

Judeo-Spanish and Spanglish: Common Considerations for the English Translator of Two Peripheral Lects

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In language development orality precedes literary production which, in turn, precedes translation. Sometimes, however, translation into a language sets the stage for larger literary production. Why and when languages move from purely oral into the written sphere is unique to each, and it is a gradual shift. Indeed, elements of the oral tradition do often appear in literature. In this presentation I will look at the cases of Judeo-Spanish and Spanglish separately and examine how the creation of a written body of literature and the prevalence of orality in the two corpora demonstrate significant parallels. I will then explain how the study of these two varieties together, rather than independently, may better inform the translator.

Though both are varieties of Spanish-speaking communities in the diaspora, Judeo-Spanish and Spanglish may, at first glance, seem to have little else in common. Judeo-Spanish is, briefly and simply put, the product of the Alhambra Decree: On March 31, 1492 the Jews of Spain were presented with a choice, convert to Christianity or leave the country (Gerber x). Jane Gerber states that as many as one third of the Spanish Jews either converted or went into hiding; the majority chose to keep the faith and leave (140).¹ A large percentage of exiled Spanish Jews (known as Sephardim) settled in the Ottoman Empire. For them the Spanish cultural and linguistic heritage remained alive for centuries after the expulsion. Even today a Spanish-based language can be heard among the older generation of the Turkish Jewish community, many of

whom now live in Israel. Though the literary tradition in Judeo-Spanish dates back centuries, language preservationists are now in a race against the clock to collect its folktales and oral tradition in writing while the population slowly dwindles.

Spanglish, in contrast, is the product of a constant renegotiation of the linguistic borders between English and Spanish that did not begin with the wartime arrival of large numbers of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans to the US mainland, as many tend to believe. Nor did it emerge as the result of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo that created a Mexican-American diaspora overnight. Rather, Ilan Stavans suggests that “the emergence of Spanglish is neither sudden nor new. In one way or another it has been around for decades, even centuries” (Stavans 29). In these areas in which English and Spanish have been in contact the lines between the two languages have been blurring through borrowings, code-switching,² lexical transfer, shifting grammatical constructions, and so-forth, slowly evolving into what many refer to as Spanglish.³ While Robert Train has written about early textual evidence of Spanish-English code-switching in personal correspondence as early as the mid-19th century,⁴ the lect had been largely confined to the oral sphere until the late 1990s. The emergence of music and literature in Spanglish marked a turning point as it began to appear not only as a nod to Hispanic-American culture in an otherwise English or Spanish text, but as main lect of the entirety of the texts, a characteristic that Lourdes Torres refers to as “radical bilingualism” (Torres 86).⁵

Despite the differences between these language varieties, from the perspective of the English translator of these texts there are several similarities between them; I will examine two. The first is the diasporic nature of these two languages, which is to say

that they are both unofficial languages spoken by either borderland or immigrant communities in their respective countries. I will go on to see how this has ignited or fueled the creation of literary production at this particular point in time. The second similarity between Judeo-Spanish and Spanglish that I will examine is the role that orality plays in their respective literatures. Rather than considering only one of these varieties, I will examine how the English translator can benefit in considering both when deciding how to translate the work from its position in the periphery of the Spanish literary sphere.

The first important commonality between these two language varieties that can aid the translator is the current landscape of literary production in each. We must consider how this relates to the larger context of the languages as minoritized varieties in borderland and immigrant societies that value assimilation over the preservation of cultural diversity. Throughout this paper I will use the term “variety” so as to underline the fact that Judeo-Spanish and Spanglish are separate from global Spanish (and English, in the case of Spanglish) while at the same time avoiding the connotations that accompany the term “dialect” and skirting the debate as to whether either of these is a language in its own right. A minoritized language or variety can be defined as one whose use has resulted in the persecution of its speakers in one form or another.

According to Tracey Harris, Modern Judeo-Spanish is spoken by approximately 11,000 speakers, the vast majority of whom are over 70 and live in Israel (Harris 58).⁶ The modern State of Israel was founded on Zionist ideals, which aimed to return the Jewish people to their traditional land from which they had been exiled. Part of this project included the revival of Hebrew and its establishment as the official language of

the State. It was viewed by many of the Zionist leaders as a neutral language that was part of a shared history of all Jews, regardless of the vernacular that they spoke in the diaspora (Johnson 442). As such, the responsibility of immigrants to Israel was to learn Hebrew and assimilate into an Israeli national identity, rather than preserve the dozens of Jewish languages they had spoken prior to their immigration.⁷ In this respect the Zionist ideology has achieved great success; there are now millions of fluent speakers of Modern Hebrew, 200 years ago there were none. But at the same time, Judeo-Spanish speakers have found themselves rushing to preserve their language from extinction and are doing so through the gathering and writing of their traditional folktales. These represent the largest genre of Judeo-Spanish literature to appear since WWII and are collected in numerous books and magazines that first emerged in the 1980s. The majority of these works have been published in small runs by independent presses, thus limiting their reach. Many involved in Judeo-Spanish preservationist efforts have articulated that they view the language as moribund, but that they are working to prolong the inevitable.

