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Bilingual Humor, Verbal Hygiene, and the Gendered Contradictions of Cultural Citizenship in Early Mexican American Comedy

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Abstract

This article examines the paradoxes of linguistic purism in a series of sound recordings of comic dialogues made by Mexican immigrant comedians in San Antonio, Texas, during the Depression. The dialogues present characters who mix English and Spanish as transgressors of gender roles and national identities, reserving their harshest criticism for women. However, bilingual wordplay in the dialogues suggests a dialectically opposed ideological move toward a celebration of linguistic and cultural hybridity.

In the wake of the literary and theatrical renaissance that accompanied the Chicana/o civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the terms *Chicana/o theatre* and *bilingual theatre* have become almost synonymous in the southwestern United States. Indeed, it is partly through such theatre that the mixing of English and Spanish has come to be understood as a defining characteristic of the *mexicana/o* experience in the United States. As Jorge Huerta has noted, *teatristas* ("theatre performers") since 1965 have used various combinations of these two languages not only to accommodate linguistically diverse audiences but also to serve those audiences' need to see their everyday ways of speaking reflected and valorized on stage (1982:6). Furthermore, many contemporary Chicana/o playwrights, poets, critics, and cultural activists (e.g., Anzaldúa 1987) see the simultaneous use of two languages within an utterance as an act of resistance against an oppressive monolingual national imaginary.

The sentiments behind these contemporary efforts to name and celebrate the mingling of languages contrast sharply with attitudes that prevailed in the commercial popular theatre that flourished in ethnic Mexican communities in the early 20th century. Indeed, two of that theatre's most durable immigrant vaudevillians, Netty and Jesús Rodríguez, ridiculed the mixing of English and Spanish in their performances and in a series of sound recordings of comic dialogues made during the Depression of the 1930s. In these recordings, the duo portrayed such behavior as cultural treason, as a symptom of the breakdown of consensus in *mexicana/o* communities, and as a transgression of traditional *mexicana/o* family values and gender roles.¹ The dialogues present men who mix English and Spanish as dandies who overzealously and reprehensibly embrace U.S. customs, while women who do the same appear as rebellious upstarts, rejecting Mexico

entirely and seeking to become foreigners. Through this asymmetrically gendered evaluation of language mixing, the dialogues attribute naturalized "ethnic essences ... to 'masculine' and 'feminine' behavior," thus ethnicizing gender (Wong 1992:112-113).

This gendered ideology of linguistic purism appears to have been common in ethnic Mexican public discourse on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border since the U.S. invasion of 1848. In the mid-nineteenth century, for example, popular songs in interior Mexico used English to satirize women who spoke that language and consorted with the Anglo-American invaders (Hernández 1991:12).² Twentieth-century Mexican immigrants to the United States further developed the ideology both in popular song (Herrera-Sobek 1993:288; Paredes 1995:151-169) and Spanish-language journalistic writing. In these institutions of public discussion, the figure of the English-speaking *mexicana* emerged as a sort of reincarnation of Malintzin Tenepal, the indigenous woman who served as concubine and translator to conquistador Hernán Cortés. As literary critic Norma Alarcón has noted, Malintzin, often known by the epithet "Malinche," has acquired an Eve-like status in Mexican nationalism, becoming both a symbol of treachery and the mother of a "fallen" people (1989:58). In this secular but religiously informed mythology, "those who use the oppressor's language are viewed as outside of the community ... but, paradoxically, they also help to constitute the community" (Alarcón 1989:59-60).

This paradox is clearly visible in the dialogues of Netty and Jesús Rodríguez. In spite of their ostensible purism, the dialogues contain jokes that play with the boundaries between English and Spanish and presume knowledge of both languages, suggesting a move toward the celebration of linguistic and cultural hybridity. Furthermore, my own

interviews with entertainers born in San Antonio who were active during the same period suggest that these performers mixed English and Spanish in ways that further advanced the celebratory tendency. All of the performers were participants in a larger process of public metalinguistic reflection by which ethnic Mexicans negotiated an ambiguous and troubled sense of cultural citizenship in San Antonio between the two World Wars. This process, I suggest, was related to the deeply gendered reactions of *mexicanas/os* both to the U.S. state and to U.S. consumer culture.

