Rae Vosberg

Dr. Rhonda Berkeley

English 490 – 002

24 April 2023

Spanish-English Codeswitching and Multicultural Identity in the United States:
A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Creative Works

Abstract

This paper discusses the phenomenon of Spanish-English codeswitching (CS) in the United States and how it is used by Spanish-English bilinguals to express their identities. The paper first provides an introduction, discussing the concept of language, the prevalence of Spanish in the US, and the phenomenon of language contact. It then examines the controversy surrounding Spanish-English codeswitching, which some see as a disfiguration of their languages, and explores the negative reactions that it often elicits. However, the paper argues that codeswitching has become an outlet for bilinguals to express their multicultural identities. The paper then focuses on the sociolinguistic approaches to analyzing codeswitching, specifically the Myers-Scotton Matrix Language Framework and Marked Choice models. It concludes that analyzing codeswitching in creative works of poetry, music, and film can provide insights into the identities of bilingual individuals in the US.

Introduction

A language is a dialect with an army and a navy- this is a common saying amongst linguists and it honestly holds to be quite true. There are many technical definitions of what constitutes a language and what does not. *Standardized language* is ultimately defined by those

who are in power as the correct means of communication. *Language* itself, though, can simply be defined as the shared ways humans choose to communicate with each other.

The United States technically does not have an official language, although several states declare English as the official language (USAGov 2023). Despite its unofficial status, it is indubitable that English is the standard language of the United States in the mind of its citizens. It is the language of government, education, medicine, and law. English is the language of power in the United States. As of 2013, 20.5% of Americans over the age of 5 spoke a language other than English in their homes. Of this number, 62% reported Spanish as the language spoken in the home, effectively making it the largest minority language in the United States. The United States, with more 37.5 million Spanish speakers, has one of the largest Spanish speaking populations worldwide (Ryan 2013, Lipski 2009).

Anytime more than one language is present in an area, the opportunity for *language contact* arises. *Language contact* essentially refers to, as it sounds, multiple languages interacting with each other and the phenomenon which may result from said interaction (Winford). One such contact phenomena is that of *codeswitching* (*CS)* which generally refers to either an inter-sentential or intra-sentential mixture of two or more languages or dialects. Myers-Scotton frames CS as the selection of two or more linguistic varieties within a single conversation (Myers-Scotton 1993). In the United States, this type of CS is frequently viewed between Spanish and English as these are the two most common languages in the nation. Notably, Spanish-English Codeswitching in the United States is sometimes referred to as *Spanglish*. There is much controversy on whether this term should be used as there is no definitive answer on whether it refers to Spanish varieties of English, English varieties of Spanish, or Codeswitching. There

often can be a belittling or negative connotation associated with the term (Sanchez 2013). Thus, it is best to refer to the phenomena as Spanish-English Codeswitching.

Unfortunately, despite Spanish-English CS being a totally natural and intricate linguistic phenomenon, there are some who would like to see it abolished. Language purists, both English and Spanish speaking, believe it is a blatant disfiguration of their languages (Rodriguez-Gonzales 2012). Additionally, it is no secret that many Americans look down on, or even hate, those who do not speak a standard version of English. There seems to be a belief amongst these people that anyone who does not speak English perfectly is unintelligent and lazy. The reality, though, is quite the opposite. Anyone who has genuinely learned or attempted to learn a second language knows it takes intelligence and hard work to be able to have command over more than one language. The negative reactions to Spanish-English CS have been used as a weapon to make those who do it feel inferior (Sanchez-Munoz 2013).

In the face of opposition, those who speak Spanish and English that engage in CS have been able to explore their identities based in their language choices. What initially resulted from a necessary and natural means of communication has become an outlet to represent has turned into a means of expressing the multicultural identities of code switchers (Rodriguez-Gonzales 2013).

While codeswitching usually refers to phenomenon in spoken language, it also can be represented in writing (Sanchez-Munoz 2013). It is especially interesting to consider the occurrence of codeswitching in written or scripted language because this indicates that there was an active choice to record a mixture of language. The media created by Spanish-English speaking bilinguals in the United States is abundant and full of content directly and indirectly associated with identity. The identities of the Latino, Hispanic, and Chicano people in the United States are

complex and full of intricacies (Rodriguez-Gonzales 2013). There is much that can be said about these identities simply based on when, where, and how they choose to use language. These identities can be observed by using sociolinguistic strategies and close readings of Spanish-English CS in creative works of poetry, music, and film.

