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His Kind of Spanglish

A Nuyorican comedian's book on the language hybrid is a defense of verbal redundancy motivated by double belonging. Bill Santiago calls Los Angeles the "promised land" of Spanglish.

By [Kevin Matthews](#)

Senior Writer

**People are not easy to categorize linguistically:
authenticity is a higher value than purity.**

Pardon My Spanglish: ¡Porque Because!—One Man's Guide to Speaking the Habla

By Bill Santiago

Quirk Books, 192 pp., \$14.95 paper

THE SERIOUS SIDE of this book about the talk of U.S. Latinos and some others—Spanglish, "the *habla*"—goes well beyond comedian Bill Santiago's evident enthusiasm about words and peculiarities of syntax. "Pardon My Spanglish: ¡Porque Because!" is a defense of a variety of Spanglish, although not the author's own geographical variant (*Nuyorican*). What he's defending, while explaining its norms and conventions, is a Spanglish that allows both English and Spanish to pulse within its circuitry. If you need to be redundant to keep Spanish and

English alive in your speech, *para él*, for Santiago, so much the better.

Why? *Porque* because. Plus, if you're speaking in this way, you've got a mishmash of identities. You can't maintain them all without bilingual wordplay—unless you want to be one person at home and another outside, a compromise that suits neither Santiago nor millions of speakers of 'lishes and "*idiomas startup*" from Chinglish to Tagalish.

Some of Santiago's favored locutions are plainly redundant. "*Porque* because" is something of an exception, since the five-year-old's retort of "because!" abbreviates "because I say so," or "because *because*." Instead consider this approved list of phrases, which look like on-the-fly translations but are actually bilingual transitions used in full by Santiago's kind of *Spanglishista*:

Maybe *a lo mejor*

A ver we'll see

Please *por favor*

A veces sometimes

Te digo I'm telling you

Almost *por poco*

Te lo juro I swear

Then there's the advice to heap up personal pronouns in both languages for emphasis, as in, "*Ella*, she knows her coolant." (Search "Iris Chacón coolant" for more.) Best of all the redundant fixes, though, is Santiago's double Spanglish syntax. I like "*De donde* does it come from?", which means the same thing at both ends, and "Careful, that dog *le muerde a* everybody," which throws in a pronoun and a preposition that gringos would omit. See? You don't just fill in Spanish words where your English would go, or vice versa. You make sentences in both languages.

Of the two, English has stricter word order, and Spanish has more rules regarding agreement of words. Spanglish takes advantage by giving everything a gender (*la Walmart*), applying word endings (L.A. anti-loitering sign: "*No Janguear*"), or placing a lone Spanish or English word in a privileged spot such as the beginning or end of a sentence. "*Algo's* not right with the President" is spot on, conveying better than English alone ("Something's not right...") that we won't soon see the bottom of *el asunto*.

Twice the vocabulary and half the grammar, Santiago jokes, but of course that's false. What

Spanglish offers is twice the *dama* or *caballero*. For its own part, the book compensates for any comedic misfires with analysis of what triggers switches (*switcheos*) between tongues and advice on how to calibrate a Spanish-English ratio that's *adequado* for every situation.

Santiago gets in a solid, generous chapter on Spanglish *a lo gringo*, or Spanglish made by and largely for gringos. He understands why we participate and how we contribute. ("Get the Whole *Enchilada* for Next to *Nada*," blares an ad for a high-speed Internet package.)

Now I'm a gringo. How gringoed? I'm from Texas but learned 98 percent of my fallible Spanish in Spain. My family visited and said "gracious" to all the waiters. To stave off grassy ass, I suppose.

Experiences since then, as a translator and ESL teacher, have made me develop an appreciation of Spanglish, and I speak a little of my own around the house. But what I understand instinctively is the American monolingual English worldview, something that perplexes Santiago.

If he thinks U.S. monolinguals will buy this book, *algo* is amiss. Half of Santiago's funny book is not written in the language of Jesus Christ, and few who'd check a box labeled "non-Hispanic" will take to it. It's a book for Latinos and their many fans and *guánabis*.

Santiago is incorrect to say right-wing haters of Spanish and Spanglish alike envy his lingual flexibility, and he knows it. He admits a heckler once flustered him during a comedy appearance by saying so. (Santiago: "Anybody here speak Spanish?" / Heckler: "No, thank God.")

Still, the book is an inspiring contribution to a moral and political debate, with comedy thrown in. People are no easier to categorize linguistically than they are sexually; in both realms authenticity is a higher value than purity.

"I may not get there *con ustedes...*," Santiago intones, paraphrasing the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. "But I have seen the promised land (Los Angeles)."

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