Spanglish: A New Language in the USA? Remapping the United States' Linguistic Borders

Costin Oancea
"Ovidius" University of Constanţa

Abstract

The linguistic situation encountered in the Southwestern part of the United States of America is a very rich and diverse one. Hispanic immigrants represent the most important minority found in the USA, therefore the rise of bilingualism is inevitable. The aim of this paper is to discuss the concept of Spanglish as it is used in the land of the free and highlight the sociocultural implications as well as the effect that it has on the Latino/Hispanic community.

Key Words: *Spanglish, Latino English, code-switching, code-mixing, border.*

1. Introduction

The United States of America, as a multiethnic nation, congregates citizens of different ethnic and social backgrounds. Bilingualism and even multilingualism is a phenomenon present in this country. Although American English is the official spoken language, Spanish has become the second language used in the States. The Hispanic population constitutes the largest immigrant group numbering over 35 million people. Sánchez (2008: 3) notes that in the Southwest of the United States, the social and linguistic situation of the population of Mexican origin (Chicanos) is connected to employment, immigration, and education. These factors have greatly influenced the contact between the Chicanos and the Spanish and English speakers.

Albeit there is a lack of empirical data, the view that *Spanglish* represents a specific type of contact language is quite widespread. One view is that the Latinos who reside in the United States and probably in Puerto Rico speak this "language" rather than "real" Spanish, as Lipski (2007: 198) suggests. *Spanglish* has its own logic and a logically explained origin (The United States' border with Mexico). It has a clear communicative function; however, it can occur when one of the dialogue partners lacks a vocabulary item. The marginal status of *Spanglish* excludes Latinos who cannot speak English and don't understand it and English speakers who don't know Spanish or don't understand it (Lipski 2004).

Code-switching is a phenomenon of language contact (Poplack 1980, 1988) and in the case of the United States of America this contact goes back to 1848 when New Mexico was conquered. Price (2010: 25) suggests that Spanish was faced with the "invasion" of English, a phenomenon of "border culture" (Gonzales, 1999: 30) pinpointing that this is not simply a situation of linguistic variation or change but a cultural shift. Therefore, in this paper I will attempt to analyse elements of code-switching, to offer a better grasp of the language used within Latino communities, delving into what is generally referred to as *Spanglish*.

BDD-A23987 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:17 UTC)

2. Latino English

According to Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (2008:194) peoples descended from the Spanish have populated the Americas since the fifteenth century and they are second only to Native Americans. The other important and highly significant category of ethnic American English is what we usually refer to as Latino English. As with African American Vernacular English, the name Latino English is problematic. Metcalf (2000: 166) notes that both Latino and Hispanic describe an American with present or past ties to Spanish-speaking cultures, but these two terms cannot be used interchangeably. Latino is the short form of ***latinoamericano***, thus it is connected to Latin America and its cultures, whilst Hispanic has a broader meaning and it can also refer to Spain and Spanish culture. A person from Spain living in the United States can be referred to as a Hispanic but not Latino. Metcalf (2000: 166-167) provides an important explanation of these two terms:

> *Hispanic* is currently the official designation used by the U.S. government agencies and also seems to be the preferred term among Spanish-heritage communities in Florida and Texas.
> *Latino* is more likely to be used to convey ethnic pride and seems to be preferred in California. There is no absolutely "right" term for all occasions.

The Latino population is concentrated in a few states, especially those that border on Mexico: California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. California is inhabited by one-third of the entire U.S. population of Hispanic ancestry, whilst Texas has one-fifth. (Metcalf, 2000: 167).

Latin-American immigrants to the United States reflect the culture and language they bring with them. People believe that Latin-Americans speak either Portuguese or Spanish, being unaware of the different varieties of Spanish spoken by immigrants. But each immigrant speaks a certain variety of Spanish. It is approximately the same as with the variety of English spoken in England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and in the United States of America. Social factors such as age, nationality, social class, gender shape the different kinds of Spanish these immigrants speak. Some examples in the U.S. are: *Nuyorican Spanglish* (spoken by Puerto Ricans in New York), *Dominicanish* (the *Spanglish* version spoken by Dominicans), *Istlos* (the *Spanglish* used in East Los Angeles) and *Sagüesera* (spoken in the South West Street in Miami) (Stavans, 2000).

