

IS SPANGLISH

a Language?

Mind over grammar It's so wrong, I can't do it Yo hablo Spanglish
— Spanglish haiku

Before I get into it here, debo advertir que if you don't agree conmigo, go write your own book. Y asegúrate de que it's at least un poquito funny, ¿OK? Porque otherwise, estos libros suelen resultar un tantito boring. Trust me, yo sí sé, because I've read them all.

Otra cosa. Don't try to get away with reducing Spanglish to just un bonche de crazy new bastard words, either. Ya estoy harto de recibir those half-baked glossaries, que siempre mis well-meaning amigos me están forwardando por e-mail.

As if that's all there was to it! Sure, ludicrous Spanglish disparates are loads of fun at parties. Pero limiting the idea of Spanglish to a loopy lexicon da la impresión de que it's nothing more than a fringe novelty. Lo cual me parece muy equivocostaken.

Why is it always the same old stupid examples? For instance: "El rufo está leakeando." That is the single most cited example of Spanglish ever. As if todos nosotros Spanglish-hablantes spent all our time sitting around under our leaky rufos.

"What's the matter, Bill, got the sniffles?"

"Yeah, es que that damn rufo of mine is always leakeando."

"When it rains?"

"No, just cuando me pongo a hablar el Spanglish."

Such lame ejemplos are unfortunate. No hacen nada para dar un true appreciation de cómo Spanglish speakers actually se comunican. Yet los fools and los haters are all too quick to sell out the habla as something less than a real idioma. Pero ojalá que my humble efforts en estas páginas will help remedy that situation.

The Million-Dollar Pregunta

So let's stop beating around the arbusto. Is Spanglish a language?

Yes, por supuesto. Spanglish is one of the most innovative languages of our time, second only quizás to Klingon. And it requires much less maquillaje.

Why wouldn't you consider it a language? Because it's made up of other languages? Pero, si no hay ningún idioma natural que se haya creado desde scratch. Resultan siempre from intimate contact entre otros idiomas. There's no such thing as immaculate vocabulary. Coinage is messy and carnal. Y de hecho most words nacen out of wedlock.

What else are you going to call it? Wait, please don't say "code switch-ing." Ese término flojo makes me cringe. ¿Cómo qué code ni qué code? First of all, cuando escucho la palabra "code," I think of top-secret military messages, not Spanglish. Suena medio silly, like lingo from a bad submarine movie.

“Commander, we’ve intercepted a highly encrypted transmission from the enemy, but we were able to de-scramble it with an English-Spanish dictionary.”

“Good code-switching, Lieutenant.”

“Gracias, sir.”

“Excuse me?”

“I mean, thank you.”

“De nada.”

As a descriptive term, code-switching, como se dice . . . sucks. No se trata de codes, sino de idiomas and everything they embody: culture, heritage, emotional frequencies, ways of thinking and feeling. El swichteo is actually between co-dependent realities. Así que code-switching is obviously code for: Estos chingados académicos have no idea de lo que están talking about.

Don’t you dare call it a dialect, either. I mean, a dialect of what? English (gringo-lect)? Or Spanish (vida-loca-lect)?

Se puede hablar igual de fluently tanto por hablantes que son English dominant como los que son Spanish dominant. Research by the Porque Because Consulting Group suggests that as the habla becomes more standardized, a través de Dora the Explorer and other pioneers, tales distinciones will become blurred, tarde o temprano, to the point of irrelevance.

Slanglish?

What about slang? Dissing the habla as un puro slang is really el colmo del descaró. Say it to my face y se va a formar un tremendo revolú! Slang is a set of informal words and phrases, perteneciente a un subculture, incorporated into an existing language. Spanglish es un fenómeno mucho más abarcador. In fact, the word “Spanglish” can also be used as a slang term for the slang incorporated into the Spanish language.

Me están following? Si no, come back cuando you can focus. Porque este libro no se llama “Spanglish for Tontos,”¿OK?

