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CHAPTER 4

Tempted by the Words of Another

Linguistic Choices of Chicanas/os and Other Latinas/os in Los Angeles

ANA SÁNCHEZ-MUÑOZ

This essay explores Chicana/o (and other Latino/a) identity formation through the use of language. It examines the vocabulary choices and communicative exchanges in the vernacular varieties of Latino immigrant groups. The main goal is to investigate the negotiation of ethnic and linguistic identity as different languages and dialects come into contact sharing the same multicultural urban space.

Previous research has identified patterns of dialect change and formation in the Spanish used by different Latino groups in Los Angeles (Parodi “Contacto de Dialectos,” “Normatividad y Diglosia,” “El otro México”). This essay adds to the existing literature by exploring how language ideologies, attitudes, and accommodation (or lack of it) are intertwined, contributing to the complex linguistic fabric of the city, defying the idea that there is only one Latino speech community (Spanish-speaking). For example, Central Americans may resist more dominant varieties of Mexican Spanish in California. Each group’s linguistic behavior has a different meaning in the construction and negotiation of a distinctive Latino identity.

In particular, this essay references the way in which Chicanas/os construct a unique identity through language as well as how their vernacular influences other Latino groups (mainly Central American). Language use plays a specific role in the negotiations, a symbol of identity to represent different social meanings within their own Latino community.
L.A.: THE CITY OF (SPANISH-SPEAKING) ANGELS

Los Angeles is a natural sociolinguistic lab: From Korea town to Little Armenia, from Chinatown to Little Ethiopia, L.A.’s many distinct neighborhoods evidence the huge ethnocultural and linguistic diversity of the city. But among the many sounds heard around town, two linguistic “giants” dominate the urban landscape: Spanish and English. These two colonial languages have been coexisting in California since the 1800s when English started moving west. Despite the fact that English gradually replaced Spanish as the language of economy and power, Spanish continued to be spoken and used by Californians, especially in the south of the state. To this day, Spanish is the most-spoken language in many areas of Los Angeles and San Diego Counties.

In addition to the long historical presence of Spanish in the area, immigration from Latin American countries, especially from Mexico and Central America, has kept on increasing. In the L.A. metro area, almost 50 percent of the population is classified as Hispanic/Latino (2010 U.S. Census). Spanish is the most frequently spoken language after English and the predominant language in many communities. Even though the majority of the Latino population is of Mexican descent or origin, the number of Central Americans has more than doubled since the 1980s. Table 1 offers a glimpse of the most recent Latino demographics for L.A. County.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORIGIN</th>
<th>POPULATION</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF THE LATINO/HISPANIC POPULATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexican origin</td>
<td>3,693,975</td>
<td>76.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central American origin</td>
<td>795,799</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South American origin</td>
<td>131,802</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean origin (Spanish-speaking)</td>
<td>88,408</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Latino/Hispanic)</td>
<td>126,435</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because immigration brings high linguistic diversity, L.A. is an ideal place to examine the formation of new Latino speech communities, dialect contact areas, and dialect mergers. This essay examines Chicano Spanish and the contact between this and other varieties of Spanish that make L.A. their home. It also explores the ways in which ideologies and linguistic attitudes are revealed against the complexity of the urban linguistic landscape.
This essay begins with an overview of the most characteristic features of Chicano Spanish in Los Angeles. Next, it examines how contact between distinct Spanish dialects manifests in various L.A. communities, specifically between Mexican and Central American varieties spoken in the region (mainly by Salvadorians and Guatemalans). The essay concludes with a discussion on some of the ways in which speakers navigate their linguistic repertoire (different varieties of English and Spanish) to display their multifaceted L.A.tina/o identities.

THE SPANISH OF L.A. CHICANOS

The term Chicana/o was originally a derogatory term applied to the descendants of Mexican people in the United States. This term was later adopted as a term of ethnic pride and political consciousness during the civil rights movements of the 1960s. To identify oneself as Chicana/o as opposed to Mexican American or Latino or Hispanic means reasserting a unique ethnic and sociopolitical bond. It means claiming a distinctive culture, not just a mixture of two colonial pasts but rather a culture with its own history, aesthetics, music, and unique linguistic expression. The Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa writes about this in her *opus magnum* Borderlands/La Frontera: The New *Mestiza*: “We don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness” (85).