By linking language mixing to these social processes, the dialogues parallel the intellectual concerns of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology in interesting ways. I here use *language mixing* as an umbrella term for various practices that have been observed in areas where linguistic varieties that are widely constructed as distinct "languages" meet and mingle. These include what are often called *borrowing* (the adaptation of vocabulary from one "language" into another), *codeswitching* (the alternation between two ostensibly distinct "languages" in a single stretch of discourse), and *interference* (the influence of one language on another, and the blurring of the boundaries between languages). I have chosen this broad term both because of the fuzziness and overlapping of the more specific categories (Gardner-Chloros 1995:70), and because the dialogues of Netty and Jesús Rodríguez foreground all of these linguistic phenomena without distinguishing among them. The sorts of speech that the dialogues satirize are the very ones that sociolinguists, operating from an implicit normative monolingualism, have seen as anomalies "in need of explanation" (Woolard 1999:3; see also Milroy and Muysken 1995:3). Furthermore, the dialogues mix languages in ways that parallel the tidy but now discredited predictions of early research on what has been

called codeswitching. Recent studies based on close analyses of naturally occurring talk have clearly shown that in multilingual situations, language choice does not follow mechanically from specific activity types, the social identities of speakers and hearers, or specific interactional goals (Auer 1995:118). In the Rodríguez dialogues, however, we shall see that English occurs in a more or less predictable array of semantic domains and interactional moments.

It is partly this predictability that makes the language-mixing in the dialogues a negative example intended to police the boundaries of the languages in question. Because they involve "critical and evaluative reflection on language and verbal behavior," the dialogues may be seen as advancing a form of what Deborah Cameron calls verbal hygiene (Cameron (AU: 1995? If different, please add to references.) 1996:9). As Cameron has noted, such reflections are necessary and ubiquitous phenomena, essential parts of the ways social actors make sense of the world. In arguing that these performances of verbal hygiene were involved in the construction of cultural citizenship, I mean that they were part of a community wide process of subject formation in which ethnic Mexicans negotiated "ambivalent and contested relations with the state" and debated senses of national belonging (Ong 1996:738).

Example (1) from "Cabrestea o se ahorca" ("Bend or Break"), a dialogue in which a monolingual Spanish-speaking woman played by Netty Rodríguez upbraids a codeswitching Texas Mexican played by Jesús, illustrates the explicit links the dialogues draw between language and citizenship.

(1) N:	Recuerde que el deber de todo ciudadano honrado y decente es perfeccionar su vocabulario para que se le tome como persona educada. No hay que corromper con disparates nuestro precioso idioma. Así es que una de dos. O se corrige o se devuelve. Porque aquí estamos completos.	Remember that the duty of every honorable and decent citizen is to perfect their vocabulary in order to be taken for an educated/well-mannered person. There's no need to corrupt our beautiful language with nonsense. So one way or the other. Either correct yourself, or go back. Because here, we're complete
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(Rodríguez-Valero 1936b).³

Set in Mexico, the dialogue does not specify what country the "honorable and decent citizen" is supposed to be a citizen of, a significant and telling ambiguity. Although citizenship is usually discussed in relation to ideas of inclusion and political participation (e.g., Flores and Benmayor 1997:9; Rosaldo 1997:38), the "othering" of the assimilated Mexican in these dialogues highlights the fact that citizenship only becomes intelligible through the exclusion of some alien.