Certainly Spanglish is a great generator of slang, and slang appeal creates un tremendo exchange between its two input languages. The thing is que una traducción literal into another language, by definition, deslangifies the slangueo. Nothing gets lost in translation like foreign slang, por lo tanto es normal adoptarlo as is. Entonces maybe lo modificamos just un chipito so that it matches its new lexical surroundings.

Por ejemplo, lately está de moda combinar la palabra “chill,” que significa “to relax” en la jerga gringa, together con la misma palabra “relax,” resultando en el super americanismo de “chillax.” Bueno, that baby’s just begging to be Spanglishized into “chilaxear.” Es más, by the time you read this, I’ll be done writing and chilaxeando en una playa someplace, escuchando el mar murmuring to me, “You deserve un breacito, papi. Have another piña colada and chilaxéate . . .”

Did I Say That?

So if you’ve been calling it code-switching, or a dialect, or slang, por favor, cut it out. A pesar de que todavía estamos working out los kinks, Spanglish is, de una vez por todas, a language. Although many people who speak this language ni siquiera saben that they’re doing it.

Una amiga mía en Bakersfield, California, swears que she doesn’t speak Spanglish supuestamente because she never uses palabras like parquear, or trocka, or rufo, even though she can barely get through a sentence without constant swichteo between languages. “¿Qué what? Who me? Déjate de bromas because I would never speak Spanglish,” she says. La mujer está en total denial. Pero it’s understandable que ella no quiera face the truth, porque she’s a Spanish teacher. Y

obviamente, no ha hecho su homework.

But la verdad es que Spanglish works best cuando you have no idea that you're doing it. Because entonces it doesn't sound forced or contrived, tú sabes. Siempre it's in that unaware flow que el Spanglish logra alcanzar su greatest justification como un idioma all its own, operating as an unconscious modalidad bi-lingüe in which English and Spanish se están utilizando precisamente as if they were one and the same outlaw lengua.

If you become too self-aware that you're speaking Spanglish, sometimes de repente you can't do it anymore. It can be like flying in a dream. Tan pronto you realize que estás flying, ¡olvídate!, you fall out of the sky. Y, en definitiva, the most seasoned Spanglishistas hablan on autopilot, switching back and forth sin darse cuenta.'

Lexical Attraction

Spanglish happens spontaneously because English and Spanish are so naturally attracted to each other. Tienen chemistry. Trying to keep them from combining would be like trying to prevent hydrogen and oxygen from pairing up to give us agua. And honestly, me cae muy bien la idea de que my body is 80 percent Spanglish.

We are lo que hablamos. Indeed, what we speak formats our reality, mientras a la misma vez providing the means to articulate it. Which begs the question, ¿quién somos? Some of the opinions are not very favorable.

We Spanglishistas are often depicted somewhat less than charitably as a bunch of degenerate incultos who are at best functionally bi-illiterate and resort to Spanglish solo porque we don't know English or Spanish very well. Bueno, OK, a veces that's a little true. But that doesn't explain my father, un hombre muy educado who worked very hard to keep a non-leaky rufo over our heads.

Mi querido papi era un abogado, who graduated from Brooklyn Law School, and he spoke, read, and wrote both Spanish and English perfectly, with native fluency, y a un nivel muy profesional. He had neither a Spanish accent when he spoke in English ni un acento americano cuando hablaba español. And he went back forth between the two, como le daba la gana or not.

Spare Some Change?

Not only is Spanglish spoken across the socioeconomic spectrum by individuals of all educational levels, it doesn't even matter de cual país your people come from. All roads lead to Spanglish. Ni siquiera importa si eres latino. Gringos are very much on board with the habla too. By the way, I want to give a shout out to all you gringos reading along here. I hope you're enjoying el booko.