What are, then, the languages that Chicanos use to encode those various degrees of “Mexicanness” or “Angloness” that Anzaldúa wrote about? A distinct code, *Spanglish*, has been commonly associated with Chicanos and with Latinos in the United States in general. But even though the population at large uses the term *Spanglish* frequently and widely, there is no consensus in the literature as to what exactly this term refers to (see, in this regard, Dumièrescu 2010, which includes, among other things, a lengthy discussion about the perception of and the attitudes toward the term *Spanglish*). Some authors claim it to be a rather new American language, produced by the blending of two languages and two identities into a single one, usually referred to with the transparent acronym of *Spanglish* (Stavans). By contrast, many scholars (see for instance Otheguy and Stern or Lipski) believe that the term does not serve the Latino community well as it blurs many scientifically well-studied linguistic phenomena into a mesh of a half-baked language system. Regardless of whether we like the term or not, what is commonly referred to as *Spang-
lish is namely code-switching, code-mixing, borrowings, and other language-contact phenomena, which I further explain below, commonly employed by bilinguals. Since Chicanos often inhabit bilingual and bicultural spaces, it is natural to expect that such features will characterize their linguistic expressions (Sánchez-Muñoz “Identidad”).

Bilingual Spanish-English spaces are not so clearly defined either. The degree to which Spanish is spoken and maintained in the United States varies greatly from community to community and from family to family. Most Chicanos in the L.A. area are bilingual, although English is the dominant language. Speakers can function in Spanish, but theirs is a variety of Spanish characterized by those unique features that are not typical of monolingual varieties of the language.

So, what are some of the key ingredients that give Chicana/o Spanish its particular flavor? Parodi (“Contacto,” “Normatividad,” “El otro México”) and her students at the CEEEUUS research center at UCLA (Center for the Study of Spanish in the United States) have been tracking the formation and evolution of Español Vernáculo de Los Angeles (EVLA), a Spanish koiné in Los Angeles which has a distinct Mexican flavor spiced with those Spanglish features typical of the intimate contact with English: convergence, borrowings, calques, switches, and so forth. EVLA is the variety spoken by Chicanos in L.A., and, according to Parodi, it is also the one acquired by second-generation Latinos/Hispanics in the city regardless of their self-identification as Chicana/o or other.

There are two main factors that characterize EVLA as an urban ethnic dialect: its connection to rural varieties of Mexican Spanish and the aforementioned features of language contact. Regarding the first, its rural origins in Mexican ranchos of Querétaro, Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, and Jalisco (Parodi “Contacto”), we find syntactic features such as the generalization of the morpheme “-s” for the second person of the simple preterit (e.g., comistes instead of the standard comiste) and archaisms such as haiga (instead of the canonical haya). Phonologically, processes typical of casual nonstandard production are normalized in Chicano Spanish, such as contractions of the definite article before a vocalic sound (e.g., l’avena, l’alfalfa); contractions or deletions of entire syllables in high-frequency connectors, prepositions, or verbs (e.g., pa’, pos, tá’ instead of para, pues, or está’); or simplification of consonant clusters (e.g., dotor instead of doKtor). These features are traditionally stigmatized in monolingual varieties since they are typical of rural environments and associated with un- or undereducated speakers, and thus carry little or no linguistic prestige. However, in a situation of bilingualism where another language, English in this case, is the language of power, the variety of
the most numerous minority (rural Mexican Spanish) becomes the one that carries more weight and enjoys covert prestige in the formation of a distinct immigrant dialect.