An important remark is made by Metcalf (2000: 167) who claims that some Latinos in certain areas speak only Spanish, and some speak only English, but the majority of them are able to use both languages. This results in a wide range of styles in both the Spanish and the English of Latinos. Metcalf concludes that the most important fact about Latino English dialects is that "though they sound Spanish-accented, they do exist independent of Spanish" (Metcalf, 2000: 167).

3. What is *Spanglish* and who speaks it?

Spanglish is regarded as being a controversial phenomenon. While some see it as a wonderful new language in development, others see it as ruining the language of Cervantes.

BDD-A23987 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:17 UTC)

Solorio and Liu (2008: 1051) highlight that in the United States of America, 18% of the total population speaks a language other than English at home and the majority speaks Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Today there are more than 35 million Spanish native speakers in the U.S, and Spanish has become the second language of the United States.

The term *Spanglish* (*Espanglish* in Spanish) appears to have been coined by the Puerto Rican journalist Salvador Tió in a newspaper column first published in 1952 (Lipski, 2008: 41). There are numerous definitions of *Spanglish*. *The American Heritage Dictionary* (2006: 1666) defines *Spanglish* as "Spanish characterized by numerous borrowing from English", whereas the Oxford English Dictionary (v. XVI, p. 105) gives the following definition: "a type of Spanish contaminated by English words and forms of expression, spoken in Latin America".

For Morales (2002: 95), *Spanglish* is a hybrid language; an informal code, a sociolinguistic construction that represents "the ultimate space where the in-betweenness of being neither Latin American nor North American is negotiated". He puts forward the idea of *Spanglish* as a border that divides cultures and identities in the United States. A compelling definition is provided by Gonzáles Echevarría (2008: 116) who argues that "Spanglish is primarily the language of poor Hispanics, many barely literate in either language. They incorporate English words and constructions into their daily speech because they lack the vocabulary and education in Spanish to adapt to the changing culture around them".

Lipski (2008: 41) suggests that in a few instances *Spanglish* is "a strictly neutral term, and some U.S. Latino political and social activists have even adopted *Spanglish* as a positive affirmation of ethnolinguistic identity."

Ilan Stavans, one of the greatest defenders of *Spanglish*, explains that *Spanglish* is generally considered to be a blend or a mixture of Spanish and English (Stavans, 2000). Other names for *Spanglish* are: *espangles* or *spangles* (*español* (Spanish) + *ingles* (English)), *casteyanqui* (*castellano* (Castillian) + *yanqui*), *inglañol* (*ingles* (English) + *español* (Spanish)), *argot sajon* (saxon jargon), *español bastardo* (bastard Spanish), *papiamento gringo*, *calo pachuco* and *a bilingual manifesto* (bilingual manifest) (Stavans, 2000). In Texas, it is called *Tex-Mex* and in Mexico they use the term *Pochismo* for *Spanglish* expressions. An earlier claim made by Lipski (2004: 8) shows that *Spanglish* is used to denote:

a) The use of integrated Anglicisms in Spanish;
b) The frequent and spontaneous use of non-assimilated Anglicisms (i.e. with English phonetics) in Spanish;
c) The use of syntactic calques and loan translations from English in Spanish;
d) Frequent and fluid code-switching, particular intrasentential switches (within the same clause);
e) Deviations from Standard Spanish grammar found among vestigial and transitional bilingual speakers, whose productive competence in Spanish falls below that of true native speakers, due to language shift and attrition;
f) The characteristics of Spanish written or spoken as a second language by millions of Americans of non-Hispanic background, who have learned Spanish for personal or professional motives;

BDD-A23987 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:17 UTC)

g) Finally the humorous, disrespectful, and derogatory use of pseudo-Spanish items in what is called *junk Spanish*.