This analysis draws on all of the extant recordings of Netty and Jesús Rodríguez, as well as oral history interviews I conducted in 1990, 1997, and 1999-2000 with 20 individuals who participated in commercial popular theatre for ethnic Mexicans in southern Texas before World War II.⁴ Having transcribed and translated the recordings, I

selected four to use in loosely structured feedback interviews (Stone and Stone 1981) with my consultants in their homes. The dialogues selected were "Una mula de tantas" ['One of So Many She-Mules'] (Anonymous Author 1935a), in which a monolingual male character reacts unfavorably to a language-mixing female character; "The Mexican from New York" (1935b), in which an uneducated monolingual woman reacts favorably to a language-mixing man; "Cabrestea o se ahorca" (Rodríguez-Valero 1936b), in which an educated monolingual woman reacts unfavorably to a language-mixing man, and "Es mi hombre" ["He's my man"] (Anonymous Author 1930), in which both characters alternate between Spanish and English. These four recordings contrast with one another according to the oppositions of favorable versus unfavorable impression given by the language-mixing speaker, male versus female language mixer, uneducated versus educated female, and monolingual versus bilingual. Significantly, the logically possible scenario in which a monolingual man, educated or uneducated, reacts favorably to a language-mixing woman does not occur in any of the Rodríguez duo's extant recordings.

In feedback interviews, I played the four dialogues listed above for my interviewees on a portable cassette player, elicited their interpretations of the dialogues, and then asked questions about their impressions of the characters. Although my approach here was influenced by the standard questions used in matched-guise studies (e.g., Bilaniuk 1996; Lambert et al. 1960), my feedback interviews were longer and less structured and the number of interviewees much smaller than is usually the case with such tests. Furthermore, in asking for my consultants' impressions of the characters, I used terms for personality traits that had emerged as culturally salient in earlier, less structured interviews (e.g., *presumido/a* or "boastfully presumptuous"), rather than

relying exclusively on a priori categories. I was able to conduct feedback interviews with only three consultants (Normalinda Monsiváis of the Carpa Monsiváis, the late Raymundo García of the Carpa García, and Mr. García's wife Virginia, who survives him) largely because I found it difficult to interest many of my other consultants in the recordings. These individuals, quite understandably, seemed to see interviews with me as a way of seeking out a new audience, and most preferred discussing their own memories to reflecting on the work of others. Although my feedback interviews do not represent a systematic sampling of audience reaction to the recordings, they do add depth and complexity to my own analyses, suggesting that Texas-born bilinguals may have interpreted the dialogues in ways that diverged from the ideology of immigrant purism.

Popular Theatre and Ethnic Mexican Civil Society in San Antonio

Ernestina (Netty) Edgel de Rodríguez and Jesús Rodríguez-Valero both came to San Antonio in the mid-1910s, during a period of massive migration spurred by the violence of the Mexican Revolution and the increasing demand for Mexican labor in the United States. A husband-wife comic duo, they were mainstays of a vibrant Spanish-language entertainment industry that became an important institution of ethnic Mexican civil society in San Antonio during the 1910s and 1920s (Kanellos 1990:79). That civil society faced severe pressures both from the encompassing Anglo-American society and from its own growing internal contradictions. Indeed, part of the theatre's importance was its value as a space of public symbolic reflection on those contradictions. The first decades of the 20th century saw a sweeping and often violent social transformation in southern Texas in which agribusiness dominated by Anglo settlers progressively replaced the older ranching economy. The transition to farming introduced drastic and

unprecedented changes in productive relations and led to the growth of localized "Jim Crow" segregation for people of Mexican heritage (Montejano 1987:159-161). Native-born *tejanas/os* were forced to become wage laborers, and new immigrants who arrived after 1910 added greatly to their numbers.

