Costin – Valentin Oancea[1]

Postcolonial Englishes in America: The Chicano English Dialect

Abstract: *This paper looks at Chicano English, a variety of American English spoken in the Southwestern part of the United States. Some phonological and morpho-syntactic properties of this variety are described. Also discussed is the phenomenon known as Spanglish, a blend of English and Spanish. It will be shown that Chicano English is a dialect and it exists independent of bilingualism whilst Spanglish is code-mixing.*

Key words: *Chicano English; variety; Spanglish; code mixing; bilingualism*

1. What is Chicano English and who speaks it?

The global spread of English has resulted in the emergence of a diverse range of postcolonial varieties (postcolonial Englishes) around the world. Nowadays we do not speak of English as a single language but of Englishes, encompasing all the varieties that have emerged. As a multiethnic nation, the United States of America is a country which congregates citizens of different ethnic and social backgrounds. Bilingualism, or even multilingualism, is a phenomenon present in the mainland of the USA. In the literature Chicano English is defined as a vernacular variety that has been influenced by Spanish or as a variety spoken only by native English speakers.

Allan Metcalf (53) describes Chicano English as "a variety of English that is obviously influenced by Spanish and that has low prestige in most circles, but that nevertheless is independent of Spanish and is the first, and often only, language of many hundreds of thousands of residents of California". Chicano English is a non-standard variety of English, found in the southwestern part of the United States, influenced by contact with Spanish, and spoken as a native dialect by both bilingual and monolingual speakers. In his extensive research on Chicano English, Santa Ana (1993: 15) claims that "Chicano English is an ethnic dialect that children acquire as they acquire English in the ***barrio*** or other ethnic social setting during their language acquisition period. Chicano English is to be

[1] University of Bucharest, Romania

BDD-A3724 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:58:12 UTC)

distinguished from the English of second-language learners…Thus defined, Chicano English is spoken only by native English speakers".

Fought (2003: 2) notes that "Chicano English is alive and well in Los Angeles, among other places. It is a dialect in its own right, separate both from Spanish and from other local varieties of English such as California Anglo English or African-American English". Also, as long as Los Angeles (the name of the city is of Latino origin) has existed, there have been native speakers of dozens of different languages and dialects here. A large number of these are native speakers of Mexican Spanish. After all, California was part of Mexico until 1848; before and since that time there has been significant population movement between southern California and all parts of Mexico, particularly after World War II.

There are several myths about Chicano English which will be presented in the following section.

1.2. Myths about Chicano English

Chicano English is an important linguistic field of study because it shows how bilingualism shapes and even affects a new language variety. Tottie (228) mentiones that:

> Chicano English is now spoken not only by people who know both English and Spanish, but by people who know no Spanish at all but who are members of a Hispanic community of Mexican origin. Chicano English has developed stable speech patterns and a distinct phonological system of its own, with several features that cannot be due to interference from Spanish.

Chicano English speakers do not speak a mixture of English and Spanish, but a variety of English spoken by descendants of Hispanic immigrants from Mexico. Fought (2006: 234) adds that Chicano English is a dialect of English "spoken by people of Mexican ethnic origin in California and the Southwest."

There are certain myths about Chicano English and many preconceived ideas about this dialect.

1.2.1. ***Chicano English is spoken by people whose first language is Spanish, and whose Spanish introduces mistakes into their language.***

Fought (2003: 3) argues that the problem with the theory that Chicano English reflects the influence of a bilingual's other language is that many speakers of Chicano English are actually not bilingual: they may scarcely know any Spanish at all. These speakers have in reality learned English perfectly, like children of all ethnic backgrounds who grow up in English-speaking countries, but the local variety of English they have learned is a non-standard one. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (196/7) claim that many speakers of Chicano English are monolingual in English and learn this variety like native speakers learn any other vernacular variety of English. Though influenced by Spanish contact historically, Chicano English exists independent of bilingualism. This idea is also reinforced by Bayley and Santa Ana (2008: 573) who argue that speakers of Chicano English may or may not

BDD-A3724 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:58:12 UTC)

speak Spanish as well as English. They also highlight the fact that nearly all Chicano English speakers live in communities where Spanish is widely spoken (in the so-called *barrios*) and most have at least some passive knowledge of Spanish.

