Spanglish
is Here to Stay

By Isis Artze
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Whether you know it or not, speak it or not, or like it or not, Spanglish is everywhere. Etymologically, the term combines the words Spanish and English. The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as “Spanish characterized by numerous borrowings from English.” Nearly 35 million U.S. Hispanics know it as their idioma, their language on the streets and in their casas. It is on national magazine covers, on advertisements, and is heard in popular song lyrics.

To Ilan Stavans, the foremost scholar of this linguistic phenomenon, it is an anthropological journey. But to its opponents, Spanglish is a threat that must be defused.

In one way or another, Spanglish has been around for nearly 150 years, says Stavans, professor of Spanish at Amherst College in Massachusetts. Asked its future, he says “The future is here,” asserting that Spanglish “has already played a dramatic role, not only in the way words are shaped, but also in grammar and construction.” If you trace the development of dictionaries in the Spanish-speaking world, it becomes clear that Spanglish has

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been silently evolving for quite some time, he says.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, and in the beginning of the twentieth, he adds, the frequency with which dictionaries of Anglicisms were published was accelerated: "Words like lasso, rodeo, amigo, manana, and tortilla made it into English; mister and money, into Spanish." So why all the recent fuss? For starters, Spanglish has a new status.

"Once viewed as degenerate Spanish, Spanglish suddenly has cachet," says Jennifer Bingham Hull. She points to the tremendous success of Latina magazine, whose cover headlines, nearly always in Spanglish, have attracted 200,000 subscribers.

Again, look to Stavans for the answer, for his two latest endeavors on the part of Spanglish made it such a hot topic. First, he is teaching a three-credit undergraduate course at Amherst, tracing the development of Spanglish, from a literary and anthropological perspective, "to try to understand what is happening with our language." First offered in fall 2000, it attracted nearly 60 students—noteworthy for a small, liberal arts college.

Second, and perhaps more important—Stavans recently completed The Sounds of Spanglish: An Illustrated Lexicon, an extensive dictionary of Spanglish, being published by Basic Books. "The buzz the course and the dictionary have created on National Public Radio and in newspapers around the globe has brought home to me just how much interest Spanglish arouses these days," he says. "But it also generates anxiety and even xenophobia. In the U.S., it announces to some people an overall hispanizacion of society; abroad, it raises the specter of U.S. cultural imperialism and the creation of a 'McLengua.'"

Grave Danger?

An outspoken Spanglish dissident is Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria, professor of comparative literature at Yale University, who says, "Spanglish, the composite language of Spanish and English that has crossed over from the street to Hispanic talk shows and advertising campaigns, poses a grave danger to Hispanic culture and to the advancement of Hispanics in mainstream America."

"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. Educated Hispanics who do likewise have a different motivation: Some are embarrassed by their background and feel empowered by using English words and di-
rectly translated English idioms."

*Miami Herald* columnist Ana Veciana-Suarez partially echoes this concern: "If we formally sanction Spanglish, are we allowing proper grammar to take a back seat to convenience? Are we giving the nod of approval to linguistic laziness and ignorance? Will the next step be to excuse our children's lack of verbal achievement? Teach them Spanglish, and teach them to settle for substandard English and menial jobs."

Stavans responds that, to a certain extent, he agrees: "I don't think the classroom should be used to teach it," explaining that, for now, the only course on Spanglish he advocates is one similar to his own, that is, taught from an anthropological standpoint.

**Like Ebonics?**

Veciana-Suarez also compares the recent Spanglish debate to California's Ebonics debate four years ago. And she has a valid point, given that Stavans has dedicated considerable time, in his study of Spanglish, to an analysis of Ebonics.

Both are "intraethnic vehicle[s] of communication, used in the United States ... to establish empathy among [groups]," he says. "But the differences with Ebonics are sharp. For one thing, Ebonics is not a product of *mestizaje*, the cross-fertilization of two perfectly discernible codes; Spanglish is. Spanglish is also not defined by class, as people in all social strata, from migrant workers to politicians, academics, and TV anchors, regularly use it, both in the United States and south of the Rio Grande."

In many ways, Stavans says, Yiddish is closer to Spanglish than Ebonics is: "Like Spanglish, Yiddish was never a unified tongue, but a series of regional varieties. Moreover, while both Yiddish and Spanglish started as intraethnic minority languages, both quickly became transnational verbal codes." The presence of Yiddish in Stavans' own upbringing in Mexico, in a small Jewish enclave, was crucial to his later fascination with Spanglish, he says.

