What is Spanglish? The phenomenon of code-switching and its impact amongst US Latinos

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Abstract

Considering the significant numbers of Spanish speakers in the United States and resulting linguistic strategies in an English language dominant context, the phenomenon of code-switching is examined in this paper as an important element of 'border culture'. Focus is given to linguistic and sociocultural code-switching practices based on research in US Latino communities, and the differences between code-switching and code-mixing are analysed alongside attitudes towards the phenomenon. In asking the question, what is Spanglish? the terms "Latino", and "Hispanic" are problematised, demonstrating that these labels carry strong connotative meanings, and in this way, the use of the term "Spanglish" can be seen as a political assertion of a border identity.

Introduction

In this paper I will be examining a concept and most interestingly, its contextualisation within the US Latino community. Considering that Spanish and English are languages which rate amongst the most dominant worldwide (Pountain 1999), and that in the United States, in 2003, a staggering 38.8 million people were registered as Spanish speakers, this context is certainly significant (Stavans 2003, p. 5). Code-switching is a phenomenon of language contact (Poplack 1988), and in the case of the United States, this contact stretches back to the conquest of New Mexico in 1848, which initiated patterns of resistance and convergence that would characterise the language relationship until today (Gonzales 1999). Not limited, however, simply to the field of linguistics, Johnson (2000) locates the experience of the US Hispanic community in the vast complexities of bilingualism, multicultural experience and group cultural distinctiveness. Surrounded by waves of "hysteria", both from the press and within academia, about the future of Spanish and its integrity faced with the "invasion" of English (Pountain 1999, p.33), this phenomenon of "border culture" (Gonzales 1999, p. 30) may point beyond just language variation or change to a much broader cultural shift in the United States. Therefore I will attempt to analyse elements of code-switching in order to better understand its nature and use within the Latino community, focussing particularly on what is known as "Spanglish". By examining these linguistic phenomena in the Latino community I hope to shed some light on how this reflects the sociocultural situation of the Latino population in the United States.

Latinos in the US

Considering that code-switching has not been observed as a homogenous occurrence, but varying according to context and language mix (Gardner-Chloros, 1997), it is perhaps prudent to reflect briefly on the particular settings and communities. Furthermore, considering that some of the terms used within this debate are regarded as complex and in contention, I shall mostly be using the terminology in the generous sense of their various meanings, clarifying as necessary in the course of the text.

Within the United States the Hispanic community is a sizable minority. In 2002 (Morales) it was predicted that within 20 years it would overtake the African-American community as the largest minority group, yet US Census Bureau statistics claim that this has already occurred (2006). Whilst it is nearly impossible to generalise about a community with migrant roots in such a variety of Latin American, Caribbean and Iberian nations, the three largest groupings are Mexican-Americans, Puerto Rican-Americans and Cuban-Americans (Johnson 2000). It has been noted that the Hispanic community's significant impact on the US "language landscape" is somewhat due to the astonishing growth of the Spanish speaking population in the US, the "cultural, demographic, and geographic factors" promoting the strength of the Spanish, and the Latino valuing of their own bilingualism (Johnson 2000, p.196). In addition to this, the economic and employment conditions in which much of the community finds itself, encourages strong protective bonds to their own culture and language (Johnson 2000). However, the increasing importance of English to this community must not be underestimated, as much as for economic necessities as the new cultural possibilities that the subsequent and younger generations are exploring (Zentella, 1997).

Code-switching: a complex phenomenon

It seems natural to begin with a definition of the phenomenon. Montes-Alcalá describes it as "a natural linguistic phenomenon" in bilingual communities where two or more languages come into contact and alternate at the level of clauses and sentences (2000, p.218). Gumperz, quoted in Zentella, clarifies a little more, positing code-switching as a "juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems" (1997, p.80). However, beyond these occasionally vague descriptions, in the research literature, a wide variety of terms are found such as "code-shifting" and "code-mixing" to which researchers seem to either propose contradicting definitions, despair at the "doomed" efforts to distinguish between them (Zentella 1997, p.81), or declare the unimportance of using any particular term over another (Poplack 1988). Taking into account that in reality, it is often difficult to distinguish the category of utterance, even when the definition is decided, for reasons of clarity I will distinguish code-switching as the alternation of two different language varieties that remain grammatically unchanged (i.e. portions that are unmistakably Spanish or English) and code-mixing as the convergence of two languages that integrate into each other's grammar characterised by borrowings such as calques or integrated loanwords (Gardner-Chloros 1997).

