It's the Talk of Nueva York: The Hybrid Called Spanglish

Lizette Alvarez

In various Hispanic American communities a hybrid language is emerging—a flexible, colloquial mixture of Spanish and English variously called "Cubonics," "Tex-Mex," and "Spanglish." More and more, through TV, the popular press, and literature written by Hispanic authors, this language is entering mainstream American culture. In her article "It's the Talk of Nueva York," Hispanic American journalist Lizette Alvarez brings the force and flavor of Spanglish to one of America's leading newspapers, the New York Times. Decried by traditionalists who deplore a loss of purity in both English and Spanish, speakers of Spanglish take pride in being fully bilingual; they claim for themselves the best of both languages.

Nely Galan, guest host for a day, and the television actress Liz Torres plop down onto the plump, oversized chairs that dominate the late-night talk show set, and without missing a beat, slip into the language that comes most naturally to both of them.

"Oye, oye, check out those red lips, girlfriend," Ms. Galan says.
"Madonna Red," Ms. Torres replies, pouting her full lips.
"Sí, gracias," Ms. Torres remarks, returning the compliment. "Y tú te ves tan linda."

Ms. Galan tells her late-night audience: "It's a Latina girlfest. We love makeup."

Never mind that the talk show, "Later," appears on NBC and is geared to an English-speaking audience. Ms. Galan, born in Cuba and reared in New Jersey, and Ms. Torres, Puerto Rican and raised in Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan, were speaking the hybrid lingo known as Spanglish—the language of choice for a growing number of Hispanic-Americans who view the hyphen in their heritage as a metaphor for two coexisting worlds.

"I think Spanglish is the future," said Ms. Galan, 32, the president of Galan Entertainment, a Los Angeles television and film production company that focuses on the Latino market. "It's a phenomenon of being from two cultures. It's perfectly wonderful. I speak English perfectly. I
from the column, and they sold faster than a macrogüey [microwave can cook up a Weigúache [Weight Watchers] meal.

The much-praised Hispanic writers Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez and Roberto G. Fernández routinely drop Spanglish into their novels and poetry, believing it to be a legitimate, creative form of communication.

"Language is not a little, airtight, clean, finished container of some thing," said Ms. Alvarez, a Dominican-American author [who is not related to this writer]. "It's permeable, alive. It moves."

The language has also picked up momentum in music. Jellybean Benitez, a New York–based record producer and the founder of Hola, a recording company whose name stands for Home of Latino Artists, said a new wave of popular artists, most of them young rappers, are using Spanglish in their lyrics.

When Reign, a young Latino singer, warns "danger, danger, cuidado" as he slides in and out of the two languages on the title track of his recording, "Indestructible," he is doing it to connect to his audience, but also to show Latino pride, Mr. Benitez said.

And in Texas, where some say a Spanish-English hybrid has been around as long as Texas has been Texas, Spanglish—or Tex-Mex as they call it—has reached unrivaled levels of acceptance. Towns close to the border resonate with the language.

Those who tune into KXTN-FM in San Antonio, which has been No. 1 in the ratings for four years running, hear deejays saying things like, "Recuérdales que hoy, esta tarde, vamos a estar en vivo en Dillards, broadcasting live from 3 to 5, with your chance to win some cool KXTN prizes. Acompañen a sus amigos." Translation: Remember that today, this afternoon, we are going to go live from Dillards, broadcasting live from 3 to 5. Come with your friends."

Even the station's advertisers have requested that their commercials be broadcast in Spanglish, recognizing that the language can tap into the listener's bicultural world.

Ms. Haubegger, 28, the publisher of Latina magazine, also believes that Spanglish is good business.

"If we were an English magazine, we would just be general market," she said. "If we were a Spanish-language magazine, we would be Latin American. We are the intersection of the two, and we reflect a life between two languages and two cultures that our readers live in."

There are two basic approaches to Spanglish, with countless variations: switching and borrowing. Borrowing words from English and Spanishizing them has typically been the creation of immigrants, who contort English words for everyday survival. This method makes new words by pronouncing an English word "Spanish style" [dropping final consonants, softening others, replacing M's with N's and V's with B's], and spelled by transliterating the result using Spanish spelling conventions.

Thus, a grandfather suffering from a chest cold in Miami will walk into a drugstore and ask for "Bibaporru," ordinarily called Vick's
Armas, whose parents are from Spain. "I'm not turning my back on what I came from. You pick and choose and accommodate, and that's what Spanglish is."

GLOSSARY

Talking the Talk

Of the two basic forms of Spanglish, borrowing—saying English words "Spanish style" and spelling them accordingly—is more common among first-generation speakers; later generations tend to switch back and forth. Here are examples of the hybrid language—often spoken with a sense of humor—that has vaulted from streets to talk shows to the pages of magazines like Latina and generation fi.

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SPANGLISH

EL Oye, me estoy risando y el estin está broken—close the door. ¿Vamos a comer el luchero, or what? I need to eat before I go to my new job as a chiroquero.

ELLA ¿Quieres que te cocine some rice en la jitali, or should I just get you some confej con leche? By the way, you embarcame te el otro díla. ¿What did you do, pick up some fafu en vez de ir al restaurant where I was waiting? Eres tan chinero.

TRANSLATION

HE Hey, I'm freezing and the steam [or heat] is broken—close the door. Are we going to have lunch or what? I need to eat before I go to my new job as a Sheetrocker.

SHE Do you want me to cook you some rice in the Hitachi [catalheli term for all steam cookers], or should I just get you some cornflakes [ditto for any kind of cereal] with milk? By the way, you stood me up the other day. What did you do, pick up some fast food instead of going to the restaurant where I was waiting? You're so cheap.