Latinosapiens acabados de llegar a los Estados Unidos speak it as English-infused Spanish, and subsequent generations tienden hacía Spanish-infused English, as the pendulum of relative proficiencies swings naturally. Los gringos join in de acuerdo a lo que aprendieron en la high school or picked up in one of those "más cerveza por favor" phrasebooks. It's all el mismo mambo.

We're all doing our part, aportando nuestro granito de arena to advance our cause. Keep in mind, this is just the beginning. Tenemos big plans for Spanglish (official language of the United States, world domination, etc.). You should come to the meetings. But suffice it to say that the evolution is well under way.

A lo largo de los siglos, languages all change drásticamente. Whatever language you speak today is really just una etapa pasajera in the evolution of that language. Your grandkids' grandkids' grandkids' nietos wouldn't understand a damn thing you were saying si pudieras hablarles, because the language habría cambiado tanto by then que no se reconocería como tal.

Seriously, if you pick up a book written in Old English, pero es decir really old, como like way antes de los Beatles, you won't recognize a word of it, except maybe "the". And the word "the" didn't even mean "the" back then. Significaba "hippopotamus." Pues, y unless you know that, understanding un libro como "Beowulf" es un nightmare.

¿Cómo Que Crutch?

Hopefully, by the time the Spanglish of today is regarded as Old Spanglish, algunos de los más nasty misconceptions about it will have been debunkados. In the meantime, I'd like to take a whack at misconception número uno.

According to one of the more balanced columns regularly posted on www.idioma-de-idiotas.com, titled "Podrido de Anglicismos," Spanglish resulta from "carencia de vocabulario" and "pereza mental." In other words, supuestamente usamos Spanglish as a crutch to save our ass when we don't know a word, because we're too perezosos to actually learn how to say something correctly.

Maybe a veces. But to assume that's always the case, sería un big mistake. Es más, many times se da lo inverso. Sometimes we perpetrate the habla because we know more than one way to say something y podemos escoger la manera that best suits our needs or expressive whims en un momento dado!

Let me give you a perfect example. See, in Spanglish you would have a choice between saying, "el alma de un frijolito que se va al cielo" or the shorter English version, "fart." You have to admit the Spanish option es un poco más tasteful. So the accusation that Spanglish is only resorted to by an underclass of people with limited vocabularies es puro pedo.

Each language tiene sus advantages. Spanglish allows us to mix and match them. All things being equal, we instinctually choose to say something in whatever language comunica the exact nuance intended. There's no such thing as truly equivalent translations between languages, only approximations. Not only that, algunos conceptos exist only in one language.

Por ejemplo, I always remember my father warning my mother not to do anything crazy. But he would say it in Spanish. "No vayas a cometer una locura," he would say, using the closest Spanish idiom. This, however, changes the meaning, as it would translate back into English as, "Don't go and commit a craziness." See, in Spanish you don't just do something crazy. You commit a craziness. Like a murder. We're very serious about our locuras. And we're always warning each other not to commit one. Although, in my mother's case, such warnings casi siempre backfired.

Pero anyway, it's not just about the words, sino también el hecho de que hay diferentes aspectos conceptuales at work in each language universe. You can't conceive of committing a locura in English, because the exact concept does not exist in that language. Don't even commit the locura of trying it. You may get caught and end up in jail for premeditated locura. And, como quien dice, if you can't do the time, no vayas a cometer la locura.

¿Y Qué, So What?

For me, the locura would be not switching back and forth. Sería como un mental straight jacket. By the way, I have no idea how to say "straight jacket" in Spanish, so that time, I admit, estuve compensating. ¿Y qué so what?

That's another thing. As Spanglish expands and standardizes, it generates its own idiomatic phrases like, "Y qué so what." Which is technically redundant. You would never say, "¿Y qué y qué?" or "So what so what?" But somehow in Spanglish this is not only perfectly valid, it's become sort of a standard idiomatic expression, at least in New York, where my particular tribu of Spanglish speakers is from.