In another paper, Lipski (2007: 203) suggests that by the middle of the twentieth century, Spanish was already "infested" with numerous well-integrated Anglicisms, which were either assimilated as they were – except for the basic phonetic adaptations – (words like *teacher*, *mister*, *miss*) or were morphologically adapted to Spanish patterns (*leak>liquiar*, *spell>espeliar*). Sánchez (2008: 34) mentions the incorporation of loanwords from English, but with a change in meaning. That is, the meaning in English is not the same as the meaning in standard Spanish. This leads to false cognates:

Chicano	Standard Spanish	English
librería	biblioteca	library
carpeta	alfombra	carpet
conferencia	reunion	conference
lectura	conferencia	lecture
suceso	exito	success
realizar	darse cuenta	realize
parientes	Padres	parents

Table 1. False cognates as true cognates

(from Sánchez 2008: 34)

Sánchez (2008) further argues that the incorporation of false cognates as true cognates is quite widespread. In this case the influence of English is visible, and for some speakers English is ruining the Spanish language.

3.1. Code-switching and code-mixing

Wardaugh (1992: 103) points out that most speakers command several varieties of any language they speak and bilingualism, even multilingualism, is the norm for many people throughout the world rather than unilingualism.

Many linguists believe that switching between languages has a communicative purpose and is an option available to a bilingual member of a speech community. In the linguistic literature there are many examples of how a speaker may deliberately choose to use a certain language to "assert some king of right" (Wardhaugh, 1992: 106). A bilingual (in French and English) French Canadian may want to use French to an official of the federal government outside Quebec, a bilingual (Catalan and Spanish) resident of Barcelona may insist on using Catalan, a bilingual (Welsh and English) resident of Wales may insist on using Welsh, etc. Wardhaugh claims that in these cases code choice becomes a form of political expression, a move either to resist some other "power", or to gain "power", or even to express "solidarity".

If code is a synonym for language, then we can identify two kinds of code-switching: situational and metaphorical. *Situational code-switching* occurs when there is a shift between the languages used according to the situations in which the speakers find themselves. They speak a language in one situation and then shift to the other language in

BDD-A23987 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:17 UTC)

another situation. What is important is the fact that no topic change is required. When a change of topic requires a change in the language used, then we are dealing with *metaphorical code-switching*. Code-mixing occurs when the speakers use both languages together and they change from one language to the other in the same utterance or even within a word.

Let us consider the following examples of *Spanglish*:

(1) a. Mi marido está **working on his master's**.
'My husband is working on his master's.'
b. Siempre está **promising** cosas.
'He is always promising things.'
c. ¿ Dónde estás **teaching**?
'Where are you teaching?'
d. Estaba **training** para pelear
'He/She was training to fight.'

Dussias (2003: 5-6)

The sentence provided in (1a) is an excellent example of intra-sentential code-switching (the complete shift to another language system at major constituent boundaries). The utterances in (1b – 1d) are typical examples of code-mixing (the use of opposite language elements which cannot be considered to be borrowed by the community, often used by a speaker to compensate for competence gaps). These examples contradict Gonzáles Echevarría's (2008) definition aforementioned, as these speakers are proficient in both languages. A translation of the sentences under (1) shows that the speakers preserve the syntactic structure.

(2) a. Mi marido está **trabajando** en su maestría.
b. Siempre está **prometiendo** cosas.
c. ¿ Dónde estás **enseñando**?
d. Estaba **entrenando** para pelear.

The speakers do not violate the constraints that govern the use of code-switching in conversation. They commence the utterance in Spanish and they either end it in English or make use of what is generally referred to as congruent lexicalization (Muysken 1997), when two languages share a grammatical structure and a slot can be filled by either (L1 and L2 can alternate in a L1-L2-L1-L2 pattern). It would be hard to assume that in this case the speakers are illiterate or that they are not proficient speakers. This situation clearly indicates that they are aware of the grammatical structures of both English and Spanish and resort to code-switching without violating any of the constraints that govern its use.