Observation Methods

There are several sociolinguistic approaches to analyzing CS. For the purposes of observing the more psycho-social concept of identity I focus on utilizing the Myers-Scotton's *Matrix Language Framework* (*MLF*) and *Marked Choice* (*MC*) models.

Rodriguez-Gonzalez summarizes the Myers-Scotton Matrix Language Framework as follows: "MLF's central assumption is that code-switched utterances have an identifiable matrix that there is always an asymmetrical relationship between the *matrix language* (*ML*) and the *embedded language* (*EL*), such that the ML dominates a mixed clause" (Rodriguez-Gonzales 2012). In other words, in every CS occurrence there is presumably a dominant (matrix) language, and a secondary (embedded) language. Myers-Scotton presents a hypothesis for ML which essentially states that the morphosyntax elements of the ML + EL are determined by the ML (Myers-Scotton 1993). She provides two ways of testing this hypothesis,

The first test for her ML hypothesis is the *Morpheme Order Principle.* This principle essentially that in a codeswitching occurrence, the surface morpheme order should not violate the system of the ML. The second test, which is a bit more complicated, is the *System Morpheme Principle.* She argues "all 'externally relevant' system morphemes come from the ML in ML+ EL," system morphemes essentially being all non-content words (Myers-Scotton 1993). Figure 1

below demonstrates the basic distinctions to make note of during a system morpheme test which essentially entails determining which words are and are not content morphemes.

Figure 1 Morpheme Classification   (Myers-Scotton, 2002:73)
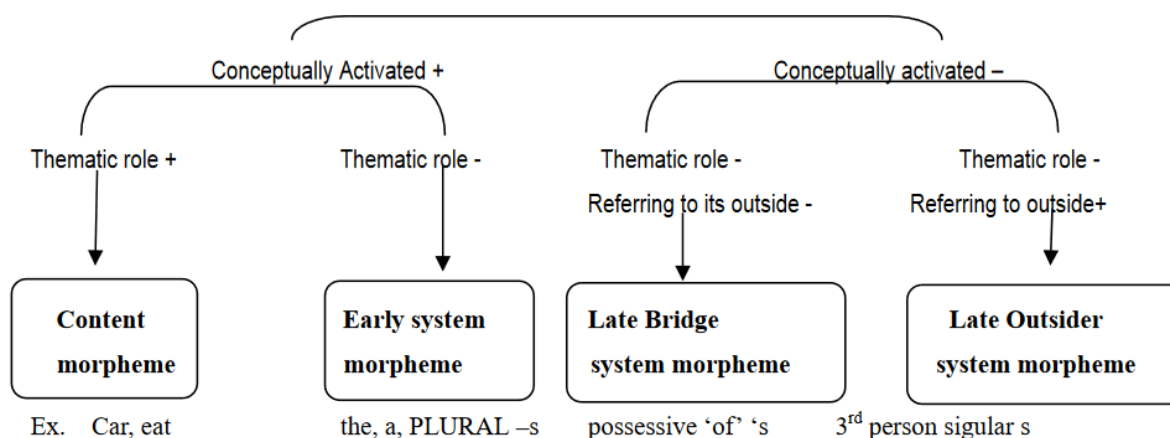
Myers-Scotton's *Markedness* or *Marked Choice* model is a sociolinguistic theory that aims to determine why language users make choices between different language forms and structures (Myers-Scotton 1993). Myers-Scotton first details the concept of *unmarked choice* which refers to a standard, somewhat expected, occurrence of CS in limited situations, i.e. in a group of bilingual peers having casual conversation. On the other hand, *marked choice,* as might be inferred, is an active decision of the speaker. It often occurs when the speaker is trying to accomplish something in the switch. In some cases this switch could be to shorten the social distance between two bilingual speakers, or they are sometimes used in anger to increase social distance. While observing Spanish-English CS in poetry, music, and film I will focus on the marked choices of the writers and discuss possible reasons why they made certain CS choices.

After using these models and tests to observe each text I hope to infer not only that Spanish-English CS can represent identity, but the exact ways in which it does.