As these processes changed the face of rural Texas in the first two decades of the 20th century, San Antonio experienced an economic boom that transformed it "from a frontier town to a modern city" with an economy based on labor-intensive industries such as the shipping of agricultural products (García 1991:26). These industries depended heavily on *mexicana/o* labor, as did the city's growing manufacturing sector (Acuña 1981:266). Furthermore, San Antonio became a major center for the recruitment of agricultural workers (Montejano 1987:208). Wherever they worked, *mexicanas/os* faced a dual wage system, earning less than Anglo workers for the same work (Zamora 1993:24). While married women often remained in the home, taking care of children and sometimes supplementing the household's income by doing laundry, piecework, and pecan shelling, many young single women were drawn into wage labor. These women often faced a stigma for this choice, and they tended to earn less than men for comparable work (26). When the Depression of the 1930s hit San Antonio, the city's *mexicana/o* population suffered its effects disproportionately.

These processes sharpened the already existing social contradictions within the *mexicana/o* community. On the one hand, the rapid influx of new immigrants in the last two decades had "raised some confusing questions" among resident Mexican Americans "about what now defined a Mexican in the United States" (Gutiérrez 1995:67), and these questions became even more salient as hard times led to an unprecedented repatriation

campaign. Furthermore, class divisions also grew sharper in the 1930s. Although most ethnic Mexicans in San Antonio were workers, a small but prominent elite of exiled Porfiristas⁵ and Huertistas⁶ wielded considerable influence. Through civic organizations and the Spanish-language newspaper *La Prensa*, these *ricos* ('rich people') advocated an expatriate mentality focused on homeland politics and a concern for "civility, decency, and elitism as contained in Mexican tradition and high culture" (García 1991:146-147). As a small native-born and U.S.-oriented petit bourgeoisie also began to emerge, divisions in political organizing between immigrants and the native-born became increasingly salient (Zamora 1993:7). By the end of the 1930s, "the Mexican laboring class was simply surviving, the middle class was finding and building its sense of Mexican American community, and the *ricos* were losing their totally Mexican sense of identity" (García 1991:77). In this environment of rapid social change, gendered reflections on the meaning of bilingualism emerged in the *mexicana/o* public sphere in south Texas.

Perhaps the most important finding of the secondary literature on *mexicana/o* theatre history in San Antonio is that public performance was a key institution through which ethnic Mexicans formed a community in San Antonio. Historian Richard García has noted that in the 19th century, as ethnic Mexicans became a minoritized group separated from the control of formal political institutions, they tended to express their sense of community and identity "through cultural activities, not political power" (1991:19). These activities included performances of "Los pastores," a nativity play that is still performed in San Antonio's West Side today (Flores 1997:126; Garcia 1991:20). According to Elizabeth Ramírez, commercial performances by *mexicana/o* traveling

theatre, opera, and *zarzuela* (an operetta-like form) companies occurred often in the city throughout the late 19th century (1990:10). However, San Antonio did not become a major center of theatrical entertainment until 1910, when refugees fleeing the Mexican Revolution began settling there (Kanellos 1990:71-75).

Initially, performances took place in church halls and *salones* ("halls") erected by fraternal organizations and mutual-aid societies, in tents, and even at venues such as Beethoven Hall, which were not explicitly identified with the *mexicana/o* community. In the 1910s, Sam Lucchese, a Sicilian immigrant whose family owned a prosperous boot company, began building theaters for Spanish-language entertainment, creating "an empire in San Antonio and Laredo that was unrivalled" and that would supplant the smaller venues to some degree (Kanellos 1990:77). The centerpieces of that empire were the Teatro Zaragoza, which opened in 1912, and the larger and more luxurious Teatro Nacional, which opened in 1917, both at the corner of Commerce and Santa Rosa Streets on the western edge of downtown. This location placed the theaters in the heart of a thriving business district and right in front *La Plaza del Zacate* ("The Plaza of Grass"), an open-air market that was an important center of ethnic Mexican social and commercial life (Mendoza 1993:58).

