

Between Tongues: Code-switching, Spanglish, and the Dual Identity of Young U.S. Hispanics

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Has the widespread use of Spanglish and code-switching among young adults in the Hispanic community led to a sense of cultural decay, diminishing their connection to their Hispanic roots? In the United States, Hispanic communities are known for their unique use of language, which often includes code-switching and Spanglish as tools during conversations. Code-switching, the practice of changing between languages during one conversation, and Spanglish, a mixed language that combines English words into Spanish, have become essential to the way young Hispanics express themselves and navigate different cultures within their community while feeling a sense of belonging. This research will explore how and why Hispanic communities use code-switching and Spanglish as a form of communication, reflecting on one's personal experience, and identity within a multicultural community. By analyzing different ways of code-switching and Spanglish being used, this essay aims to demonstrate how these “linguistic phenomena” (Price 25) are more than a mixing of languages but a vital tool for navigating the complex relationship between the U.S. and Hispanic cultures.

Code-switching refers to the act of changing between languages within a conversation or sentence; it is a unique linguistic practice among Hispanics in the United States. This typically occurs when speakers seamlessly switch between Spanish and English. With research, I've found that this act depends on the context, topic, or social setting. For example, a bilingual speaker may use Spanish to express emotional depth or cultural references while switching to English for technical or practical terms. During one of my interviews, Kevin Miranda, a Mexican-American student at WOU, expressed that despite his native language being English, there are certain situations where Spanish is more of a comfort language for him. Miranda only speaks Spanish at home and a few other settings like going to church. He states that the only way he understands the Bible is in Spanish, and in English these religious terms have “no meaning” to him since that is the only way he has been taught all his life, which illustrates my other example. A bilingual speaker may also only code-switch when they feel they are in a comfortable environment and more casual. Code-switching is often driven by the need for convenience, or a desire to communicate effectively within bilingual communities. For Miranda and many other individuals in this community, code-switching isn't a matter of necessity for lack of fluency in either language but rather a way to feel more connected to the Spanish-speaking community as it allows them to connect and communicate with people from different cultures and backgrounds.

Code-switching often gets misinterpreted as a lack of knowledge or fluency in either language, since the younger generation of this community often become more dominant in English, forgetting or never learning Spanish properly. These people often experience a lot of gaps while trying to communicate in their nondominant language.

Having no control over the conversation, they try to compensate with switching over to their dominant language resulting in “compensatory code-switching” (Schächinger Tenés et al. 943). In these cases, it is obvious that code-switching is more of a necessity for them, since without it they basically can’t express what they are trying to say in a conversation. As this practice shows a lack of fluency in their nondominant language, these cases make many people believe that code-switching is only helping these individuals cover up their lack of fluency and stopping them from truly becoming fluent in both languages. While this is true in some cases, code-switching also serves as a marker of cultural identity for many in this community, signaling belonging to both the Hispanic community and the broader American society.

Spanglish, on the other hand, gets very easily criticized by many. The blend of Spanish and English is a common and often natural form of communication for many Hispanics in the United States. It emerges especially in areas where both languages are frequently spoken. Individuals may often get one language more fluent than the other, typically English. In the moment of translating an English word into Spanish, these Spanglish words are being created. While there are certain words in English that are similar if not the same in Spanish, many younger individuals in this community make the mistake of mistranslating. Camila Perez writes that “students use these ‘techniques’ to translate unfamiliar and sporadically used words” (31). And while a couple of words are similar and the translation might be the same this is not the case for all, making these “techniques” useless most of the time. Some examples of this would be “accidente” which is the Spanish translation for “accident” in English. Other words aren’t so similar, like “embarrassed” in English which often gets mistranslated to “embarazada” in

Spanish which means a completely different thing. These small mistranslations occur to many in the United States.

This phenomenon is not new; Spanglish has been around for many years in the United States, which makes it very hard to acknowledge when you are younger. Many Hispanics in this community have lived their whole lives here and usually learn Spanish from home and by speaking with other people in their community. Since Spanglish is so popular among this community, many of these individuals don't acknowledge that they are using it. Spanglish can be seen in everyday conversations, media, music, and even advertising, where it resonates with many members of the younger generations. It is hard to detect when you are using these terms. The main problem with Spanglish is that it isn't proper Spanish nor English, making these words have basically zero meaning. Some examples for Spanglish words would be "troca" which comes from the word "truck" in English. When these individuals start being too comfortable with using Spanglish in their day-to-day speech, their Spanish fluency ultimately starts to vanish. Paola Camacho, a Mexican American, expressed that she limits her use of Spanglish as she feels like it "diminishes" her native language.

Despite the hatred towards Spanglish, for many, especially among the younger generation, it is a practical solution to the gaps in their vocabulary or the inability to fully express concepts in one language. Spanglish also serves as a cultural marker, reinforcing ties to both Hispanic heritage and American society, while symbolizing a shared experience of being part of two worlds.

In conclusion, the widespread use of code-switching and Spanglish among young Hispanics in the United State does not necessarily indicate a lack of knowledge

or fluency in one language over the other. These linguistic practices serve as tools for helping young Hispanics to express their belonging in this community, and while some may argue that the use of either practice diminishes one's cultural identity, these practices also reinforce the connection these individuals have with their native culture, while also sharing their experience of living with two languages and two different cultures at once. These practices help younger generations that are not able to experience the culture of their parents' native country for themselves feel more connected to that culture's practices and beliefs. While it is hard for those younger generations born in the United States to obtain fluency in both English and Spanish, these practices help them build up their confidence and fluency in Spanish, as it is a way to make mistakes without being judged or criticized for using the "wrong" word. As a Hispanic that is also part of this community, being able to code-switch has helped me navigate the difficulties that come with being part of this community, one of them being all the different cultures there are within this community. The Hispanic community in the United States is very multicultural, as there are people from many different countries, regions, and backgrounds. This heavily affects the way you feel connected with other individuals since you may not share the same beliefs and experiences as them, but the use of these tools, has helped many, including myself, to come together and not feel left out if another individual in this community has different beliefs than your own. And while the answer to the question of this phenomena leading to cultural decay is very complex and often depend on one's own beliefs and experiences, code-switching and Spanglish often serves as tools for navigating and expressing cultural identities within this big multicultural community. Rather than leading to cultural decay, these practices often

bring individuals closer together, reinforcing a sense of belonging. And while some of these practices complicate traditional language norms, being able to code-switch and use Spanglish to your advantage is “a blessing” (Miranda).

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Abstract: This paper explores the widespread use of code-switching and Spanglish among young Hispanic adults in the United States and how these linguistic practices impact their cultural identity. Drawing from personal experience and interviews, I examine how code-switching and Spanglish serve as important communication tools that reflect the complexities of living between two languages and cultures, rather than simply indicating a loss of fluency. This research shows that these linguistic habits help individuals maintain connections to their Hispanic heritage while adapting to their American surroundings.

Bio: My name is Arianna Salazar, and I'm originally from Venezuela. I'm currently a first-year student at Western Oregon University, majoring in Criminal Justice with a minor in Legal Studies. My long-term goal is to attend law school and become a criminal defense attorney. Outside of academics, I run my own baking business, which lets me channel my creativity in a different way. I'm also part of the WOU cheer team, which keeps me active and connected on campus. Balancing school, baking, and cheer has been a challenge, but it's taught me discipline, time management, and the importance of staying passionate in everything I do.

Keywords: Spanglish, Code-switching, Hispanic Community, US Latinos, Composition, Cultural Identity, Language Norms, L1, L2, Bilingual.

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