Another interesting example of code-switching, more precisely code-changing (Muysken 1997) is offered by Pfaff (1979) (quoted in Wardhaugh 1992):

(3) a. No van a **bring it up in the meeting**.
'They are not going to bring it up in the meeting'

BDD-A23987 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:17 UTC)

b. Todos los Mexicanos **were riled up**.
'All the Mexicans were riled up'
c. **Some dudes**, la onda **is to fight** y jambar.
'Some dudes, the thing is to fight and steal'.

In (3a-b) it is noticeable that a complete shift to another language system at major constituent boundaries occurs. The utterance in (3c) is another example of congruent lexicalization, where Spanish as L1 and English as L2 alternate in an L2-L1-L2-L1 pattern. In such examples of code-switching, Spanish is considered to be the dominant language, while English can be considered the invasive language. In a very interesting article, Pountain (1999:35) asserts that although *Spanglish* includes code-switching, it is construed as a version of Spanish which is "lexicalized" by English, and code-mixing is a part of this process. Another interesting example spoken quite flowingly by a New York Puerto Rican speaker is provided by Labov (1971: 457):

> Pore so cada, you know it's nothing to be proud of, porque yo no estoy proud of it, as a matter of fact I hate it, pero viene Vierne y Sabado yo estoy, tu me ve haci a mi, sola with a, aqui solita, a veces que Frankie me deja, you know a stick or something, y yo equi solita, queces Judy no sabe y yo estoy haci, viendo television, but I rather, y cuando estoy con gente yo me…borracha porque me siento mas, happy, mas free, you know, pero si yo estoy con mucha gente yo no estoy, you know, high, more or less, I couldn't get along with anybody.

Such conversational code-switching is used by bilinguals as a solidarity marker and has become "an established community norm in the Puerto Rican community in New York City" (Wardhaugh, 1992: 108). However, a speaker who mixes languages or codes in this way when speaking with an acquaintance or a friend will almost use English entirely when speaking to a monolingual English-speaking person or will use entirely Spanish when addressing a person who is of Spanish origin.

Spanglish is sometimes associated with Tex-Mex, which is a pejorative term (Zentella, 1997: 81) used to describe the code-switching practices of the Latino/Hispanic population living in the USA. It is difficult to label Spanglish a dialect, since it represents of mix of Spanish and English, as this would imply a certain "inauthenticity" (De Genova and Ramos-Zayas, 2003: 171).

An interesting idea put forward by Johnston (2000: 160) centers around the notions of "border" and "hyphenated" identities. These concepts describe the US Latinos/Hispanics as people caught between two different languages and cultures, the prestigious and highly acclaimed English monolingual world and the stigmatized Spanish monolingual world. We, as speakers, have different attitudes towards the language we use, and it should come as no surprise that the Americans consider Spanish a stigmatized language. Therefore, the emergence of a "hybrid language" (Gonzales 1999: 26) would convey the idea that they belong to two different worlds, without wanting to give up to any of them. The fact that their linguistic practice is called *Spanglish* should not be frowned upon, but considered to be a cultural clash, and a sign of two identities coexisting harmoniously. *Spanglish* should be considered a successful blend of two languages different in nature but brought together by culture.

BDD-A23987 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:17 UTC)

3.2. Myths about *Spanglish*

One of the most common ideas regarding *Spanglish* is that it is the same as Chicano English. Fought (2003) says that a person may speak Chicano English for an hour without using any Spanish words at all. It is true that Chicano English speakers may choose to throw in an occasional Spanish word intended to highlight ethnic identity. Chicano English is an English dialect spoken in the southwestern part of the United States of America. It is a dialect influenced by Spanish, but it exists independent of bilingualism. You can be a speaker of Chicano English without being a speaker of Spanish. In the case of *Spanglish*, you have to be bilingual, in order to switch from one language to the other. The fact that Chicano English is the same as *Spanglish* is just a myth and there is no evidence to support such a view.

4. Conclusions

Throughout this paper we have examined the "language" used by Mexican-Americans in conversation. *Spanglish* has become a well-known phenomenon in the United States and there is even a movie entitled '*Spanglish'* directed by James L. Brooks in 2004.