Spanglish is a vernacular used by an unknown number of the US Hispanic population that is bilingual in English and Spanish. While we don't know how many people currently use Spanglish, what we do know is that the official report from the 2010 US census identified an estimated 37 million people who spoke Spanish at home, or roughly 13% of the total population (Ryan 3). Despite the United States not having a federal official language, de facto, and in the mind of many Americans, it does. The prevalence of the "English-Only Movement" is wide and anti-Latino sentiment is very public and at times quite vitriolic.⁸ Despite 75% of the aforementioned 37 million

Spanish-speakers claiming they speak English “very well” or “well” the fact that they speak Spanish at all, rather than being monolingual English speakers, is viewed as un-American to many (Ryan 3). However, for bilingual Spanish-English speakers in the US the reality is that they are neither English speakers nor Spanish speakers, but they reside in a borderland, a space that Gloria Anzaldúa defines as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary... a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live [t]here...in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the ‘normal’” (Anzaldúa 25). According to this definition Chicago, Miami, New York, Los Angeles, even the very capital of the country, Washington DC, are all borderlands. Spanglish is the unofficial language of these borderlands and speaking it is a way of saying “I belong to two worlds and can function in either, but I am most at ease when I can shift back and forth from one to the other” (Zentella 54).⁹ Historically, Latinas/os in the US have written in English or Spanish, forced, by publishers or by their own beliefs that Spanglish is inferior, to choose which element of their identity to highlight in their text. However this is changing. Resisting assimilationist pressures from both directions (Spanish and English), American Latinas/os are increasingly publishing in Spanglish. Short stories, crónicas, and translations of literary classics into Spanglish constitute the majority of this literature, which, as we have seen to be the case with Judeo-Spanish, is typically published in small book runs. Spanglish works are restricted in large part to academic presses.

While it is clear that Judeo-Spanish and Spanglish resist against different types of assimilation, the act of publication in either variety is, in itself, an act of resistance. This

is especially evident when we consider that *every* modern author in these languages could *choose* to write in another language, and in fact many of them do: Matilda Koén-Sarano, the most prolific modern Judeo-Spanish writer has published in Italian and Hebrew, Susana Chávez-Silverman and Giannina Braschi have both published in Spanglish, Spanish and English.

Resistance through the use of one language over another may be motivated by a variety of factors. Koén-Sarano, who publishes the folktales of her community, seems to be spurred by a fear of losing the words to reflect her reality or culture. It could also be a tool for reclaiming or demonstrating pride in one's own identity that is marginalized by the majority; this seems to be the driving force for Susana Chávez-Silverman's Spanglish-language crónicas. These are but two of many possible motivations.

For the translator of literature whose resistance lies in the language in which it is written the challenge is great indeed. One must consider how to retain that resistance while placing the text in a different linguistic context. Studying Judeo-Spanish and Spanglish together allows the translator to consider postcolonial frameworks and theories across both varieties and find solutions that may be more readily visible in one context, but equally applicable to both. While some solutions could be gleaned by the English translator of both, looking at how these challenges have been addressed by translators of these works into other languages could yield even more. For example, it is certain that translating Spanglish into English requires a more intentional consideration of the power dynamics than does translating Judeo-Spanish into English. This is because English is precisely one of the powers against which Spanglish is resisting. That paradigm is not present between Judeo-Spanish and English. However

considering how Hebrew translators have approached Judeo-Spanish texts, where the power dynamics much more closely resemble the relationship between Spanglish and English, might provide new insights to the translator of Spanglish texts. The same is true in reverse, the Hebrew translator of Judeo-Spanish might benefit from considering how these power dynamics are addressed in English translations of Spanglish literature.

A second problem confronts the translator of these two literatures; orality, or the presence in writing of elements more often associated with speech rather than the written form. Since the majority of recent Judeo-Spanish literary production has been the publication of folktales copied down from the oral tradition through the use of recordings, the author has not edited them in the same way that one would typically craft a written work. It is generally accepted that oral production and written production are two separate forms, and indeed the folktales published by Matilda Koén-Sarano seem to straddle that line. Since she has collected and compiled these tales from informants from across the Judeo-Spanish-speaking world (from Morocco to Turkey), the accents and vocabularies of her informants have impacted her orthography and the types of foreign borrowings in her tales. For example, a Moroccan informant might use French or Arabic borrowings and pronounce words slightly differently than a Turkish informant who would borrow more heavily from Turkish and Greek. All of this is preserved in Koén-Sarano's collections. Furthermore, these tales demonstrate an inconsistent temporal agreement of verbs; informants often alternate between the past and present tenses. In written form this can be quite confusing and does not translate well into a language where folktales, as a genre, have a recent history of being highly

formulaic, descriptive, and crafted for reading, rather than short oral tales that evolve with each telling.