1.2.2. *Chicano English is the same as "Spanglish"*

While code switching certainly occurs in this community, where it is commonly referred to as *Spanglish*, it is a separate phenomenon from Chicano English and should not be confused with it. A person may speak Chicano English for an hour without using any Spanish words at all. However, it is true that Chicano English speakers may choose to throw in an occasional Spanish word intended to highlight ethinc identity.

(1) "My mother called their names over and over and ran from one to the other, holding him and kissing him. My father shook their hands and gave each other the abrazo."

The example provided in (1) is taken from Rudolfo A. Anaya's book *Bless Me, Ultima*, belonging to the so-called **Chicano literature**. What is noticeable is the use of the Spanish word *abrazo* at the end of the sentence, by the narrator (a Chicano English speaker). This indicates that Chicano English speakers use Spanish words in their speech, although occasionally.

Though Chicano English is definitely not Spanglish, it is still true that **code-switching** is a part of the linguistic competence of the community. (Fought 2003: 5/6)

Some features of *Spanglish* will be discussed in section 4 in order to prove that Chicano English and *Spanglish* are two different phenomena.

1.2.3. *Chicano English is a dialect spoken mostly by gang members and not used by middle-class Latinos and Latinas*

The reality is that Chicano English is used by speakers that may come from a range of social and cultural groups. It is important, however, to keep in mind that Chicano English, as any dialect, is defined mainly by a set of phonological, grammatical, and lexical features rather than social division.

Elías-Olivares (122) notes that being "Chicano" or "Mexican-American" depends on the age, the educational background and the environment of the speaker. The statements in (2) and (3) are tape recordings, taken from Elías-Olivares (1979) which contain different opinions regarding the label "Chicano/a".

(2) "I can't stand the word "Chicana". Chicano means a very low class sort of…Chicano means animal, or say, really, the definition is **bandido**, **embustero**, **traicionero**, and things like that and I don't consider myself that type of person."

(3) "I say Chicano and I feel very much that the world itself connotates more than just an ancestral background, it connotates a belief in yourself, your race whereas when I say "Mexican-American" it's more in the sense that I have an ancestry that comes from Mexico, that now I'm an American and all this."

BDD-A3724 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:58:12 UTC)

These two statements in (2) and (3), though different, express the Chicanos/Chicanas attitude towards their dialect. In (2) the person interviewed clearly despises the word "Chicana" because people associate it with gang members. Also, the fact that the person uses Spanish words in her definition of "Chicano/a", supports the hypothesis that Chicano English speakers use Spanish words in their speech. In (3) there is another view about what "Chicano" really means. Neither the Mexican-American family not this Mexican-American community can be considered as a monolithic entity.

1.2.4. *Chicano English is merely incorrect grammar*

Chicano English suffers from the same misperceptions and prejudices as other non-standard dialects such as African American English, Appalachian English, etc. Even those who do not attribute the differences in Chicano English specifically to Spanish often judge its structures as "incorrect" relative to Standard English. For example, double negation, or double modals are incorrect in Standard British English, but they are correct in a significant number of English dialects. There is no understanding in the general public of the fact that non-standard dialects have rules and patterns just as standard ones do, and that the distinction between them is social and political rather than linguistic (Fought 2003: 7/8).

2. Some phonological peculiarities of Chicano English

In this section several phonological features of Chicano English will be discussed, based on the research of Fought (2003, 2006), Santa Ana (1991), Bayley and Santa Ana (2008).

Godinez (1984) points out that the vowels used by Chicano English speakers do not shift uniformly in the direction of the Spanish language equivalents. There are some elements of Chicano English phonology that reflect the influence of Spanish, but there are others that may come from contact with other dialects (for example African American Vernacular English) or from other sources.