Perhaps it also necessary to further problematise the phenomenon in question by highlighting the fact that the research carried out into code-switching often produces questionable data due to the fact that linguistic behaviour is highly sensitive to context which makes studying any kind of "natural" behaviour complicated. This is especially the case when code-switching is racially stigmatised in any way (Montes-

Alcalá 2000). Toribio (2002) comments that the research environment is often relatively artificial, with the participants often being asked to code-switch; however, whilst this may not necessarily represent spontaneous speech it is still useful for highlighting linguistic and syntactic patterns. In her research, Poplack (1988) noted that different data collection methods had a quantitative effect on the data produced and also reflected that researchers were prone to confuse bilingual behaviour and make insufficient distinctions between communicative and stylistic language use, thus falsely contributing to the already misleading miscellany of code-switching observations. In light of Torres' condemnation of "meaningless" (1991, p.265) studies which focus purely on the quantitative occurrences of the phenomenon without making any significant sociological or linguistic analysis, I will use the perspectives of Toribio (2002) to simplify and divide code-switching into linguistic and sociocultural elements. Whilst I shall attempt to make a division between these two perspectives it is important to recognise that the two elements are undoubtedly and profoundly linked and there is much crossover.

Attitudes towards code-switching

Alongside the vast analytical research and literature involving this aspect of bilingual discourse, much has also been said concerning the attitudes of those within and outside of communities involved in code-switching towards this practice. Lourdes Torres' work with a suburban Puerto Rican community in New York recorded that over 50% of her participants had negative feelings towards the mixing and switching of codes (1987), whereas Montes-Alcalá, in her more recent research in California amongst Spanish speaking youths, noted a shift in the traditional opinion of code-switching towards a more positive appreciation (2000). However, in a different community in the same state, Toribio (2002) found a considerable range of attitudes including utter rejection, apprehensiveness and even positive opinions. Montes-Alcalá (2000) noted in her research that whilst attitudes gave an insight to the perceived status and stigma of the practice of code-switching, such opinions did not necessarily dictate whether the user was able to or actually did engage in code-switching. However, Toribio noted that when a participant expressed strong disapproval or the sentiment that the behaviour was antithetical to their identity, code-switching occurrence and ability was drastically reduced, thus confirming the idea that such practice is not necessarily a part of bilingual experience (2002). Whilst there is a strong code-switching presence in the media, Johnson commented that outside the Hispanic community there is also a sense of negative opinion from the US Anglo population, who assume that code-switching is indicative of a rejection of full participation in American society and a refusal to learn 'proper' English on the part of Latinos (2000).

Linguistic perspectives

The linguistic perspective asks whether code-switching, as a communicative form, sees Spanish maintained within an English context or become subordinate and ultimately "corrupted" by English (Toribio 2002). One of the early criticisms of code-switching accused participants of using it as a linguistic "crutch" in order to compensate for linguistic incompetence (Montes-Alcalá 2000). However, whilst researchers like Zentella have found that code-switching for reasons of lexical ignorance does occur, due to the varying levels of education within the immigrant community, and often quite commonly in children (1997), most research has

concluded that this only accounts for a very small percentage of usage (Johnson 2000). As well as investigating whether participants knew the equivalent term in the other language (Zentella 1997), smoothness and fluency of code-switching was cited as a negation of the "crutch" hypothesis (Poplack 1988). In order to examine the claim that code-switching represents a linguistic innovation and creativity it is perhaps important to look at some of the patterns and mechanics behind the phenomenon (Gonzales 1999). Poplack describes how early research thought code-switching to be an exception to "systematic and rule-governed" language variation (1988, p.44). However, she describes the trends of research resulting in the creation of rigid rules and frameworks, which were only to be discounted for their inability to function across different contexts and language pairs. Whilst the many attempts to create universally applicable rules based on the grammar of the languages in question have been contested (Poplack 1988), unlike the popular assumption that it is just another form of bilingual communication, there are some distinctive patterns (Toribio 2002).