Although much of the Mexican American stage was commercial, it was often used to raise funds for the benefit of mutual-aid societies, schools attended by *mexicana/o* children, the legal defense funds of *mexicanas/os* caught up in the criminal justice system, and political and social causes in Mexico (Rosales 1984:20). This seems even to have been true of performances that took place in venues owned by non-*mexicanas/os*, such as the Lucchese theaters. According to Kanellos, the Spanish-language press in San

Antonio and elsewhere in southern Texas portrayed attending the theatre as a sort of patriotic duty for citizens of *el México de afuera* ('Mexico abroad') and stressed the edifying and educational nature of the spectacles (1990:76). Furthermore, Ramírez has noted that *mexicanas/os* in San Antonio greatly valued the theatre for its capacity as a didactic tool and moral example (1990:15-16). During the second and third decades of the 20th century, this moralizing current entered into a dynamic tension with the light, irreverent, titillating, and even bawdy sensibility of the *carpas* ('tent shows') and vaudeville (Haney 1999:440; Ybarra-Frausto 1984:45), but as we shall see, didacticism never disappeared entirely. Regardless of its content, the theatre put a public face on the *mexicana/o* community, both projecting an image outward and reflecting inward.

The Performers

Netty and Jesús Rodríguez played an important role in this process, particularly from the late 1920s until World War II. In an interview with me, Jesús's brother Enrique Valero reported that Jesús was born in 1900 in Concepción del Oro, Zacatecas, while Netty was born in an unknown year in Mazatlán. Mr. Valero said that his and Jesús's father, who was also named Jesús Rodríguez and who died when the children were quite young, owned a silver mine in Concepción del Oro. In the tumultuous first years of the Revolution, Mr. Valero's mother Esther Valero and stepfather Raimundo Heredia were forced to take the family to San Luis Potosí due to political problems about which Mr. Valero remembers little. Probably because of these same political difficulties, they crossed into Texas on October 31, 1916, to join cousins who already lived in San Antonio. Mr. Valero recalled that the family reached Nuevo Laredo loaded down with furniture and other belongings, but that Mexican customs officials refused to allow them

to take the luggage across the border. After trying vainly to sell what they could, they were forced to leave everything behind, and they arrived in San Antonio with nothing but the clothes they were wearing. There they took up residence with their cousins, and soon, thanks in part to a monthly allowance that came from the elder Jesús Rodríguez's estate, they were able to find their own living quarters.

Mr. Valero recalled that his stepfather became the manager of the twenty-room Hotel Morelos, which was located on the West Side of downtown San Antonio, just across the street from the Teatro Nacional and Teatro Zaragoza. There, the family rented living quarters from the hotel's owners and oversaw the day-to-day business, often renting rooms to performers who visited the Lucchese theaters. Soon the family allowance from Mexico stopped coming, and of necessity the older sons, Jesús and Carlos, went north to work on the railroad.⁷ At some point, either because of his work with the railroad or because of the family's proximity to the theaters, Jesús made contact with the vaudeville company of Nelly Fernández, who hired him as a singer. It was apparently on a tour with this company that he met Netty, who would become his wife and partner in song, dance, and comedy. According to Kanellos, the couple was a fixture of the Spanish-language stage, both in San Antonio and New York, from approximately 1928 until the early 1940s (1990:79). Together with Jesús' brother Carlos, who adopted the stage persona "Don Suave," they kept audiences coming to the Teatros Nacional and Zaragoza as late as 1938, and in the 1940s they graced the stage of the Teatro Hispano in New York as part of Beatriz, "La Chata" Noloesca's famous vaudeville company (Kanellos 1990:135). Even after Spanish-language theatre ceased to be commercially viable in San Antonio, the couple continued to perform in community theatre and even

worked in the electronic media. In the 1960s, toward the end of their lives, they acted in *radionovelas* (radio soap operas) on KCOR, a prominent Spanish-language AM radio station in San Antonio.