An important feature of Chicano English phonology is **a lack of glides**. In Chicano English, glides are usually pronounced as monothongs, which is similar to the corresponding vowels in Spanish (Santa Ana 1991). The high vowels, realized as [ij] and [uw] by most Anglos, often lack glides among Chicano English speakers. Also, the diphthongs [ej] and [ow], although they tended to be realized with a glide more often than the high vowels, were variable in this respect. Some examples of vowels without glides include:

(4) *least* realized as [lis], while in OED[2] it is realized as [li:st]

ago realized as [əgo], while in OED it is realized as [əgəʊ; AmE [əgoʊ]

[2] Oxford English Dictionary

BDD-A3724 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:58:12 UTC)

LA zoo realized as [əlezu]

Fought (2003:65) notes that with the diphthong [aj] there was no loss of the glide among Chicano English speakers, but the nucleus often tended to be a bit higher than the nucleus typical for Anglos in this diphthong, as in:

(5) *time* realized as [t^{h}ɐjm] while in OED it is realized as [taɪm]

Another important feature is the **neutralization** of [i] and [ɪ], a feature typical of a non-native English learner whose first language is Spanish. A phonetic realization of [ɪ] and [i] sometimes occurs and the most common environment for this realization is the morpheme [–*ing*].

(6) *working* realized as [wəkin], while in OED it is realized as [wɜ:kɪŋ; AmE wɜ:rkɪŋ]

embarrassing realized as [ɪmbɛɹəsin], while in OED it is realized as [ɪmbærəsɪŋ]

I compared the Chicano English pronunciation of the two words in (6) with the standard pronunciation found in the Oxford English Dictionary. We can notice that in Chicano English, the vowel /i/ in *working* is tense while in the standard pronunciation it is pronounced as a lax. The same goes for *embarrassing*.

According to Fought (2003: 64) Chicano English speakers show **less frequent vowel reduction** than Anglos from the same area. Santa Anna (1991) found that not only did Chicano English speakers tend to reduce vowels in unstressed syllables less often than Anglos did, but also that the direction of movement for unstressed vowels was sometimes quite distinctive in Chicano English. Particularly with the high vowels [u] and [i], there was very little centralization, and in the case of [i], little reduction of any type in unstressed syllables.

(7) *together* realized as [t^{h}ugɛðɚ], while in OED it is realized as [təgeðə(r)]

because realized as [bikəz], while in OED it is realized as [bikɒz] ; AmE [bikʌz]

In California Anglo English (CAE), the first vowel in *together* or *because* would usually be [ɨ].

These are only some of the most salient features of Chicano English phonology[3]. In what follows, several morpho-syntactic features specific to Chicano English will be presented.

[3] For a more detailed analysis of the phonological features of Chicano English see Fought (2003) and Santa Ana (1991).

BDD-A3724 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:58:12 UTC)

3. Morpho-syntactic features specific to Chicano English

In this section several morpho-syntactic features specific to Chicano English will be discussed. The features of Chicano English syntax and morphology are not nearly as distinct as its phonological features. For example, in comparison with African American Vernacular English, there are fewer grammatical structures specifically associated with Chicano English, albeit there are some. We will discuss only modal verbs and prepositions.

3.1. Modal verbs

Wald was among the first researchers who wrote several articles on modal verbs based on fieldwork conducted among Mexican – Americans in Los Angeles. Wald (520) studied the use of *would* in *if*-clauses among his east LA speakers. He was interested in the interaction of *would* with stative verbs in the present, which is usually disfavoured in other dialects, as shown in (8):

(8) If **he'd be** here right now, he'd make me laugh.

Wald further notes that there might be a quantitative difference between Chicano English and other dialects in the co-occurrence of *would* with *if*-clauses, a pattern which seems to be more frequent in Chicano English (Wald 1996).

(9) If I **woulda** been a gangster, I woulda been throwing signs up.

(10) If Thurman Thomas **wouldn't've** dropped those fumbles, then the Bills woulda won.