Poplack describes two general syntactic constraints as the "free morpheme constraint" which "prohibits mixing morphologies within the confines of the word", e.g. "*run*-iendo" and would not be used by a Spanish-English bilingual, and the "equivalence constraint" which ensures that both "sides of the switch are grammatically correct according to their particular rules, e.g. "A *tree* verde" would not be possible as it violates the English ordering of words (Poplack 1988, p.47). Code-switching has also been described as occurring intersententially and intrasententially (Zentella 1997). Switching within a sentence – intrasententially – as well as following the aforementioned rules suggests that a certain level of linguistic skill and proficiency is necessary for code-switching to occur – which certainly counteracts the negative connotations of the 'lexical gap' explanation. Counter to the idea of Spanish being lost through the process is the fact that as English dominance increases, calquing is employed rather than just using an unintegrated loanword, thus demonstrating a creative use of Spanish (still adhering to its structure) rather than a simple shift to English (Torres 1987). Considerably more could be said about the linguistic side of code-switching as the mechanics of the phenomenon are undoubtedly complex, however, for the purpose of this examination it is most important to note that those who are more proficient in the two languages being combined, such as fluent bilinguals, demonstrate ever more complex instances of switching (Johnson 2000).

Sociocultural perspectives

Interestingly, in one of Toribio's case studies, one of the participants, Guadalupe, demonstrated a lack of Spanish ability, and whilst her code-switching could be assigned to lexical need, she still codeswitched when need was not an issue (2002). Zentella also shows evidence that 90% of what her Puerto Rican community codeswitched, was in the same sense, unnecessary (1997). Therefore it seems appropriate to ask the question, why codeswitch? One helpful description is again Zentella's as she describes code-switching as "a conversational activity via which speakers negotiate meaning with each other" (Zentella 1997, p.113). It is here that the sociocultural approach seems to offer some insight into the reasons behind the behaviour. In a positive interpretation of code-switching dialogue, Torres (1987) acknowledges that many of the decisions made reflect a certain discourse strategy. Researchers have identified reasons behind the switching as related to strategies of "clarification" and "emphasis", switching in order to establish control, i.e. in a

child/parent scenario, for "marking" or "bracketing" certain parts of the speech such as direct speech and for "footing" in order to highlight a re-alignment of the narrator's role and to appeal to the interlocutor (Johnson 2000, Torres 1987, Zentella 1997). The role of the interlocutor seems to be key in this process as the perceived linguistic proficiency of the addressee seems to be important in determining the speaker's linguistic choice (Gonzales 1999) and of course this is something that parents stress to their bilingual children in order for appropriate communication (Zentella 1997). Punctuating speech with discourse markers such as "y'know" is another example of code-switching to ensure that the interlocutor is following the dialogue (Torres 1987, p. 74).

As well as simply a way of proving the speaker has some knowledge of English or Spanish (Johnson 2000), code-switching is deeply linked to the issue of identity. It was noticed by Johnson (2000) that those who had the highest rates of code-switching were also those who had the most significant and balanced contact with the rest of their community. One way in which code-switching can be seen to link to identity is the fact that it functions to preserve Spanish as the use of English does not in fact change the structure of Spanish (Johnson 2000). With the perceived need to learn English for education and employment success in the United States code-switching allows the Hispanic community to maintain important cultural and linguistic traditions (Gonzales 1999). Perhaps even more subversively, it could be interpreted as a resistance to the "Americanisation" that the host culture threatens to force upon them (Gonzales 1999). Anzaldúa is quoted in Johnson (2000, p.177) as describing ethnic identity as being "twin skin to linguistic identity" and Stavans has argued that language constructs our worldview (Johnson 2000). In this sense, learning a new language for many immigrants to the US is like learning a new cultural identity. However, what we see in code-switching is the mediation of two languages and two cultures, which can be interpreted as an act of "self-reflection" and construction (Toribio 2002, p.98) or even more radically as the creation of a "new powerful voice" (p.110). Finally, what is crucial about code-switching is that whilst it is important to understand the speaker's bilingual ability in both languages, it is equally as crucial to understand how the particular monolingual codes are used within the community as well as community specific cultural and bilingual patterns (Poplack 1988). For example even though a speaker may have the bilingual ability to code-switch, without membership to a code-switching community he or she will lack the necessary practice and social knowledge (Toribio 2002). The significance of community in this sense seems to suggest the importance of the phenomenon beyond a purely linguistic nature.

What is Spanglish?

