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Reading the world in *Spanglish*: Hybrid language practices and ideological contestation in a sixth-grade English language arts classroom

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a study of language and ideology among bilingual Chicana/o and Latina/o sixth-graders at a middle school in East Los Angeles. Relying on participant observation, video/audio-recording, and semi-structured interviews, the study explored students' *language ideologies* with respect to Spanish-English code-switching, a language practice that many of the students referred to as "*Spanglish*." Analysis of the data reveals that students articulated and embodied both *dominant* language ideologies that framed *Spanglish* in pejorative terms and *counter-hegemonic* language ideologies that valorized and normalized this bilingual language practice. It is argued that this ideological variation and contradiction provide fertile ground for transformative dialog that could potentially help students cultivate *critical language awareness* and *critical literacy* more broadly.

1. Introduction

In the following quote, Samantha, a bilingual sixth-grade student, explains why she sometimes mixes Spanish and English in conversation:

Maybe it's the way I talk. I can. . .I speak both, so I kind of mix them together.

Samantha's comments come from an interview that I conducted as part of an ethnographic study of language and ideology among Chicana/o and Latina/o youth at a middle school in East Los Angeles. Like many of her classmates, Samantha referred to her mixture of Spanish and English as "*Spanglish*." In Ms. Ramírez's sixth-grade English language arts classroom, where I collected the data for this study, students spoke *Spanglish* on a daily basis, and they did so in ways that displayed creativity, skill, and intelligence. I have described elsewhere the various social and communicative functions that *Spanglish* served in this classroom, as well as how the skill embedded in students' use of *Spanglish* might be leveraged as a resource for helping them to develop related academic literacy skills (Martínez, 2010). In this article, I turn to a consideration of students' *language ideologies* with respect to *Spanglish*. I explore students' beliefs and feelings about this everyday language practice, highlighting the ideological contestation that emerged within the context of this "English Only" classroom.

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1.1. In terms of definition

I use the term *Spanglish* in this article to refer to the language practice that most linguists have historically called Spanish-English *code-switching*. Woolard (2004) defines code-switching as "an individual's use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event or exchange" (pp. 73–74). Over the past four decades, linguists and other scholars have debunked popular perceptions that bilingual code-switching is a deficient or haphazard language practice, demonstrating that it occurs in rule-governed and systematically predictable ways (Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Joshi, 1985; Mahootian & Santorini, 1995; Toribio, 2004). These scholars argue that code-switching is not caused by insufficient competence in one of the two languages, but rather reflects the same level of grammatical competence as that reflected in the speech of monolinguals (Lance, 1975; MacSwan, 1999; Poplack, 1981). This scholarly tradition stands in stark contrast to prevailing folk theories that attribute code-switching to gaps in vocabulary, lack of education, improper control of language, and/or an overall lack of proficiency in one or both of the languages in question (Gumperz, 1982; Lance, 1969; Romaine, 1995). To be sure, many bilingual speakers occasionally switch between two languages in order to sustain interaction when they are at a loss for words. Zentella (1997) refers to this type of code-switching as *crutching* or *crutch-like* switching because, like someone who relies on a crutch to walk, "a bilingual who is stumped in one language can keep on speaking by depending on a translated synonym as a stand-in" (p. 98). As Zentella (1997) has demonstrated, however, this is not necessarily the primary factor motivating code-switching among bilinguals. In her long-term ethnographic work among bilingual speakers in a New York Puerto Rican speech community, she reported that *crutch-like* switches constituted only 25% of the total number of strategic switches that she documented (Zentella, 1997). Zentella explains that code-switching constitutes "more than a convenient way to handle linguistic gaps" (1997, p. 99), noting that it is a valuable linguistic resource that bilingual speakers utilize for various communicative purposes.

Some scholars in education and related fields have begun to use the term *Spanglish* to refer to Spanish-English code-switching and related linguistic phenomena (Martínez-Roldán & Sayer, 2006; Rosa, 2010; Sayer, 2008). Although some linguists reject the term outright because it is often used to refer inaccurately and pejoratively to the varieties of Spanish spoken by Latina/os in the United States (Lipski, 2008; Otheguy & Stern, 2010), it has, nonetheless, gained currency in popular discourse and in some of the research literature. Zentella (1997), for example, notes that bilinguals are increasingly using the term to describe their code-switching in a positive light despite the fact that it has historically carried a pejorative connotation. While I occasionally use the terms *Spanglish* and Spanish-English code-switching interchangeably, I privilege *Spanglish* because it is the preferred term among most of the people that I know who engage in this language practice, including more than half of the students with whom I have worked over the past 16 years.

My use of the term *Spanglish* also reflects current theory in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics that frames language as *practice*—as a form of social action that emerges within particular local contexts (Blommaert, 2010; García & Sylvan, 2011; Pennycook, 2010). Scholars in these fields have challenged the notion that languages are bounded systems that pre-exist their use, simultaneously rejecting the assumption that a bilingual speaker's languages function as two separate codes (Blommaert & Backus, 2011; Jorgensen, Karrebaek, Madsen, & Moller, 2011; Makoni & Pennycook, 2005; Pennycook, 2010). As Pennycook (2010) notes, this perspective shifts attention "away from language as a system and towards language as something we do" (p. 8). Of course, this perspective on language and bilingualism is not without precedent. Over two decades ago, for example, Urciuoli (1985) argued against privileging the systematicity of language. She proposed abandoning the notion of *code* in favor of the notion of *practice*, arguing that bilingual speakers' two languages are "pragmatically unified" (Urciuoli, 1985, p. 383) in their everyday speech. More recently, scholars have echoed this perspective, moving away from the use of the term *code-switching* in their discussions of bilingual speech. Seeking to represent bilingual language mixing as the dynamic use of linguistic resources rather than as the combination of two supposedly distinct codes, these scholars have proposed terms such as *translanguaging* (García, 2009), *polylanguaging* (Jorgensen et al., 2011), *transidiomatic practices* (Jacquemet, 2005), and *hybrid language practices* (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, & Tejeda, 1999). Following Gutiérrez et al. (1999), I use the term *hybrid language practices* to refer to linguistic phenomena such as code-switching, as this term affords an understanding of the dynamic everyday practice of bilingualism. *Spanglish*, I argue, is best understood as a hybrid language practice that emerges normally within bilingual settings.

2. Language ideologies

Although there is an extensive body of scholarship on Spanish-English code-switching (Gumperz, 1982; Lance, 1975; Poplack, 1980; Zentella, 1997), including some research in classroom settings (Genishi, 1981; Gort, 2012; Valdés, 1981), very few studies focus on what bilingual youth think and feel about this hybrid language practice.[1] And while there is a growing body of literature on language ideologies in education (López, 2012; Martínez-Roldán & Malavé, 2004; McGroarty, 2010; Razfar, 2005, 2011), this literature does not focus specifically on *Spanglish*. By foregrounding students' *language ideologies* with respect to *Spanglish*, I hope to contribute to the reversal of what Kroskrity (2004) has called "a longstanding scholarly tradition of delegitimating common people's views of language" (p. 507). To this end, I draw on scholarship in linguistic anthropology that highlights speakers' beliefs and feelings about their language practices in relation to broader ideological

[1] See Mendoza-Denton (2008), Rosa (2010), and Zentella (1997) for some noteworthy exceptions.