Regarding the linguistic phenomena that develop in language-contact situations, Chicano Spanish displays several well-known traits; among these, two are particularly salient: code-switching and lexical transfer. Code-switching is the moving back and forth between two languages in a single communicative exchange. It is the ubiquitous *entre idiomas* (between languages) that can be heard on the streets of L.A., in *mercados* (markets), buses, and several Latino TV and radio stations. Indeed, code-switching is a very common linguistic strategy present all over the world in bilingual and multilingual speech communities. The general category of “lexical transfer” can further be classified into single-word switches to English (items that preserve English phonology) and single-word borrowings (items adapted to Spanish phonology). In this latter group, we differentiate between loans (the transfer of forms with their meanings; for example, *troca* ‘truck’), and semantic extensions (the transfer of meanings only; for example, *carpeta*, which in standard Spanish means “binder” or “file folder,” used with the meaning from English “carpet”). Speakers of L.A. Spanish use these linguistic resources that set them apart from monolingual varieties of the language. Thus, Chicana/o speakers perform the various pieces of their cultural heritage in their language use, as a kind of linguistic *Nepantla* (Sánchez-Muñoz “Identidad”).

Chicano Spanish can be heard in many L.A. barrios, sometimes together with Chicano English, another urban ethnic dialect of English, which is characterized by the contact with the Spanish of the region (for an in-depth analysis of Chicana/o English, please see Penfield and Ornstein-Galicia and Fought). But just as Chicano English is not the only variety of English heard on the streets of L.A., Chicano Spanish is not the only Spanish, either. A growing number of Central Americans have made their linguistic mark in the city, too. The following section discusses some of the consequences of dialect contact among speakers of Spanish from different regions of the Spanish-speaking world.

**JUNTOS PERO NO REVUELTOS: DIALECT CONTACT, CONVERGENCE, AND DIVERGENCE**

As mentioned earlier, according to the last U.S. census, half the population in Los Angeles is Latino or Hispanic (of course, if we took into consideration those not included in the official statistics, these numbers would be much higher).
Also, as indicated above, even though most Latino communities are bilingual, that does not necessarily imply that every member of the community speaks Spanish or English. There is indeed a continuum between recently arrived monolingual Spanish speakers and U.S.-born monolingual English speakers with various degrees of bilingualism between those poles. Additionally, there are many varieties of Spanish spoken in the city. Even though Chicano Spanish is the most widely spoken variety (Parodi “En torno”), Central American varieties are increasingly making their way in the linguistic landscape of Los Angeles. As shown in Table 1, the number of Central Americans in L.A. County, mainly Salvadorian and Guatemalans, is significant, at close to eight hundred thousand people (more than 16 percent of the Latino population).

Central American Spanish differs from Chicano Spanish phonologically, syntactically, and lexically. These differences correspond to dialectal variation between Spanish varieties of the highlands in Mexico, which is the base of Chicano Spanish, (Parodi “Contacto,” “Normatividad,” “El otro México”) and the lowlands in Central America. Some of the main differences are summarized in Table 2.

### Table 2
Differences between Central American and Mexican Chicano Spanish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CENTRAL AMERICAN VARIETIES</th>
<th>MEXICAN VARIETIES (N/BAJÍO)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phonological features</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiration s → h</td>
<td>No aspiration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Velarization n → n</td>
<td>No velarization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epenthesis o → y</td>
<td>No epenthesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Morphosyntactic features</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of the second personal singular pronoun “VOS” and its verbal conjugation (vos venís, vos comés)</td>
<td>Use of the second personal singular pronoun “TÚ” and its verbal conjugation (tú vienes, tú comes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lexical features</strong> (great variation in vocabulary)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayote (pumpkin)</td>
<td>Calabacita (pumpkin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chumpa (jacket)</td>
<td>Saco/Chamarra (jacket)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chele (light-skinned person)</td>
<td>Güero (light-skinned person)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yinas (sandals/flip-flops)</td>
<td>Chanclas (sandals/flip-flops)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacha (baby bottle)</td>
<td>Mamila (baby bottle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piscucha (kite)</td>
<td>Papalote (kite)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just as language contact results in a number of unique linguistic phenomena such as loans, calques, or switches, the situation of contact between two dialects of the same language also leads to particular linguistic outcomes. There are some important linguistic notions that inform the research of dialect contact and that form the theoretical framework of my study of dialect contact in Los Angeles. These are some of the main theories.
In accommodation theory, Giles and Coupland argued that people adjust their speech, gestures, and vocal patterns to accommodate to others. This framework explores the various reasons why individuals emphasize or minimize the social differences between themselves and their interlocutors through verbal and nonverbal communication. This theory addresses the links between language, context, and identity by exploring intergroup and interpersonal factors that lead to accommodating communication behaviors (Gallois, Ogay, and Giles). There are two main accommodation processes described by this theory: convergence, which refers to the strategies through which interlocutors adapt to each other’s communicative behaviors, in order to reduce differences, and divergence, which refers to the instances in which individuals accentuate their speech and nonverbal differences. In the case of dialect contact, when speakers of different varieties of the same language interact continuously and inhabit the same spaces, we can expect that convergence, and, perhaps in some cases, divergence, will take place. It is also expected that the accommodation will gear toward the most prestigious or predominant dialect (Chicano Spanish in this case).