This leads us onto the question of what is Spanglish? Before even beginning to tackle this question in any concrete way, it is perhaps imperative that we deal with some of the terminology that has been so far used without clarification. I have decided to use the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" equally and without any sense of differentiation. However, as previously mentioned, the community or communities that are encapsulated by such terms are in no way homogenous. Difficulties arise in the terms when their origins and political insinuations are explored, uncovering right wing, assimilationist and nationalist motives behind the use of the term "Hispanic" which favours a unity based on language, whilst the term "Latino", no less complexly, arose from a desire to distance the community from its Iberian heritage and exclusion of Portuguese speaking Brazilian-Americans, alluding instead to themes of shared

culture and race (Morales 2002). I consider the term "Spanglish" therefore, alongside these other terms, as an "abstraction" (Stavans 2003, p.12) whose varied definitions are politically and ideologically motivated. However, what is interesting for our purposes is to examine the ways in which this has been done and therefore what it means to use the term "Spanglish".

Johnson defines the term through the lens of language, stating that it is the particular combination of Spanish and English language contact, with Spanish being the dominant of the pair (2000). Pountain also confirms that whilst including code-switching, Spanglish is characterised by a version of Spanish that is "lexicalised" by English, which would incorporate 'code-mixing' into the definition (1999, p. 35). Stavans, a US Latino professor who has spent considerable time researching and promoting the phenomenon hints at the complexity of Spanglish by appropriating Herbie Hancock's description of jazz: "It is something very hard to define, but very easy to recognize" (Stavans 2003, p.5). Whilst later attempting a more concrete explanation of Spanglish as "The verbal encounter between Anglo and Hispano civilizations." (2003, p.5), the link to jazz is quite significant as it draws comparisons with a creative and innovative force of the lower classes which moved from subordination to a place of power and status amongst higher echelons of society. However, Latino journalist and poet Ed Morales in his 'manifesto' for Spanglish takes this broad definition even further stating that "Spanglish is what we speak, but it is also who we Latinos are, and how we act, and how we perceive the world." (2002, p.3). This appears to be an attempt to replace the aforementioned problematic terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" with 'Spanglish' as Morales prefers the way it expresses a unity in what the community is 'doing' rather than where they came from (2002).

Despite these seemingly positive characterisations of 'Spanglish' it seems that the popular understanding, often expressed in the US media, of the term does not quite carry the same connotations. Associated with "Tex-Mex" as a pejorative term (Zentella 1997, p.81) for the code-switching practices of the Latino population, Pountain has announced that both term and phenomenon have been "universally ridiculed" (1999, p.35). Partly due to the influence of the Real Academia Española, amongst others, Spanglish appears to be a term that carries a negative connotation to describe the feelings of disdain towards US Spanish-English code-switching practices (Toribio 2002). This is best expressed through the association of the term with a "bastardized language" (Morales 2002, p.5) and the claim that Spanglish is the "trap" preventing Hispanics from full assimilation (Stavans 2003, p.3). However, the fact that it is a phenomenon that is spread in varying capacity throughout the entire Spanish-speaking world by means of the media and relational influences suggests again that there is something more significant occurring than popular assumption allows (Stavans 2003). Linguistically, the significance of 'Spanglish' is similar to that which we have seen in our brief glance at code-switching, and the reactionary fears of it corrupting Spanish have been calmed somewhat by academic investigation that suggests that Spanish is not structurally changed yet given expanded possibilities (Pountain 1999) due to the "natural language evolution" that is occurring (Torres 1987 p.71). Whilst forms of "Spanglish" vary wildly between different communities, its presence in the media is serving to standardise terms and forms (Stavans 2003). Whilst it is still unclear whether we are dealing with an existent language evolving, a new language emerging, or simply just a form of bilingual language contact, De Genova and Ramos-Zayas have called for Spanglish not to be labelled a dialect as it

implies a certain inauthenticity and an implicit association with the racially stigmatised "Black English" (2003, p.171).

One helpful conceptual tool in attempting to investigate Spanglish, is the notion of "border" and "hyphenated" identities (Johnson 2000, p.160) which describe US Hispanic experience as being caught between two languages and cultures and in continual translation. Zentella takes the idea of "borderlands" further describing US Latinos as stuck between the "prestigious English monolingual world" and the "stigmatized Spanish monolingual world" located within the USA (1997, p.114). The creation of a "hybrid language" (Gonzales 1999, p.26) then can be seen as a way of stating that they belong to "both worlds" and that neither should have to be given up (Zentella 1997, p.114). Morales essentially sees this hybrid language and culture as a denial of the dichotomy that it sits between, negating the racial purity and white supremacy that seeks to repress the Latino community (2002). Seen in this light, the way that the Hispanic community is beginning to use the label "Spanglish" to describe itself can be understood as a transformation and a rehabilitation of the term (Zentella 1997). The concept of Spanglish then, whilst useful in describing the hybrid language creation that is arguably occurring, is perhaps best understood as a challenge to the essentialist monoculturalism and established patterns of "categorisation" (Morales 2002, p.7) of the US. The "democratic" nature of Spanglish, which is purportedly used across a variety of class identities (Stavans 2003, p.20), further demonstrates the "transnational" and even 'transracial' sympathies of a postmodern border crossing/eradicating phenomenon, as older patterns of inclusion and exclusion are replaced with new hybrid forms (Morales 2002, p.7).

