



"The *Spanglish* Problem: An Interview with Dr. Ricardo Otheguy"

Kevin Bookhamer (Bronx Community College, CUNY)

When any discussion arises concerning the speech of U.S Latinos, the term *Spanglish* is often the default term used to describe what they speak. The idea is that somehow these Latinos mix Spanish and English, and therefore speak a mixed, or hybrid, language. But is this an accurate description? Indeed, is it even possible to "mix" two distinct languages? Sociolinguist Dr. Ricardo Otheguy has researched this problem in depth and is considered by many to be an authority on the matter. Dr. Otheguy has published several articles, presented papers, and spoken at conferences centered on the *Spanglish* problem, all from a sociolinguistic perspective. I recently had the opportunity to interview Dr. Otheguy regarding his thoughts on this problematic term and the potentially harmful implications of its use.

Is there such a thing as *Spanglish* and what are some examples that support your stance?

I wouldn't know how to answer this question when posed in these terms. I have always approached this problem from the point of view of *terminology*, not of *existence*.

My point has been that the term 'Spanglish' does not have a referent that I can recognize. More specifically, my point has been that the term is not useful or revealing when the intended referent is the speech of Latinos in the USA.

The question of examples that support my stance is simply a question about my extensive publications in this area, in English and Spanish. They contain, in my view, ample justification for my stance.

I wouldn't want to essay here a quick review of my own work. Anyone truly interested in my stance can go to my work and study it. And anyone interested in disseminating it more can summarize it and articulate it in any way they find useful, as many have in the many publications that cite my work.

In addition, there are, in addition to my published work in English and Spanish on this question, at least two videos of my debates on this issue with my colleague Ana Celia Zentella, one at a meeting of the Spanish in the US conference, and another one at a meeting of the American Anthropological Association. I haven't seen these videos but I understand they're easily available. Prof Kim Potowski of U Illinois (Chicago) has details.

My skepticism of the term 'Spanglish' connects with my skepticism about language names in general, though one does not require the other. I've written recently (Garcia and Otheguy 2015) about the problems created by all language names, including 'Spanish', 'English', 'French', 'Swahili', 'Arabic', etc. etc. But while the problematic terms 'Spanish' and 'English' can be useful for some purposes, the term 'Spanglish' is not useful, as far as I can tell, for any purpose.

What might somebody in contrast to your view propose concerning *Spanglish*?

I am not sure that there are any convincing alternative proposals. But the most intelligent handling of this question comes from Ana Celia Zentella, who says that the term is the name of a set of linguistic practices (not of any kind of linguistic entity but of a set of uses of these entities). I address this question in my entry on 'Spanglish' in the Rutledge encyclopedia.

How did your interest in studying this linguistic phenomenon surface?

There is no linguistic phenomenon called 'Spanglish', so there's obviously no answer to this question. I have had a long-standing interest in something entirely different, namely the Spanish spoken in New York. It has been a natural thing. I am a linguist, I am a Latino, the language that I first spoke was Spanish, and

have lived in NY for most of my life (and for almost all of my adult life). So I have naturally found Spanish in NY interesting. I have a view of language as a naturally occurring phenomenon that can be subject to observation and analysis. An understanding of my language as spoken in my city has been a natural thing for me to do.

Do you have any anecdotes that highlight the consequences of using such a term to describe the Spanish spoken in the USA?

As I have written on several occasions, I've heard many Latinos say that they need to study Spanish as a foreign language because they do not speak Spanish; they speak 'Spanglish'. I find these beliefs to be pernicious and not conducive to growth in Spanish literacy or control of standardized Spanish features (both of which I think are worthwhile goals for US Latinos).

Do you have any current projects in the works dealing with this notion?

Not at present. But I have several projects in the works dealing with Spanish in NY.

Since you find the term *Spanglish* problematic, how do you refer to the Spanish spoken in US society?

There is NO one Spanish spoken in US society. There are many Spanishes. If you insist on a single name for a single thing that is not single, you're going to sew confusion and misunderstanding.

But if you must engage in this kind of oversimplification, then the oversimplification must be parallel to all the other ones used for all other languages. People speak of 'English as spoken in the US'. So then, try 'Spanish as spoken in the US.'

That's all you need, and even that is a misrepresentation, because it focuses on the very small number of features that are unique to Spanish in the US, rather than focusing on the vast majority of features that are shared with Latin America and Spain.

This is the old problem of being hell-bent on trying to find a unique object to talk about, even though the unique object does not exist, and to give it a single name in an effort to bring it into existence.

Once someone makes the a priori decision that Spanish in the US is different, and accompanies that decision with a determination not to base their inquiry on the existing research literature, there's little of use that can be said to that person.

Code-switching between English and Spanish, as well as English loan words and calques, in your view these do not constitute a hybrid or mixed language, why?

No, they do not constitute a hybrid or mixed language; they do not constitute a language of any kind. How could they? These phenomena represent a very small proportion of the speech of Latinos in the US, as research has shown time and again. How can a small fraction of a person's speech represent 'a language.' Most of the Spanish of Latinos in the US consists of lexical, phonological, and morphosyntactic features that are identical to those found in Latin America and Spain. It makes no sense to focus on a few minority features and call them 'a language'.

Codeswitching, loanwords, and calques are, by definition, hybrid phenomena, that is, they represent the presence of other-language features in the language under discussion. But there is not, to my knowledge, any research showing that these three kinds of things mark Spanish in the US as unique. These things are found in all languages.

And what about the question of volume, of how many? In Spanish in the US, they have been the subject of very explicit quantitative research. The findings are clear. These English-origin features in Spanish in the US are a tiny part of it. How can they add up to a mixed language?

What makes the Spanish of the US different from the Spanish of other seemingly "monolingual" societies? Perhaps you can comment not only on colloquial US Spanish, but also the Spanish spoken & written in more formal mediums, such as TV, radio, and print in the US.

Nothing. Spanish in the US is basically the same as that of other Spanish speaking areas.

I have demonstrated in a variety of publications that the differences between Spanishes in the US and Spanishes in Spain and the Latin American countries are the same differences as are found between Spanishes in these countries.

There are loanwords in Spanish in the US. But also there are loanwords in Spanish in each of the other Spanish-speaking countries (writing 'monolingual' in quotation marks does not make Spain and the Latin American countries monolingual; it only serves to dismiss all the other languages spoken in those countries).

There are words unique to Spanish in the US. But there are also words unique to Spanish in each of the other Spanish-speaking countries.

There are morphosyntactic features that are unique to Spanish in the US. But there are also morphosyntactic features that are unique to Spanish in each of the other Spanish-speaking countries.

The questions here seem, again, guided by the a priori decision that there MUST be something unique and exciting about Spanish as spoken in the US that constitutes its defining and overriding characteristic. The literature has shown exactly the opposite.

People like to study the Spanish spoken in their country. Mexican linguists study Spanish in Mexico. Uruguayan linguists study Spanish in Uruguay. And so forth. Linguists in the US study Spanish in the US. None of these approaches implies that the object of study is mostly unique and different from Spanish as spoken in all the other places. It is only in the US where a different name has been brought to the fore to try to reify a new thing.