Factors Influencing Language Choice Among Latino/a Spanish English Bilinguals

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Introduction
Language is a dynamic form of communication that constantly changes and adapts to contemporary norms. The hybridization of Spanish in the United States, also referred to as Spanglish, is a controversial phenomenon among many critics and scholars. While some view this dialect as a form of identification, Chicano/a norm or an unavoidable phenomenon (Martinez 2010; Stavans 2008, Rothman and Rell 2005) others consider it a threat, language of the poor and a hybridized language (Achugar and Possoa, 2009; Echaves-Solano, 2007).

Some scholars argue that Spanglish (code switching/mixing) is a choice depending on various factors (Alcaya, 2000; Toribio 2002) others argue that code switching is not a choice but marks a speaker as a low income or lowly educated individual (Achugar and Possoa, 2009; Echaves-Solano,) thus language choice and use is thought to reflect social status.

This study explores the specific factors that influence the students’ language choice at a large University in the Pacific Northwest, ostensibly to identify other elements that influence language choice and the use of Spanglish.

Literature Review
Spanglish is the clashing of English and Spanish and serves as an umbrella term for Spanish that is not spoken properly and is mixed with English. Code-switching and code mixing fall under the Spanglish umbrella: “code-switching means that at a certain point, the speaker changes the language, and continues talking in another language” [when beginning a new sentence]. Code-mixing “means that within a single sentence, two languages are mixed and may alternate” (Ardilla, 2005, p. 70).

One of the more prominent subjects discussed in this area of study is the correlation between socio-economic status with the use of Spanglish. The use of Spanglish is particularly attributed to low-income settings, (Zentella, 1997; Stavans, 2008).

Echaves-Solano (2007) states, “The sad reality is 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” (p. 206).

In contradiction with Echevarria’s argument that bilinguals code switch or code mix based on lack of proficiency in either language, Toribio provides data that supports the notion that Spanish-English bilinguals have the ability to code switch/mix as a choice. (Toribio, 2002, p. 93). Zentella, another prominent voice in this area of research, observes children in their homes. She coins the phrase; follow the leader; when children switch languages to accommodate to the adults language choice. Further, Tip-of-the-tongue (TOT) phenomenon is another important factor in a bilinguals language choice. TOT occurs when a bilingual code switches, not for lack of knowing the word, but because they fail to retrieve the correct word fast enough. Thus bilinguals will code switch to substitute for the word using the alternative language.

Research Questions
Does the conversational context and or starting language choice of a speaker in a college setting, determine the change or the choice of another Spanish-English bilingual Latino American speaker? [Conversation context pertains to social, cultural, and academic situational settings.]

Methodology
Participants were selected based on the following criteria;
- 2nd or 1.5 generation Latino/a (Born in the U.S. or Born in a Latin American country and immigrated to the U.S. before or during early teens)
- Spanish-English Bilingual
- Attending a four year university
- 18 years of age or older

The data collection took place at the Washington State University campus.

The participants filled out two surveys; a demographic survey and a language dominance scale survey. They also participated in an interview consisting of academic, hobbies and culturally related questions.

Results
The students use of Spanglish; code switching/code mixing emerged as a result of various factors. There are a few major trends to be noted with the factors influencing the participants language choice: (1) the actual hybridization of Spanish was not commonly noted during the conversation (2) there was little correlation between Spanglish use and income levels and (3) the participants code mixed in instances where the context of the conversation affected their retrieval for the correct word in the language they originally started speaking in, (4) another major trend noted was the “follow the leader phenomenon”, as the participants followed the lead of the interviewer. Below I will be focusing on the major points noted above.

Spanglish
Spanglish occurred randomly throughout the interviews, but never occurring more than once or twice throughout the entire dialogue.

Interviewer: Y vas seguido a visitar?
Participant 5: Si, cuando tengo la chansa. (Yes, often, whenever I have the chance).

Code Mixing
Code mixing occurred more frequently in the participant’s speech than did Spanglish. The participants were more prone to code mix when asked about their academics and hobbies in Spanish, or when asked about their culture in English.

Spanglish and socio-economic status
Code mixing occurred when the question was posed in English or Spanish and the context was contradictory, meaning academic and hobby questions were asked in Spanish and cultural questions were asked in English. TOT was notable as the participants code mixed in response to delayed retrieval of the correct word.

There was no visible correlation with family income and the use of hybridized code mixing and Spanglish. The participants in the $40,000-$60,000 range were the most frequent users of code mixing and Spanglish. And those in the $20,000-$40,000 marked the lowest users of both Spanglish and code mixing.

Follow the leader
One of the major trends noted in the interview and the responses is the follow the leader phenomenon”, as the participants followed the lead of the interviewer.

Discussion
The absence of a clear pattern or correlation between Spanglish speakers and socio-economic status, does not necessarily indicate that there are no possible correlations between these two factors. However, raising awareness on other factors that influence language choice among Latino/a Spanish English bilinguals is pertinent in understanding this language phenomenon.

The initiators language choice played a major influence in the interviews. Thus this is one of the factors that can be attributed to the participant’s language choice. The participants followed the leader 76% of the time.

Code Mixing also commonly occurred due to context, which caused TOT to emerge. These results reinforce the notion that context often plays a role in the language choice of Spanish English bilinguals.

Lastly, Spanglish, the hybridization of Spanish and English, did not occur as frequently as anticipated, it occurred unsystematically throughout the interview sessions with no apparent pattern or notable reasoning. Further, the participants who most commonly used Spanglish did not fall under the lowest or lower income level; on the contrary, the participants in the highest income group spoke more Spanglish.

Future Research
In the expansion of this research, similar interviews will be conducted at various four-year universities and community colleges around Washington, making a few changes to the surveys and interviews. The interview questions will be more open ended, with the intention of making the setting more casual, so the conversation will be more unmediated. Exploring the potential factors that influence language choice among Latino/a Spanish English Bilinguals will continue to be the primary focus.

Selected References


Research in the Teaching of English, 45(2), 124-149.