Spanish-English CS in Poetry

In Ana Sánchez-Muñoz's article on the power of using Spanish-English CS to express hybrid identity in heritage language learners, she features two poems written by one of her Chicano students. She praises her student for her effective use of language which "defies clear boundaries between 'Anglonness' and 'Mexicanness' that Anzaldúa wrote about" (Sánchez-Muñoz 2013).

The first student poem, which is untitled, goes:

My first words were en español

English I mastered in school,

Somehow mamá managed to make

A Mexican-American out of me

Mexican when I went to misa every Sunday

Seeking to be like La Virgen de Guadalupe

American when we grilled burgers

On hot July summers,

As my National Anthem blasted through the speakers

Based on the MLF model tests we can easily find the matrix language of this poem. The morpheme order follows English structure. The system morphemes are mostly English, with the exception of one Spanish preposition (*en*) in the first line. The content words are majority English with a mix of some Spanish. In this case then, the ML is English, and the EL is Spanish.

The uses of Spanish in this poem would then be marked choices. The first line ('my first words were en español') is not only a choice of content word, but also a system word. I think this usage is small but significant because the writer disregards the ML's grammar when referring to their mother tongue. This sets the tone for the rest of the poem which details the poet's experiences growing up under a Mexican-American identity.

The second untitled student poem, also untitled, is as follows:

¿De aquí o de Allá? ¿De allá o de aquí?

Escucho corridos, norteñas y más

El rap y el hip hop no me faltan jamás

Escucho gooooool al mirar el fútbol

Escucho homerun al mirar el béisbol

Me encanta un buen hot dog

With a side of horchata

Tortillas y biscuits

Nunca faltan en casa

¿De aquí o de allá? ¿De allá o de aquí?

Allá soy de aquí. Aquí soy de allá.

This poem follows the Spanish structure for morpheme order. This poem follows the Spanish system of morphemes except for the expression 'with a side of,' which usually appears as a bound expression in English, which explains its departure from the matrix language morpheme system.

The English word choices here seem less marked than the previous poem. The flow of nouns about music, sports, and food seems entirely natural. Perhaps the general point of using English words for these terms is to paint a picture of this person's own experience as they view the world. 'With a side of horchata' is the only line that seems like a truly marked choice. It seems that the center point of the poem is coupled with the line before it about the hotdog. These lines create the image of consuming both American and Mexican culture. They ask if they are from here or there, but in the end they determine they are both.

Spanish-English CS in Music

Music is a place where Spanish-English codeswitching frequently appears. Concurrently, music is a place where people express themselves and who they are as people. This makes lyrics a perfect subject for observations about language and identity.

"Se Acabo Remix" by the Beatnuts is a song that uses a mix of Spanish and English to express the life experiences of the lyricists. This 1990s group is made up of two members: Dominican-American JuJu (Jerry Tineo) and Colombian-American Psycho Les (Lester Fernandez). Their music can generally be described as "Boricua/Latino-centric" (Garley 2019).

The lyrics are dominantly in English, but the main hook of the song is the Spanish refrain "Se Acabo." In the few Spanish lines that do appear, they appear in the form of a complete sentence ("Por ahí viene el perro, por ahí viene / Cae la gorda por") and follow the Spanish word order and morpheme systems. Even when Spanish and English occur in the same sentence, they are still easily separated grammatically and systematically (I fuck wit Beatnuts, Livin' La Vida Loca! / Callete la boca, see the Spanish Fly on the sofa).

In this song, it seems like both languages have equal MLF qualifications when they appear. When considering the larger picture of the song, it is most reasonable to identify English as the ML because it is used significantly more with only seventeen out of seventy lines including Spanish, and only 5.7% of those lines fully in Spanish.

Due to the small amount of Spanish used in the song, the writers marked choices are very clear. One of the most interesting and impactful uses of Spanish-English CS in these lyrics:

Now what's fuckin' wit that ha?

Not you, you chocha

I fuck wit Beatnuts, Livin' La Vida Loca!

Callete la boca, see the Spanish Fly on the sofa

One word, he slap you wit the toaster

Keep it in the holster on safety

This lyric choice does a few things. First, the ability to select words from both Spanish and English creates an opportunity for the writer to rhyme in a more open and creative way. Secondly, the specific words he chooses are emotionally provocative and somewhat meant to offend. The use of the line "Livin' La Vida Loca" feels like the most marked choice in this mostly English song, though. This phrase is one often associated with the Spanish language by English speakers. The song is dealing a lot with the writer's own experience and identity with lines like "Dominican flag over the bed on the ceiling/Protect everything I rep, that's the first thing." When he uses the stereotypical phrase in a way, he summarizes the core feeling of the song which is if someone were to mess with him, it would not turn out well because his Latino heritage and resilience.