Spanglish is not the same as Chicano English, but rather a switch from one language to another (English and Spanish). Such conversational code-mixing is regarded as being a marker of solidarity and it even creates a new identity. It is a mixture of Spanish and English but it has not been formally recognized as a language or a dialect. It is interesting to see how *Spanglish* will evolve in the following years and to what extent people will use it.

References

De Genova, N., Ramos-Zayas, A.Y. 2003. *Latino Crossings: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and the Politics of Race and Citizenship*. New York/London: Routledge.

Dussias, P. 2003. Spanish-English code mixing at the Auxiliary Phrase: evidence from eye-movement data. *Revista Internacional de Lingüítica Iberoamericana*. 1(2): 7-34.

Fought, C. 2003. *Chicano English in Context*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gonzales, M.D. 1999. Crossing Social and Cultural Borders: The Road to Language Hybridity. In Galindo, D.L. and M.D. Gonzales (eds), *Speaking Chicana: Voice, Power and Identity*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 13-35.

Gonzáles Echevarría, R. 2008. Is "Spanglish a language?" In Stavans, I (ed.), *Spanglish*, Westport/London: Greenwood Press, 116-118.

Johnson, F.L. 2000. *Speaking culturally: language diversity in the United States*. London: Sage.

Labov, W. 1971. The Notion of 'System' in Creole Studies. In Hymes, D. H. (ed) *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

BDD-A23987 © 2015 Ovidius University Press

Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:17 UTC)

Lipski, J.M. 2004. *Is "Spanglish" the third language of the South?: truth and fantasy about U.S. Spanish*. Paper delivered at LAVIS-III, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa. Available at: http://www.personal.psu.edu/jml34/spanglish.pdf, 2004.

----------. 2007. Spanish, English, or Spanglish? Truth and Consequences of U.S. Latino Bilingualism. In Nelsy Echávez-Solano and Kenya C. Dworkin y Méndez (eds.) *Spanish and Empire*. Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press.

----------. 2008. *Varieties of Spanish in the United States*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Metcalf, A. 2000. *How we talk: American regional English today*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Morales, E. 2002. *Living in Spanglish: the search for Latino identity in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Muysken, P. 1997. Accounting for variation in code-mixing patterns. Paper presented at the Bilingualism Symposium, Newcastle, United Kingdom.

Poplack, S. 1980. Sometimes I'll start a sentence in Spanish Y TERMINO EN ESPAÑOL: toward a typology of code-switching. *Linguistics* 18, 581-618.

Poplack, S. 1988. Contrasting patterns of code-switching in two communities. In Trudgill, P., and J. Cheshire (eds), *The Sociolinguistics Reader*, vol 1, London: Arnold, 44-61.

Pountain, C.J. 1999. Spanish and English in the 21st Century. *Donaire*, 12 (April), 33-42.

Price, T. 2010. What is Spanglish? The phenomenon of code-switching and its impact amongst US Latinos. *Début: the undergraduate journal of languages, linguistics and area studies*, 1(1): 25-33, available on-line: <www.llas.ac.uk/debut>.

Sánchez, R. 2008. Our linguistic and social context. In Stavans, I (ed.), *Spanglish*, Westport/London: Greenwood Press, 3-41.

Solorio, T., Yang L. 2008. Part-of-Speech Tagging for English-Spanish Code-Switched Text. *In Proceedings of the 2008 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*. Honolulu: Association for Computational Linguistics.

Stavans, I. 2000. *Spanglish para millones*. Madrid: Colección Apuntes de Casa de América.

Stavans, I. 2002. Translation of the Quijote into 'spanglish'. *La Vanguardia* (Barcelona) July 3, 2002. 5-6.

The American Heritage Dictionary. 2006. Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd edition. 1989. 20 volumes. Oxford: Claredon.

Wardhaugh, R. 1992. *An introduction to Sociolinguistics*, 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Wolfram, W., Schilling-Estes, N. 2008. *American English: dialects and variation*, 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Zentella, A.C. 1997. *Growing Up Bilingual: Puerto Rican Children in New York*. Oxford: Blackwell.

BDD-A23987 © 2015 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-16 16:55:17 UTC)