

**Discussion on the use of the term “Spanglish” at the Spanish in the U.S. conference,  
February, 2009, between Dr. Ana Celia Zentella & Dr. Ricardo Otheguy**

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<b>Summary of Ricardo Otheguy’s arguments:</b>
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He points out that the U.S. is among the countries with most Spanish speakers. He rejects the term Spanglish, which has been used frequently by linguists as in everyday speech, to refer to the colloquial or popular Spanish spoken in this country. Instead, he proposes that we simply use the term ‘Popular/Colloquial US Spanish’.

**Point #1**

Equivalent labels such as *Singlish* are different in their meaning in that they refer to the influence of English on the language as a whole, not to just a certain type of the language.

**Point #2**

The everyday Spanish spoken in the home in the United States (not the Spanish spoken on the news or at a linguistics conference) actually has the same relationship with other countries’ varieties as they do amongst themselves. In other words, U.S. popular Spanish in relation to Mexican popular Spanish is no different than Mexican popular Spanish in relation to the popular Spanish of Argentina. Why? Because all possess characteristics of the same type: local vocabulary (e.g. *elote*, *palta*), local syntax, local morphology (e.g. *juez* / *jueza*). One of the characteristics that differentiates local Spanish from standard Spanish across countries is that often the local or popular varieties have incorporated features from neighboring languages. Where in some geographical areas, words or syntax have been borrowed from Quechua or Nahuatl, in U.S. Spanish, the same process has occurred with English. What characterizes the popular Spanish of the U.S. is what characterizes the popular Spanish of any other region; In northern Latin America one says “*devolver la llamada*” while in southern areas one generally says “*llamar de vuelta*”, so it shouldn’t surprise us that in the U.S., another way of expressing the same idea has emerged (*llamar para atrás*).

Another characteristic common to all popular varieties of Spanish is that their particular lexicon or phraseology is foreign to those who have not experienced contact with it. For example, U.S. Spanish should seem no more foreign to a Chilean than Mexican Spanish.

The use of certain phrases that express conceptual notions of a dominant or contact culture is totally normal and happens in many places, not just in U.S. Spanish. He mentions an ad seen in Spain: *Solo en Vodafone tienes e-mail en **tiempo real** con **tarifa plana***, where the terms in bold represent borrowed concepts. Because this is a regular occurrence in all places, why single out the popular Spanish in the U.S. by labeling it with a loaded term such as ‘Spanglish’? It seems rather pointless, according to Otheguy.

**Point #3**

In Otheguy’s opinion, the use of the label ‘Spanglish’ is also very dangerous to the survival of Spanish in the U.S. It is important to be able to say to second and third generation speakers that they speak Spanish, not a jumbled up mix called Spanglish. Many young speakers in the U.S. are convinced that what they speak is monumentally different from monolingual Spanish, when it actually isn’t.

**Summary of Ana Celia Zentella’s Arguments:**

Zentella begins by citing an article written by Otheguy in the *Enciclopedia del Español de los Estados Unidos* (noting that the encyclopedia did not include any articles written by U.S. born and raised Latinos). She rebuts Otheguy’s argument in the article, and in his preceding remarks, saying that she and Otheguy come from two very different perspectives regarding the use of the term Spanglish. She states that Spanglish is more than just a term, it captures a whole experience. Zentella acknowledges that she and Otheguy agree that they both have a common goal in that they do not want young U.S. Latinos to say, “Oh, I speak Spanglish” as if this were embarrassing. However, Zentella makes clear that Otheguy holds a very formal vision of language, desiring to combine public discourse about language with scientific knowledge of linguistics. She states that she comes from an *anthropological* vision of linguistics. She cites Halliday and says that language is always used to accomplish a social function, is molded by social contexts, and the speakers of the language also transform these contexts.

Zentella states that her interest is in the vision of the term *Spanglish* and how this label inscribes itself in a socio-political context. She is interested in exploring how the discourses about Spanglish either reproduce the dominant linguistic order or how they challenge it. She states that the term can be useful for challenging an imposed normativity. Zentella emphasizes that the Spanish of the U.S. is *not* the same as the popular Spanish of other Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico or Puerto Rico. Classifying Spanglish as the same as these popular varieties ignores the role of linguistic oppression in the experience of Spanish speakers in the U.S. The word-borrowings and syntactic structures of Spanglish are themselves part of an oppression in a country in which Spanish is not the dominant language and holds a subordinated position in society.

The word *Spanglish*, argues Zentella, captures the conflict and oppression. Using the term *popular U.S. Spanish* erases the conflict and she wants to highlight the conflict so that in classrooms throughout the U.S., young Spanish speakers understand this oppression as part of the experience of U.S. Latinos. Zentella underscores the importance of turning negative attitudes about Spanglish into something positive by highlighting this conflict and oppression so that the students can appreciate the way that they speak as part of a larger linguistic repertoire. Zentella makes clear that expanding the students’ linguistic repertoire does not mean that they have to reject Spanglish.