Standard Spanish?

In responding to the question of whether it matters if Latinos do not use 'standard' Spanish it is important that we remind ourselves of the fact that 'Latinos' are in no way a homogenised group and therefore when talking about the Spanish that they speak, the inclusion of the word "standard" implies a certain motivated intention, namely the hegemonic manoeuvring for power both within and between minority groups and by the dominant majority social groups against minorities. It also is not without a certain irony to attempt to speak of a "standard" language when the very language used to describe and codify the language in question is not agreed upon. However, perhaps the first important question to ask is to "whom" exactly the language choice of the Hispanic population would be significant. This perhaps can be viewed from two perspectives, those from within the community and those outside of it.

Unlike English, the Spanish language has a regulatory body, the Real Academia Española, which serves to standardise and officially legislate the language across the Spanish-speaking world in order to preserve its "acknowledged and much prized" linguistic unity (Pountain 1999, p.34). For such a prestigious enterprise, the fact that the Spanish language is being merged with its traditional enemy, the English language, is a significant occurrence and to such language purists the implications are largely negative (Stavans 2003). Torres also notes that academically there has been "an almost exclusive interest in deviations from standard Spanish" (1991, p.255). Nevertheless, most would agree that due to Spanish not being a *lingua franca* like English, it is more likely to remain unified (Pountain 1999, p.34). It seems probable however, that the most important reaction to the Latino community not speaking a "standard" or mutually intelligible Spanish would come from within the community

itself, given that the Spanish language is one of the most visible unifying factors amongst such a diverse and partly diasporic community (Johnson 2000). One of the four main Hispanic cultural themes as identified by Johnson (2000) was a strong tie to the Spanish-language. This is evidenced by the strong desire that parents have to teach their children Spanish and by the fact that many who rejected it in childhood often return to learn it (De Genova & Ramos-Zayas 2003). However, whilst this appears to tie in with the theme of unity and togetherness, upon closer inspection, it seems that a sense of "standard" Spanish is no more than a myth in the United States. Using Tajfel's "intergroup-distinctiveness framework" (Gonzales 1999, p.27) it becomes clear that the some Hispanic communities compare their language to other groups' "versions" of Spanish as that is the unifying element of the group. For example De Genova and Ramos-Zayas demonstrate examples of Puerto Rican and Mexican animosity between each other based on their perceived language standards and hierarchical judgements (2003). In this case then, the very concept of a 'standard', or for want of a better word, 'best' Spanish is what causes friction between the two groups. Gonzales noted that the older generation was more concerned about the 'quality' of Spanish spoken than the younger Latino generations (1999). Perhaps then this can be seen as a sign that the myth of 'standard' Spanish and the hierarchical notions laid upon national/ancestral differences is being left behind in order to embrace the hybrid border culture of Spanglish and the freedom and unity it brings.

In conclusion, having briefly examined a phenomenon of bilingual language contact in the context of the US Hispanic/Latino community, it must be said that this vast area of evolving research and the size and scope of this paper has not permitted anything close to a comprehensive investigation of the issues in question. Nevertheless, I have attempted to problematise some of the issues that the question raises and expose some of the myths that simplify a complex phenomenon, transforming it into a stigmatised and denigrated practice. Whilst it is possible to affirm, as Torres does, that "all languages incorporate borrowed items from other languages" (1987, p.64) and that the code-switching observed in the United States is a natural part of language contact and even evolution, the particular context, history and communities involved in the US seem to be pointing towards a unique phenomenon and shift beyond the purely linguistic. The polemic concept of Spanglish appears to be a figurehead for a much larger cultural shift in a land that historically has been central to the fusion and creation of new cultures. In fact it could even be claimed that Spanglish, for the Hispanic community, not only represents liberation from the black/white dichotomy of tradition and assimilation but also can be seen as a signpost pointing toward a new "abstract nationhood" (Morales 2002, p.15).

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