



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 plopped down onto the plump, oversized chairs that dominate the late-night talk show set, and without missing a beat, slipped 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.

“Madonna Red, una belleza,” Ms. Galan says. “You look beautiful.”

“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

speaking Spanish perfectly, and I choose to speak both simultaneously. How cool is that?"

Immigrants struggling to learn a new tongue have long relied on a verbal patchwork to communicate in their adopted land. But Spanglish today is far from the awkward pidgin of a newcomer. As millions of Hispanic-Americans, first, second and third generation, take on more prominent roles in business, media, and the arts, Spanglish is traveling right along with them.

The headlines of a glossy new magazine aimed at young Hispanic women spout a hip, irreverent Spanglish. Young Hispanic rappers use the dialect in recordings, and poets and novelists are adapting it to serious literary endeavors. Spanglish has few rules and many variations, but at its most vivid and exuberant, it is an effortless dance between English and Spanish, with the two languages clutched so closely together that at times they actually converge. Phrases and sentences veer back and forth almost unconsciously, as the speaker's intuition grabs the best expressions from either language to sum up a thought. Sometimes, words are coined.

Some Spanish-language purists still denounce Spanglish as a debase-ment of their native tongue. And many Latinos, wary of the Ebonics controversy that flared over the suggestion that black English should be considered a separate language, are unsure just how far they want to push their own hybrid. Many see it as a purely colloquial form of communication best suited to popular culture, and there is little talk of introducing a Spanglish curriculum in schools or demanding that Spanglish be accepted in the workplace.

Most speakers fall into Spanglish only among other bilingual Latinos, and when they do, it is often with a sense of humor.

"If in addition to, quote, 'taking all those good fruit-picking jobs' we then begin bastardizing the language, we are really going to catch it," said Christy Haubegger, publisher of *Latina* magazine. "We don't need another strike against us."

But those reservations have not limited Spanglish's popularity. Ms. Haubegger, a Mexican-American lawyer, began Spanglish's most successful foray into the magazine world last June when she started *Latina* magazine, a bilingual glossy in New York for young Hispanic women. The magazine peppers its stories and headlines with Spanglish. "When He Says Me Voy . . . What Does He Really Mean?" one headline reads. ("Me voy" is "I'm leaving.") "Mi padre's infidelity. Are cuernos genetic?" another reads. ("Cuernos" are horns.) The magazine, published six times a year, is so successful that it will go monthly.

In Miami, *generation ñ*, another bilingual magazine, found an audience in part because of a regular humor column by Bill Cruz called "Cubanamericanisms." Nothing more than a list of Webster-style definitions of Spanglish words, now dubbed Cubonics in Miami, it had Miami's Cuban community guffawing over their own expressions. In January, the magazine printed 4,000 novelty books featuring excerpts

from the column, and they sold faster than a maicrogüey (microwave can cook up a Weigüache (Weight Watchers) meal.

The much-praised Hispanic writers Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez and Roberto G. Fernandez 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 in 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 "Bibaporrú," ordinarily called Vick's

VapoRub. A teenager will buy a pair of "chores"—"shorts"—for the gym. A housekeeper will plug in the "bacuncliner" to vacuum the rug. And, since regional differences exist in Spanglish, Latinos in New York might complain about "el estín" during winter if the steam shuts off or warn you late at night about "los joldoperos," robbers who hold you up.

Sometimes, an English word is borrowed for reasons of efficiency, since Spanish is famously multisyllabic. Instead of saying, "estacionamiento" for "parking," Spanglish speakers opt for "parquin." Instead of "escribir a máquina" for "to type," they say "taipear." Swiftly advancing technology has also added the verbs "bipiar" (from the noun "beeper") and "i-meiliar" ("to E-mail") to the vocabulary.

"Dame un bipeo later," said Mike Robles, a stand-up comic from the Bronx who does a whole riff on Spanglish. Give me a beep. "There are whole generations out there that speak exactly that," he said.

The children of immigrants, who grow up speaking or hearing Spanish at home, and English everywhere else, use these borrowed words, but they take Spanglish one step further. Ask them what they speak among themselves or at home and the answer is inevitably the same: Hablo un mix de los dos lenguajes, a mix of the two.

Traditionalists have sometimes deplored this "code-switching" between languages, often calling it a product of laziness and ignorance. And it is true that as Spanish gets fuzzier to American-born Hispanics, they come to rely on English words to fill the gap. But a new school of thought has recently emerged that says that Spanglish illustrates a high degree of fluency in both languages.

"It's a sign of linguistic dexterity," said Ana Celia Zentella, a linguist at Hunter College and at the CUNY Graduate Center who has written a book on bilingualism in New York. "It's like a complex juggling act or a train car able to run on two tracks at the same time, shifting from one to the other at the appropriate time. It's a skill that is often misunderstood."

Luz de Armas, chief creative officer and managing partner of Conill Advertisers in New York, who said she and her co-workers speak mostly Spanglish among themselves, agreed. She often switches into Spanglish, she said, to convey anger, joy, love, or embarrassment, because Spanish is a more descriptive, emotional language than English—not because she doesn't know the word.

That is also true for Ms. Alvarez, the novelist. "For me, Spanish is my childhood language," she said. "I came to this country when I was 10. It's the language of sensations and emotions, of the day to day."

As with other foreign languages, some Spanish words simply cannot be translated.

"English is very concise and efficient," said Gustavo Perez Firmat, a Duke University professor and poet who has written a collection of poems called *Bilingual Blues*. "Spanish has sabrosura, flavor."

It is also a statement of identity. "The reality is, because you do have a constant influx, we don't assimilate, we acculturate," said Ms. de

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 ñ*.

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| bacuncliner vacuum cleaner | fafu fast food | pulóver T-shirt |
| biper beeper, pager | jangear hang out | roofo roof |
| boyla boiler | joldoperos muggers, holdup artists | sangüiche sandwich |
| chileando chilling out | liqueo leak | tensén 10-cent store, like Kmart or Woolworth's |
| choping shopping | maicrogüey microwave oven | |

SPANGLISH

EL Oye, me estoy frizando y el estin está broken—close the door. ¿Vamos a lonchar, 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 jitachi, or should I just get you some confley con leche? By the way, you embarked me el otro día. ¿What did you do, pick up some fafu en vez de ir al restaurante where I was waiting? Eres tan chipero.

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 [catchall 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.