Zentella also rejects the notion that the use of Spanish varieties classifiable as Spanglish can close doors of opportunity to Latinos in the U.S. She states that these doors are closed by economic, socio-political, and cultural pressures and policies and the word *Spanglish* emphasizes the need to combat these practices and pressures. Zentella cites the poem entitled “Star Spanglish Banner” in which the use of the word Spanglish in the re-written national anthem [lyrics by Paul Shanklin, on YouTube] has nothing to do with language, but everything to do with undocumented immigrants: “José, can you see, by the dawn’s early light. Cross the border

we sailed, as the gringos were sleeping...”. The use of the word demonstrates how race has been re-mapped from biology onto language, as Urciuoli maintains, i.e., comments about language become substitutes for comments about the biological inferiority of a group.

Zentella concludes by emphasizing that by simply telling those who use the word Spanglish to stop using it will not assure that the word is no longer used. Instead, a process of semantic inversion is necessary, through which the word can be rescued and given a more positive meaning. She states that to get rid of Spanglish as a term you are going to have to get rid of Spanglish speakers and that is at the risk of not benefitting from what they have to contribute and the alternative views that they have to share. Zentella then refers to a handout. After reading the excerpts of an interview with a participant who uses Spanglish, she states that we should support the use of the term and the linguistic practices and vision of the world that it represents. It communicates a life that shares two worlds.

### **Comments between the audience and Otheguy/Zentella**

**Rafael Orozco:** Both have good points. I feel ambivalent. The language belongs to its speakers. We should all be able use it as we please, in a positive or negative way.

**Otheguy:** Considering the oppression that Spanish speakers in the U.S. have and do face, the use of the term Spanglish, which lends itself to such negative thought and confusion, should be avoided. Trying to change the prestige of a term is very challenging and in his experience, usually results in failure.

**Zentella:** The words queer, black, newyorican have all been embraced by those that they describe and a type of semantic inversion has taken place. The term Spanglish also has the potential of undergoing the same shift.

**Silva-Corvalan:** The problem with Spanglish is that, unlike the words queer, black and nuyorican, it lacks a clear definition. Does Spanglish only consist of borrowings or calques? Does it also include CS?

**Zentella:** Spanglish can have many characteristics: word borrowings, reduced morphological features, alternation. It CAN be defined!

**Otheguy:** What Zentella read from the handout is not really Spanglish. It was the alternating between two different systems, two different languages. Most people interpret ‘Spanglish’ as being a hybridized language with its own set of rules, not the switching between two languages. The words queer, black, nuyorican were able to undergo a shift in meaning because they have very little content; Spanglish is understood by most as a hybrid of two languages, which is incorrect. It is too difficult to drastically change common perception of this word.

**John Lipski:** Spanish is the most discriminated and criticized language of the U.S. We’re among friends now, but we have to think about who our enemies are (Rush Limbaugh, Fox News). The Italian immigrants spoke Italian, Chinese immigrants speak Chinese, but somehow Spanish doesn’t deserve to be called what it is. We shouldn’t be so naive, if we want to change the way the term Spanglish is interpreted, we must consider how it is used in the mouths of our enemies.

**Ana Roca** acknowledges that words “black” and “queer” still do have negative meanings. Otheguy responds that because of this we cannot give more ammunition to our enemies by using the word Spanglish. Zentella responds, “The helping hand strikes again...no me protejas tanto por favor, yo me defiendo.” She says that Spanglish is going to continue and switching between the languages will not stop. Speakers do not do what linguists tell them to do. Otheguy responds that he advocates for the elimination of the term because it is a term imposed by academics and does not come from the bottom-up.

The next comment is by **Juan Valdez** and makes a parallel between the semantic inversion of the word *chicano* during the Chicano movement and how this type of inversion can be ambivalent. The control of the use of the word cannot be contained. Zentella responds that the word *chicano* is still viewed as positive and that many of the G2 speakers in California identify with those politics.

**Luis Ortiz-López** makes a comment regarding the use of the term Spanglish in Puerto Rico, but it was very hard to hear. Otheguy responds about the irony of Spanish speakers from other Spanish-speaking countries criticizing the use of Spanglish by Puerto Ricans when Puerto Rico has fought harder than any other Spanish-speaking country to maintain its language. Zentella mentions that this highlights a pecking order. The central Mexico criticizes northern Mexico for their use of Spanglish. Northern Mexico criticizes the Chicanos. It is a question of center and periphery. And it is still a question of inverting the meaning of the word Spanglish. Otheguy responds that it is not a question of inverting the word, but burying the word, asserting that “The semantic reversal ain’t gonna happen!”