Dialect leveling refers to the assimilation of dialects by reducing the “variation between dialects of the same language in situations where speakers of these dialects are brought together” (Lefebvre 46). Dialect leveling is triggered by contact between dialects and has been observed in many parts of the world as a result of language standardization. As opposed to accommodation, which is a short-term approximation between speakers of different dialects in communication, dialect leveling is a long-term process that leads to convergence and the disappearance of distinct features in the precontact varieties.

Koinéization (Siegel) is the mixing of features of different dialects, which leads to a new dialect. It results from integration or unification of the speakers of the varieties in contact. A koiné is a structurally stabilized variety that is the product of heavy intermixture. According to Parodi ("El otro México"), Chicano Spanish is a koiné mainly derived from rural varieties of Spanish in Mexico and the predominant variety of Spanish in L.A.

Diglossia (Ferguson, Fishman “Bilingualism,” Gumperz) refers to the specialization of use of two languages that are in contact within the same geographical area. Diglossic situations are also very common around the world. Usually one of the languages or varieties is considered high and is associated with official status (carries overt prestige), while the low variety is often relegated to less formal situations.

All of these theories—accommodation, dialect leveling, koinéization, and diglossia—are at play in the linguistic situation of Los Angeles, with Spanish
and English having had intense contact for centuries, but also in more recent times with the contact among different varieties of Spanish.

In previous studies, Parodi (“Normatividad,” “El otro México”) proposed that Central Americans living in Los Angeles acquire EVLA (Chicano Spanish) regardless of their parents’ vernacular variety. Parodi studied the Spanish of Central Americans (mostly Salvadorians) in L.A. She divided her population into two groups: those born in L.A. or who arrived before eight years of age¹ and those who came as adults in their twenties and beyond. Parodi examined various linguistic features including morphological, phonological, and lexical traits, which are different between Mexican and Central American Spanish (see Table 2): for instance, the use of vos in Central America for the second-person singular instead of tú in Mexico (and EVLA). She found that typical Central American words and morphosyntactic features such as vos are not produced by Central Americans born and raised in L.A. Thus, Parodi concludes, there is evidence of dialect leveling resulting in a koiné that is mainly characterized by features of the most numerous, oldest, or prestigious dialect (Chicano Spanish or EVLA, in this case).

In my own research (Sánchez-Muñoz “Los distintos dialectos”) examining contact between Central Americans and Chicanos in Los Angeles, some of my data coincides with Parodi’s results. While some speakers abandon the use of vos and tend to produce words and terms that are typical of Chicano Spanish, my research indicates a stronger tendency toward bidialectalism rather than a complete leveling or adoption of a koiné.

In my study of dialect contact between Central American and Chicano Spanish in L.A., I was interested in examining how much convergence, if any, first-generation Central American immigrants showed toward the predominant Chicano Spanish of Los Angeles. To this end, I collected data from first-generation Salvadorians and Guatemalans who had been residing in L.A. for over ten years. The data collection procedures included open-ended sociolinguistic interviews, which ranged between forty-five and seventy minutes and aimed at eliciting information related to the speakers’ ethnic and linguistic identity and dialect awareness. Speakers also completed a picture-naming task to see whether they would produce the local Chicano word for a given image of an object or action or whether they would first produce their own vernacular version of the word. For instance, when presented with a picture of a kite, the speaker would first say piscucha (Central American) or papalote (Mexican). The picture-naming task contained seventy images of objects or actions.