In Spanish, the same verb form (the pluperfect subjunctive) could be used for both clauses. The Spanish translation would be something like:

(11) Si Thurman Thomas no hubiera perdido la pelota, los Bills hubieran ganado.

if Thurman Thomas NEG would-have lost the ball, the Bills would-have won.

One might say that the Spanish construction might reinforce the frequency of this pattern in Chicano English.

Another interesting use of modals highlighted by Fought (2003: 100) is the extension of the modal *could* to environments where the basic meaning was "competence". In other standard varieties of English the modal *can* would have been used. Most speakers of other English dialects would not be able to replace *could* for *can* in a sentence like *She can speak English*, unless a different meaning was intended. For the majority of Chicano English speakers a sentence like *She could speak English* used simply as a way of listing someone's talents is completely acceptable.

BDD-A3724 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:58:12 UTC)

(12) He **could** talk, like, smart, y'know…he's like a straight-A student.

(13) I learned that people that are left handed **could** draw better than people who are right handed.

(14) Nobody believes that you **could** fix anything.

A remark should be made here, namely that this feature has not been documented for African American Vernacular English. Also, it appears that there is no connection to the Spanish syntactic patterns, unlike the use of *would*, because Spanish uses different tenses for the "can" meaning and the "could" meaning, paralleling the Standard English usage. In Spanish, the present tense *puede* is used to express ability, and the future conditional *podría* for a hypothetical future event. It is impossible to use *podría* to indicate ability.

3.2. Prepositions

Fought (2003:100) argues that one feature of Chicano English grammar that seems most clearly tied to Spanish and unlikely to come from any other dialect is the non-standard use of prepositions. In what follows, some relevant examples will be given:

(15) We're supposed to get out of here **on** June.

(16) So they just pulled **on** the side of him, and they opened the door.

In example (15) the preposition *on* is used instead of *in*. This is a clear indication of Spanish influence, as Spanish uses only one preposition, *en*, to express both *in* and *on*. The same applies to (16).

Bayley and Santa Ana (2008: 580) agree that the use of prepositions is one area of Chicano English grammar where Spanish influence seems likely.

Other examples of prepositions include:

(17)

Chicano English	*Standard English*
a. arrive **to**	arrive **at**
b. concerned **of**	concerned **with/about**
c. leave **to**	leave **for**
d. take care **about**	take care **of**

BDD-A3724 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:58:12 UTC)

4. Spanglish

In this section, the notion of *Spanglish* will be discussed, and we will demonstrate that it is different from Chicano English. Also, we will try to establish what *Spanglish* really is, and who uses it. *Spanglish* refers to the language used by Latinos born or residing in 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) notes 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**." In what follows we will give two definitions of the term "*Spanglish*" taken from two highly prestigious dictionaries. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (v. XVI: 105) defines *Spanglish* as "a type of Spanish contaminated by English words and forms of expression, spoken in Latin America". On the other hand the *American Heritage Dictionary* (1666) gives the following definition "Spanish characterized by numerous borrowings from English".

As Ilan Stavans (6) claims, *Spanglish* is "the verbal encounter between Anglo and Hispano civilizations". What is important is that none of these definitions of *Spanglish* define it as a language or a dialect. It is simply a mixture of English and Spanish. It can also be viewed as a case of **code-switching** among bilingual speakers in Latin-America. Ilan Stavans (quoted in Lipski 2004) has offered a "translation" of the first chapter of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quijote* into *Spanglish*:

> In un placete de La Mancha of which nombre no quiero remembrearme, vivía, not so long ago, uno de esos gentlemen who always tienen una lanza in the rack, una buckler Antigua, a skinny caballo y un greyhound para el chase. A cazuela with más beef than mutón, carne choppeada para el dinner, un omelet pa los sábados, lentil pa los viernes, y algún pigeon como delicacy especial pa los domingos, consumían tres cuarters de su income. El resto lo employaba en una coat de broadcloth y en soketes de velvetín pa los holidays, with sus slippers pa combinar, while los otros días de la semana él cut a figura de los más finos cloths. Livin with él eran una housekeeper en sus forties, una sobrina not yet twenty y un ladino del field y la marketa que le saddleaba el caballo al gentleman y wieldeaba un hookete pa podear. El gentleman andaba por allí por los fifty. Era de complexion robusta pero un poco fresco en los bones y una cara leaneada y gaunteada. La gente sabía that él era un early riser y que gustaba mucho huntear. La gente say que su apellido was Quijada or Quesada – hay diferencia de opinión entre aquellos que han escrito sobre el sujeto – but acordando with las muchas conjecturas se entiende que era really Quejada. But all this no tiene mucha importancia pa nuestro cuento, providiendo que al cuentarlo no nos separemos pa nada de las verdá.

This text is not a case of code-switching because it contains too many syntactic violations of code-switching and uses popular or non-academic Spanish (e.g. *pa* instead of *para* 'for', *verdá* instead of *verdad* 'truth'). However, the text is a very good example of **code-mixing**. All these features lead to one conclusion, namely that only uneducated people speak *Spanglish*, and it involves bilingual speakers of English and Spanish.

BDD-A3724 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:58:12 UTC)

It is necessary to point out that *Spanglish* and Chicano English are two distinct phenomena. Chicano English is a dialect of American English spoken in the Southwestern part of the United States, while *Spanglish* is just Spanish contaminated by English words. Chicano English has native speakers, and most important has a literature, the so-called Chicano Literature (authors like Gloria Anzaldua, Rudolfo A. Anaya, Sandra Cisneros, etc) while *Spanglish* does not.

5. Conclusion

Throughout this paper we have seen what Chicano English really is, who speaks or uses it. There are a number of misconceptions regarding this dialect influenced by Spanish which have been discussed and clarified. Some phonological peculiarities of Chicano English have been presented as well as some important morpho-syntactic properties specific to this variety. It was shown that Chicano English is not *Spanglish*, but it is a variety which has native speakers and a literature of its own. Also, it is not a variety spoken by bilingual speakers but by monolingual speakers.

References

Anaya, Rudolfo. *Bless Me, Ultima*. Clayton: Warner Books, 1999.

Bayley, Robert. and Otto Santa Ana. Chicano English: morphology and syntax. *Varieties of English*, Edgar.W. Schneider (ed.) vol.2 *The Americas and the Caribbean*, 572-590. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008

Elías Olivares, Lucía. Language use in a Chicano community: a sociolinguistic approach. *Sociolinguistic Aspects of Language Learning and Teaching*, J. B. Pride (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.120-136

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

Fought, Carmen. *Language and Ethnicity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Godinez, Manuel. Jr. Vowel differences between Chicano and general Californian English. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 53(1985): 43-58.

Lipski, John. M. *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 (last accessed: October, 3rd 2010), 2004.

Lipski, John. M. *Varieties of Spanish in the United States*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008.

Metcalf, Allan. The study of California Chicano English. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 2(1974): 53-8.

Santa Ana, Otto. Phonetic simplification processes in the English of the barrio: A cross-general sociolinguistic study of the Chicanos of Los Angeles. University of Pennsylvania dissertation, 1991.

BDD-A3724 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:58:12 UTC)

Santa Ana, Otto. Chicano English and the nature of the Chicano language setting. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 15(1993): 3-35.
Stavans, Ilan. *Spanglish: the making of a new American language*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2003.
The American Heritage Dictionary. Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006.
The Oxford English Dictionary. USA: Oxford University Press, 1989.
Tottie, Gunnel. *An Introduction to American English*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.
Wald, Benji. Substratal effects on the evolution of modals in East LA English. In Jennifer Arnold et al. (eds.), *Sociolinguistic Variation: Data, Theory and Analysis: Selected papers from NWAV 23 at Stanford*. Stanford CA: Center for the Study of Language & Information, 1996. 515-30.
Wolfram, Walt. and Natalie Schilling-Estes. *American English: dialects and variation*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

BDD-A3724 © 2011 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 19:58:12 UTC)