In the case of Spanglish, there is a very short history indeed of writing this variety. Limited in the past to short texts or dialogue in literature, full-length works entirely in Spanglish have only recently emerged. Most of the corpus to-date is written in a very informal oral register. For example, *Yo-Yo Boing*, by Giannina Braschi (1998) is a Spanglish novel primarily recounted through dialogue. Similarly Susana Chávez-Silverman's *Killer Crónicas* (2004) and *Scenes from La Cuenca de Los Angeles y Otros Natural Disasters* (2010) are essentially collections of crónicas, or first-person stories told through letters written to friends, and thus highly informal. Whereas this is, to date, the norm for Spanglish texts, English writers avoid publishing works that could be perceived as written in too low of a register, reserving orality instead for dialogue. However, with such a limited literary corpus from which to draw inspiration, Spanglish appears to not distinguish between formal literary registers and oral registers. In fact, at this stage in its development, many Spanglish authors seem to resist the application of literary registers to the language at all, instead preferring to see themselves and their community in writing. Their language choice and their poetics are one and the same. One might predict that as Spanglish literary production continues to emerge, the novelty of the language itself will wane and creative literary registers will emerge, but only time will tell.

Again, as the English translator of these texts can observe, there is a high degree of overlap between the problems that orality presents in Judeo-Spanish source texts and those confronting the translator of Spanglish. Paul Bandia speaks of this as the

orality/writing interface in which a predominately oral culture is doubly transposed both from orality into the written form and then from the written form into a foreign tongue (Bandia 265). Given this challenge, how can the translator approach this?

Many scholars have cautioned against using “dialect” to translate “dialect” including Berman in his paper “Translation and the Trials of the Foreign” (Berman 294). However there are other tools to translate orality than merely through dialect. In fact, the English translator might benefit from an exploration of literary media outside of the genre of the source text for inspiration. For example, Chávez-Silverman publishes crónicas, a genre that is somewhere between an informal personalized letter and an editorialized retelling of auspiciously real-life news stories. This is a common genre in Mexico, but is rarely translated (Cruess 17). The crónica per se doesn’t exist in English. Similarly, as we have previously seen, the oral folktales of the Judeo-Spanish texts studied do not coincide well with the genre of folktales in English. How then can an English translator proceed?

If the translator is familiar with both of these highly oral source text corpora, they might identify other genres that could better receive the translations that what would seem immediately evident from the source texts. For example, how might the genre of the epistolary novel, a different type of correspondence-based storytelling, pull together Chávez-Silverman’s crónicas in a way that is more accessible for the English-language reader while preserving their orality? Could modern translations of medieval frame tales, such as the *Canterbury Tales* or *The Thousand and One Nights* help structure Koén-Sarano’s folktales so that the orality seems less disorganized, as it can sometimes appear in English, and more representative of the frame tale genre?

Of course, the questions posed here provide no answers in themselves. They blur the lines between domestication and foreignization, between translation per se and adaptation. But that is, after all, precisely my argument. The questions that the translator must address apply to both Judeo-Spanish and Spanglish. Make no mistake, these varieties are not the same, and a single approach to both of them would be short-sighted indeed. Nevertheless, the processes required to arrive at an approach is where we find the overlap. An English translator who takes into account how to address the challenges in translating one of these vernaculars is a step ahead in deciding how to address the other, and the translator of both may find significant inspiration in their responses to challenges in the other.

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¹ The majority of the introduction is considered common knowledge for the scholar of Hispanic studies, however for a complete introduction to the topic consult (Gerber)

² Code-switching is the linguistic term for a speaker alternating between two or more languages or varieties of languages in one conversation in a way consistent with the syntax and phonology of each language or variety. This is distinct from borrowing. Borrowing (or the use of loanwords) is defined as "elements integrated into the grammar of the recipient language" (Budzhak-Jones and Poplack 225).

³ For an overview of what Spanglish is consult (Fairclough 185–88)

⁴ See (Train)

⁵ Lourdes Torres provides an overview of several different approaches Latina/o writers use to represent their linguistic reality. She describes the texts considered in this paper under the subheading “radical bilingualism” see (Torres).

⁶ Tracy Harris, in the aforementioned citation, provides this assessment. However given the sociolinguistic context presented and the assertion by David Gold that the usage of living speakers may not reflect “the traditional usage of good native speakers,” we must consider the possibility that the entire Judeo-Spanish speaking population may be comprised of heritage speakers, rather than native speakers in the true sense of the term (Gold 71). It would appear that most living speakers would have grown up with Judeo-Spanish at home, but with the majority language of the country in which they lived dominating their public life, including education, media and employment. This would almost certainly have resulted in Judeo-Spanish being a complete language for the speakers, but based on incomplete input, which would substantiate the argument that living speakers are not, in fact, native speakers of the variety.

⁷ The Jewish Languages Research Website identifies 28 Jewish languages.

⁸ For more information about the English-Only Movement and its history consult: (Pac).

⁹ Many studies have shown that, contrary to popular belief, code-switching is not the result of a low level of proficiency in the languages in question, but rather it is evidence of a high degree of fluency in both. See (Becker 3; Toribio and Rubin 216–17; Muysken 12–34)