers	I don't care at all
Me sacaron el hígado	They took my liver out	I worked like a slave
Tú no pintas nada	You don't paint anything	This doesn't concern you

Nuyorican is a blending of the terms New York and Puerto Rican. Nuyorican is spoken by Puerto Ricans living in New York. It is also called New York Latino English. Its origin goes back to post-war times when Puerto Rican immigrants arrived in New York. They began to arrive in the 1930s, and then in larger waves in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. The following generations were bilingual speakers of English and Spanish.

Spanglish is not recognized as a particular linguistic phenomenon, but could be best described as a mixture of Spanish and English used as a way of communication. English and Spanish are not about to mix in a new language; they will remain two separate and distinct languages, although borrowing will always remain present when they come into contact. Since Spanglish has found its way into print media, it is obvious that it will be used and it will continue to develop. It will be difficult to define its formal written form, since the speakers come from different countries in Central America and they use it differently.

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