In addition to their work on the stage, the Rodríguez duo recorded at least 31 78-rpm records, primarily for the Vocalion and Blue Bird (RCA) record companies between 1928 and 1937. According to Mr. Valero, Netty and Jesús began their career as singers, and many of their recordings, especially the earlier ones, feature musical performance. The bulk of their recorded work, however, consists of comic dialogues, sometimes with songs at the end. Seventeen of these dialogues are attributed to Jesús, and whatever the authorship of the remaining dialogues, it is likely that the performers at least incorporated their own ideas into the material.⁸ Mr. Valero recalled that the couple performed these dialogues on stage as well as recording them, and there is direct evidence that the dialogues circulated, entering the repertoires of other theatrical performers via the recordings. In interviews with me, the late Carlos Monsiváis, a comedian with the *Carpa Monsiváis*, recalled transcribing the dialogues by hand and using them in his *carpa*, sometimes making his own improvements in the process. Mr. Monsiváis's family still has several of these transcriptions, including "The Mexican from New York," one of the dialogues I selected for use in feedback interviews. This example illustrates the circulation of performers and comic material between the theaters and the tent shows during the florescence of vaudeville in southern Texas.

Although the dialogues clearly circulated in face-to-face performance contexts, they seem to bear the marks of the circumstances of their production. They lack, for example, the audience reaction and input that would have been crucial to any live

performance. Furthermore, the dialogues had to fit within the maximum length of a 78-rpm record, leaving little room for elaboration and improvisation. Like other ethnic Mexican artists who recorded for the major labels during this period, Netty and Jesús met with record-company representatives in downtown hotel rooms that doubled as improvised recording studios. Schedules for these sessions were crowded, and the companies expected a finished recording in one or two takes with little time for rehearsal (Peña 1986:41). Probably to make the sessions worthwhile, the couple tended to record enough material for at least two records in each session. In one marathon session in 1936, they recorded eight sides. Perhaps because of these time constraints, several of the dialogues contain such errors as repair of misread words and false starts that anticipate lines further ahead. Since the recording format constrained the length of the dialogues, it also forced the performers to be concise. Sometimes lighthearted and witty, other times biting satirical, the resulting comic pieces are all tightly and elegantly written theatrical statements.

Overview of the Dialogues

Although the majority of Netty and Jesús Rodríguez's recorded work is entirely in Spanish, switches to English and use of English borrowings occur in 21 of the extant recordings, about one-third of the couple's surviving output. In 12 dialogues, the use of English is limited to a few words or a couple of stock phrases, amounting to less than two percent of the total words. Eight of the dialogues and one song, however, extensively mix English and Spanish in a highly marked way and can be seen at least in part as theatrical reflections on language mixing itself. Netty and Jesús Rodríguez were native speakers of Spanish, but they probably did not have nativelike competence in English at

the time of the recordings. Reflecting on his family's linguistic background, Jesús's brother Enrique Valero recalled that when they arrived at San Antonio, "ni siquiera sabíamos decir *whatsamatter*," ['we didn't even know how to say *whatsamatter*']. It is likely that his sister-in-law was similarly situated. Although the performers demonstrate an ample vocabulary in English and command of some idiomatic expressions (e.g., *nothing doing*), they tend not to switch phonologically when using English. When English loanwords and switches to English occur, they are always highly marked and symbolically charged.

In the 12 dialogues that make minimal use of English, those English-derived words that do appear all come from semantic domains associated with settings distant from the *mexicana/o* family home and close to the dominant U.S. culture and the market. These include references to the workplace:

(2) "...estoy trabajando en el *laundry*" ["I'm working in the *laundry*"]

(Anonymous Author 1929);

the nation-state:

(3) "...como estamos en los *United States*" ["...since we're in the *United States*"]

(1936a);

U.S. consumer culture and mass media:

(4) "... me fui a ver si trabajaba en los *moving pictures*"

["I went to see if I could work in the *moving pictures*"] (1935c);

money:

(5) "La póliza de a *daime*" ["The Dime Policy"] (Rodríguez-Valero 1931);

organized crime:

(6) "Yo he sido el alta escuela *gangster*" ["I've been a *gangster* of the high school] (Anonymous Author 1936b);

recreational dating:

(7) "... todos mis *boyfriends* me decían que parezco a Mae West"
["... all my *boyfriends* said I look like Mae West"] (1935c);

and flirtation:

(8) "*Hello big boy*" (Rodríguez-Valero 1930a).