¹ Eight years of age has been established as the approximate cut-off age for nativelike dialect acquisition (Chambers, Parodi “Contacto”).
that are commonly referred to by different words or expressions in Mexican
and Central American varieties.

Although the results are inconclusive at this point since I have only
included data from ten participants so far for this project, there is a clear ten-
dency toward bidialectalism. Most speakers produce first the Chicano word
about 50 percent of the time (usually for common actions or objects such
as sucio or chanclas instead of shuco for “dirty” or yinas for “flip-flops”), but
right away also explain that they would say it differently in their places of ori-
gin. It seems that most speakers easily code-switch between varieties depend-
ing on the situation and interlocutor. Regarding the use of vos versus tú, my
observations indicate that vos is only used with family members and close
friends from the same place of origin (Salvador or Guatemala), whereas tú
is used with everyone else (Chicano, Mexican, Spaniard, etc.) This diglossic
use of Central American variants for some situations may indicate a negotia-
tion not only of linguistic spaces but also of ethnocultural alliances. This is
more clearly evidenced in the open-ended interviews, where we find com-
ments such as “soy latino aquí en Los Angeles y es bueno poder hablar mi idi-
oma con mucha de la gente de aquí, pero soy chapín de corazón” (“I am Latino
here in Los Angeles and it’s good to be able to speak my language with the
majority of the people here, but I’m Guatemalan at heart.”). I argue that just as
code-switching between Spanish and English is a way of negotiating the multi-
faceted identities of Chicanos in Los Angeles, the code-switching between dif-
f erent dialects also evidences negotiations of different aspects of being Latino
in which both convergence and divergence are at play: Juntos pero no revueltos
(Together but not mixed).

TEMPTED BY THE WORDS OF ANOTHER?
ETHNICITY, LANGUAGE, AND IDENTITY

Language is one of the most powerful tools to construct one’s identity. Lan-
guage serves more than a purely communicative function; it serves as a
symbolic marker of identity that, among other things, enables a particular
group to distinguish itself from others (Fishman “Language and Ethnicity,”
Bucholtz). The complexities of ethnic and cultural identities are mirrored
in speech practices particularly evident in urban environments as diverse as
the city of Los Angeles. In the case of Chicanos, an indigenous connection,
a Spanish-linguistic heritage, and an Anglo-centric reality are intertwined in
a unique sociolinguistic space. As I have argued here and elsewhere, Spang-
lish (namely, code-switching, code-mixing, borrowings, and other language-
contact phenomena commonly employed by Chicana/o bilinguals) evidences how speakers move between various identity spaces. Some of these spaces are realized in English, some in Spanish, some as a mixture of both; essentially speakers are creating a unique linguistic space in which identity can be constructed and reconstructed by means of language.

Additionally, the contact between different varieties of Spanish in the city results in negotiations not only between languages but also more subtly within the same language. In the case of Central Americans in Los Angeles, previous studies (Parodi “Contacto,” “Normatividad,” “El otro México”) demonstrated that those born and/or raised in L.A. acquire a Chicano koiné, EVLA, with the distinct flavor of rural Mexican Spanish. Yet, many speakers show a clear tendency toward bidialectalism (Sánchez-Muñoz “Los distintos dialectos”). In this case, the negotiation of distinct varieties of Spanish with salient differences especially in the lexicon can also be seen as a form of linguistic hybridization. In this view, bidialectalism mirrors bilingualism and offers a fluid linguistic space for speakers to converge in a common Latino identity or diverge as a distinct ethnic culture.

Chicanos and other Latinos in the United States live together with the dominant Anglo culture, which marks its power politically, socially, and economically. Yet, in the urban linguistic landscape of Los Angeles, language takes center stage. Power is linguistically enacted as speakers of different languages and varieties juggle cultures on a daily basis. Speakers are not merely tempted by the words of another, but through code-switching between languages and dialects, they make those words and codes their own. The creation of linguistic third spaces (such as Spanglish) allows for the freedom to converge, diverge, take on, and abandon those words and codes. Bilingualism and bidialectalism are thus linguistic resources to better express the fluidity and complexity of the multifaceted immigrant experience.

**WORKS CITED**