In case you're wondering, yes: seguro que hay regionalismos. But despite variations, Spanglish everywhere operates the same way. "La troka," "el sub-way," same difference. Llegarás to where you're going. My girlfriend is Mexican and she has no trouble understanding my Puerto Rican grandmother's Spanglish. Or vice versa. El único glitch es que mi abuelita is losing her hearing and won't admit it, lo cual creates problems.

Just yesterday my girlfriend made the mistake of mentioning the term "hearing aid" to her. Now that, por supuesto, she heard and flipped out. "Yo no me voy a poner ningún hearing aid," she said, indignantly, in classic senior Spanglish. "Pueden decir que yo soy orgullosa, me don't care." I swear when I heard her say it, por poco me muero de la risa.

Obviously mi abuelita understood “hearing aid” in English. She’s probably never even heard the term in Spanish, which is “prótesis de oído amplificador.” I had to google it myself just now. I’m sure none of her doctors and nurses and home attendants, ni siquiera los que hablan español, ever say it in Spanish. Why? Pues, it’s easier not to. And everybody knows what you’re talking about if you say it in English. In this country, hasta los chinos call it a “hearing aid” as a function of practicality.

Plus, switching out of Spanish to say “hearing aid” also gave my grand- mother’s first sentence a little extra “¡fuácata!” of protest at the end. The switch por si mismo stresses her point. Preferiría estar sorda than walk around with a plastic pendejada in her ear.

In her second sentence, she repeats the same pattern: Spanish followed by an emphatic burst of English. And the “me don’t care” is delivered con un poquito de gracia in her endearingly imperfect inglés. She knows it’s cute. She may not have even been aware that she was switching languages, but she was trying to be funny, y así le salió.

Mucho Fun = Mucho Funny

Spanglish speakers intuitively revel in the playfulness of it. ¡Se goza un montón! Have you ever watched sea otters frolicking in the sea en el Discovery Channel? Don’t they look like they’re having a blast? That’s how much fun Spanglish speakers are having when enjoying el chistoso juego de palabras that the habla makes possible.

Other languages can convey humor, but the habla has got mucho funny already packed into it. Por lo tanto, Spanglish always breaks the ice. It’s ideal for social occasions or even job interviews. One time I was applying para un part-time at Cuchifrito Corp. The owner asked me why I wanted the job. I said, “Porquebecause,” and was hired on the spot. Part of the playfulness and humor of the language is facilitated by the freedom of it. “Twice the vocabulary and half the grammar,” as I’m fond of pointing out, is a signature virtue of the habla, emancipating nosotros los Spanglishistas from official dos and don’ts. Ah, pero it’s not so fácil. Below the surface, operando a un nivel desapercibido, there’s a whole substrata of laws dictando el mix para que cuadre perfectamente every time.

An unfailing Spanglish ear allows us to integrate English and Spanish flu- idly and organically. A pesar de que todavía no haya una gramática oficialmente reconocida for the habla yet, si existe una especie de inner logic to it, innately pos- sessed by native Spanglish speakers y algunos gringo savants.

Anticipation of something Spanglish al punto de zafarse de tu boca sets off an involuntary syntactical scramble to make it all fit together:

- (a) The grammars de ambos idiomas have to be reconciled. (b) Se tiene que efectuar un cross check de palabras prestadas against alternate language contexts para asegurar viability.
- (c) Hay que elegir el Spanish-to-English ratio más apropiado.
- (d) Juxtapositional compatability en cada switcheo tiene que verificarse.
- (e) El mejor word order se tiene que negociar.
- (f) Lexical stems de un idioma have to be tricked out con los sufijos, los prefijos y las conjugaciones of another, to supply todas las palabritas brand new.
- (g) Cada expresión tiene que someterse a un pre-screening riguroso, to filter for authenticity over gratuitous affectation, pero siempre con un waiver for clever exaggerations en son de broma.

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