Interestingly enough, these English or English-derived words appear more than twice as often in the speech of the female character as in that of the male (34 times versus 14).

Furthermore, in many of the dialogues, characters switch from Spanish to English or use English loanwords when they become aggressive. In general, then, this selective use of English and Anglicisms in particular interactional contexts and semantic domains advances a gendered critique of *agringamiento* (Americanization) and maps the oppositions of interpersonal distance versus closeness, aggression versus solidarity, outgroup versus ingroup, and mutual respect versus disrespect onto the opposition English versus Spanish. This set of metalinguistic associations is similar to the one surrounding Spanish and Náhuatl in the Central Mexican community studied by Hill 1995, as well as the ideology surrounding French and Corsican noted by Jaffe 1999.

The dialogues that make more extensive (six percent or greater) use of English take this critique even further, linking language mixing with the collapse of traditional family and morality, the confusion of gender roles, the embrace of materialism and the market, and the failure of *mexicanas/os* to communicate intelligibly with one another. To examine the gendered asymmetry of the dialogues' critique of language mixing, we may

compare "The Mexican From New York" and "Una mula de tantas" two contrastive examples, both recorded during a January 31, 1935, session. In the first, a codeswitching *agringado* ('assimilated ethnic Mexican man') visits a monolingual Spanish-speaking woman in Mexico. In the second, a monolingual Spanish-speaking Mexican man encounters a language-mixing *agringada* ('assimilated ethnic Mexican woman') who is selling tamales on the streets of San Antonio. Although neither *agringada/o* character appears in a positive light, and although the two characters share many important faults, the differences are instructive.

In "Una mula de tantas," the *agringada* played by Netty (N in this and following transcripts) is a tamal vendor, a fact that highlights both her low socioeconomic status and her Mexican identity. Her exchange with the wealthy Mexican tourist played by Jesús (J in this and following transcripts) begins with a series of cross-linguistic misunderstandings.

- (9) J: ¿Qué tal, paisanita? How are you, countrywoman?
 ¿Cómo le va? How's it going?
N: *What you say?*
J: ¿Juan José? No vino. Juan José? He didn't come.
N: *Whatsumatta?*
J: ¡Qué mara ni qué mara! Don't give me this "mara"
 Yo soy Chema. I'm Chema.
 José María. José María.
N: *Me don't understand.*
J: ¡Mire ésta! Look at this woman!

Pos yo ¿qué sé dónde están? Well how am I supposed to know
where they are?

In the conversation that ensues, the female character, who identifies herself as "Mary Lou Taguada," speaks in a register of Spanish that is usually used to satirize the *español mocho* ('broken Spanish') of Anglos and other foreigners.⁹ Among the principal features of this register is the misuse of the English *me* (or the Spanish *mí*) in subject position and the use of uninflected or incorrectly conjugated verbs, as in the following example, also from "Una mula de tantas":¹⁰

- (10) J: Pues, ¿que Ud. no conoce México? Well, aren't you familiar with Mexico?
N: Oh, no. Oh, no.
Me ser American girl. Me to be American girl.¹¹

Interestingly enough, this register also appears in the speech of an Anglo prostitute in "Mexican Kiss" (Anonymous Author 1935d). The humor of the use of *me* in subject position derives from the hearer's knowledge of English. It would be possible to describe this register in more detail, but for our purposes it is sufficient to note that its use in these dialogues seems to equate the *agringada* with the foreigner, presenting her as deficient in both English and Spanish. This character recalls one of José Limón's early examples of *agringada/o* joking, which appeared in a Laredo newspaper, about a *tamalera* ("tamal-vendor") who marries an Anglo-American and, when she deigns to attend *mexicana/o* social gatherings, eats tamales husk and all as if she does not know to take them off. Of particular interest is the woman's reported reaction when presented with a plate of

tamales: “¿Qué este?” (“What this?”) (Limón 1978:37). In addition to denying cultural knowledge, she is shown as feigning linguistic incompetence by deleting the verb *ser* (“to be”).