Another song which utilizes Spanish-English CS is "Dinero" by Puerto Rican-American singer and actress J Lo (Jennifer Lopez) featuring DJ Khaled and Cardi B. The first verse of the song follows a standard morpheme order for English with lines like "If you ain't getting no pesos," and "me and Benjamín Franco stay at the banco." The chorus and main hook of the song mostly follows the Spanish standard morpheme order repeating the line "yo quiero, yo quiero dinero, ay" several times. Like "Se Acabo" the song is distributed in a way where there is not a lot of code switching in a single sentence, but rather the language changes based on each line. I found that thirty-seven out of sixty-five lines were either entirely in Spanish or included a Spanish-English CS. Of the thirty-seven lines which include Spanish, 46% included a CS. Since such a high percentage of these words included a CS and were not solely in Spanish, it seems English is the ML for this song. For the lines which include CS, they do follow the system morpheme principle as well, with most Spanish words being content only during the CS.

One notably marked choice in this song is this couple of lines "Soy la Princesa, San Juan, Puerto Rico/They say money talk, but my talking bilingual." Lopez enters the first line directly from the Spanish chorus and interjects to remind the audience of her dual success as a bilingual actress and singer. In one of the final choruses, she changes the previously Spanish phrase "yo quiero dinero" to an English version "I just want the dinero." This emphasizes the same message she has been delivering the entire song by doubling down on it in a second language. This song celebrates the positive effects of her bilingualism and how has and continues to benefit her.

Spanish-English CS in Film

The musical film *In the Heights* (2021) directed by John Cho and written by Lin-Manuel Miranda is about the Washington Heights neighborhood in New York. It features a block of Latino and Hispanic people, the main cast being mostly immigrants or second-generation

Dreamers who are trying not only to get by but to reach their personal dreams and goals. Throughout the movie, characters codeswitch between Spanish and English with total ease.

For the purposes of brevity, I will not dive too deeply into the MLF for the entire movie. The story is narrated by the main character in a storytelling and conversational format with children. I will be looking at this portion of the story for MLF and MC codeswitching features.

The movie starts with a little girl asking the narrator, Usnavi, "what does sueñito mean?" Usnavi then explains to her that it means "little dream." This then leads him to start his story of Washington Heights with these lines: "Once upon a time, in a faraway land called Nueva York... ...en un barrio called Washington Heights… the streets were made of music." This opening is the prototype which Usnavi follows as he continues his story throughout the movie. This sentence follows the morpheme order structure of English and follows the morpheme system pattern. This effectively sets up English as the ML and Spanish as the EL for this movie.

One interesting thing throughout the film is how the script seamlessly uses and represents unmarked choices. Whenever Usnavi retells dialogue of himself talking to his abuela or any other person with seniority, we see him using CS to Spanish more frequently, saying things like "I got café but no con leche" and that his "El Sueñito will be a labor of love." Despite appearing as unmarked choices as they are delivered in the film, in reality they are marked due to the writer's choice to use them. These exchanges essentially serve a meta-purpose of specifically using this codeswitching to show identity as the entirety of the film itself is about identity. There is a certain self-awareness in these specific character relationships and communication choices that subtly enhances the overall message of the story.

Conclusions

The MLF and MC models are not a perfect approach towards understanding all the intricacies of Spanish-English CS. There are far too many variations to rely on just a few tools, but rather it takes a wider range of thinking and approaches from situation to situation. Ultimately, whether one language is more powerful or not is not the most important thing. Rather, it is the social, cultural, and personal concepts which the languages represent. Language, after all, is a tool that we as humans use. Perhaps, the best approach is to recognize bilingual and multilingual people as simply possessing a larger conceptual lexicon than a monolingual individual. Thus, giving them an entirely different towards expressing meaning as a whole.

Across different linguistic and creative mediums, Spanish-English CS users can use their language as a tool to express themselves and who they are. Consistently, these creators use their platforms in a way that shows the beauty and power in their bilingual roots. In the face of language purism and discrimination, they repeatedly prove the validity of their language and of themselves.

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