Hull also addresses the role of Spanglish in Miami, where it is a predominant language. She says that, on the one hand, the prevalence of Spanglish demonstrates the dexterity of its users: "For those truly bilingual, Spanglish can reflect impressive verbal skills as speakers choose from two languages for just the right expression. Switching back and forth between Spanish and English, or 'code switching' as linguists call it, these people will often use Spanish to express emotions and English for analytical thoughts. They also use Spanglish as a shortcut, replacing long Spanish words and phrases with shorter English ones."
On the other hand, she says, the popularity of Spanglish in Miami can reflect a lack of fluency in Spanish: “Though more than half of Miami-Dade County’s population is Hispanic, only 3% of its public school students graduate from high school fluent in Spanish. Miami business leaders complain that the prevalence of Spanglish in South Florida is symptomatic of a larger problem they face finding employees who are truly bilingual.”

Might Spanglish hinder social advancement? Stavans says the opposite is true: “For Latinos to succeed in the U.S., English has to be learned, but you are worse off if you don’t speak Spanglish.”

Another common critique is the “purist” view that the Spanish language must be protected. Echevarria says, “Spanish is our strongest bond, and it is vital that we preserve it.” He anticipates some will challenge him, comparing development of Spanglish, from Spanish and English, to that of Spanish as a branch of Latin: “I suppose my medievalist colleagues will say that without the contamination of Latin by local languages, there would be no Spanish (or French or Italian).

“We are no longer in the Middle Ages, however, and it is naive to think that we could create a new language that would be functional and culturally rich. Literature in Spanglish can only aspire to a sort of wit based on a rebellious gesture, which wears thin quickly,” he adds, concluding that “those who practice it are doomed to writing not a minority literature but a minor literature.”

“Languages are living things,” Stavans replies; “they are constantly changing and evolving.” It is spoken by everybody, even by those who reject it, he adds, “and if we’re using it, it’s proof that it’s needed.”

**Threat to English?**

Also defending the Spanish language is La Real Academia Espanola (RAE). To encourage proper Spanish, it has a website with an interactive service to answer questions about correct Spanish use. Yet, in an October 2000 visit to Spain’s University of Oviedo library, RAE director Victor Garcia de la Concha and Language Academies Association (LAA) secretary Humberto Lopez Morales said Spanglish does not threaten the Spanish language but does threaten English.

So long as schools and the Spanish-language U.S. media uphold correct grammar, “there is no danger,” Lopez Morales argued, adding that LAA’s project to create a dictionary of Latin American words and expressions, launched in 1996, will be done in four years and include 125,000 entries.

Their suggestion that Spanglish poses a threat to English, as
opposed to Spanish, seems political in nature, and stands in opposition to Echevarria's final critique: "To permit and promote Spanglish—if it actually exists—is to surrender to the globalisation and the predomination of English. Politically, Spanglish is a capitulation; it indicates marginalization, not enfranchisement."

One could rebut both arguments by saying that, in Spanglish, English encroaches upon Spanish to an extent comparable to that at which Spanish encroaches upon English, thereby resulting in a somewhat politically neutral verbal code.

**Authoritative?**

A debate specific to Stavans' dictionary itself relates to the idea that, once a dictionary is published, its contents become authoritative. The book is said to contain about 6,000 words, mini-essays, descriptions of how words are used in context, and a critical apparatus indicating if the word was previously recorded in a dictionary, and if words are regionally or subculturally specific. It will list entries as Spanglish-English and Spanglish-Espanol.

What some consider the alarming component of the physical presence of this text is that, even now, Spanglish is an oral tradition, so that seeing it in black and white, in dictionary form, changes its essence.

The role dictionaries play in shaping a language is addressed by Stavans in his course. He says his dictionary "is not prescriptive." It is not to teach people nor to be used as a guide in writing school papers. Instead, for the time being, it has an anthropological purpose, documenting a language spoken throughout America.

"For me, it is a way to legitimize a linguistic phenomenon that has been around for some time, says Stavans. "More than a fashion that comes and goes, it's part of a trend that ultimately will reshape the way we speak." Who will use the dictionary? "People interested in the phenomenon," Stavans anticipates, but perhaps it will serve other purposes in years to come, he adds.

It contains words used in nearly every facet of daily life. Nearly 10% are Cyber-Spanglish, a result of our Internet-driven lives and the American domination of this enterprise. Words like *el mouse* (the computer mouse) have no recognizable, readily used Spanish translations.

Enthusiastic about his work, his course, and his upcoming dictionary, Stavans' message to academia is that "In the academic world, we choose to bury our head in the ground, not wanting to see what's around us. We need to stop ignoring [Spanglish], to realize it's there, and that languages are in constant change."