In interviews with me, the Raymond García and Normalinda Monsiváis, both members of *carpa* families, described the *agringada* of "Una mula de tantas" as “*presumida*” and “smart-alecky.” In Normalinda Monsiváis’s words, “she's trying to discriminate [against ethnic Mexicans] there and she's one of them.” Normalinda Monsiváis was receptive to the message of the dialogue and even hypothesized that some *agringadas* might in fact have spoken like “Mary Lou Taguada.” Raymond García, however, reacted with some degree of disgust to the dialogue, declaring, “Taban 'taban relajando al la a las ... a los tejanos, ves. Porque ... es casi todo lo que que hacían.” [‘They were making fun of the of the ... of the tejanas/os, see. Because ... that’s about all they did.’] With the use of *they*, Mr. García refers both to Netty and Jesús Rodríguez and to Mexican-born *artistas* in general, whom he criticizes as follows:¹²

Y los que vienen de allá	And the ones who come from there [Mexico]
“¡Ey vendidos!	[say] “hey sellouts!
¡Muertos de hambre!” que quién sabe qué.	Starvelings!” and who knows what else.
Y los muertos de hambre no somos nosotros. Son ellos. Los que vienen de allá a querer trabajar aquí ves.	And we aren’t the starvelings. They are. The ones who come from there wanting to get work here see.

In Mr. García's view, then, many Mexican-born performers engaged in mean-spirited and even hypocritical satire of ethnic Mexicans born in the United States. I had, in fact, expected this sort of offended reaction from U.S.-born performers, which is why Normalinda Monsiváis's sympathy with the dialogue's message surprised me. In spite of this difference in reaction, neither performer evaluated the *agringada* character favorably or found her language realistic.

By contrast, the codeswitching dandy in "The Mexican from New York" is at least fluent in the variety of Spanish that he speaks. A fashionable *agringado* named Juan Palomares (J) whose visit to New York City has gone to his head returns to Mexico and tries to impress a naïve *ranchera* ('country woman') named Dominga Luz (N) with his sharp clothes and his command of English. As in the encounter between Mexican and Mexican American in "Una mula de tantas," the *agringado*'s use of English leads to difficulties in communication.

(11)

- | | |
|---|---|
| J: Y como vengo de <i>New York</i> | And since I come from <i>New York</i> |
| [nuw y□ ◆κ] | |
| N: ¿De dónde? | From where? |
| J: New York. | |
| “New York” se dice dándole la
vuelta a la lengua | You say “ <i>New York</i> ” by twisting back
your tongue |
| y luego un pajuelazo “ <i>New York</i> .” | and then letting it fly “ <i>New</i>
<i>York</i> .” |
| N: Ah. ¿Así? ¿ <i>New York</i> ? | Oh. Like this? <i>New York</i> ? |

[nuw yɔɪk^h]

J: 'Stá güeno comadre pero no me	All right, comadre, but don't
escupa	spit on me. ¹³

For comic effect, the actors here emphasize the English retroflex [r], which Spanish speakers usually render as a trill, and the word-final [k], which Spanish speakers usually delete. Netty's hypercorrect aspiration of the word-final [k] and Jesús's response draw added attention to the difference between Spanish and English as it highlights her ignorance of the language and the unnecessary extra effort she is making to speak it. Jesús's character, Juan Palomares, is enthusiastic about the United States, even when he recounts humiliating experiences at the hands of the U.S. Border Patrol.

(12)

J:	La última vez que yo pasé	The last time I crossed
	los empleados del puente los de	the employees at the bridge the
	inmigración y sanidad	ones from immigration and
		health
	con el sombrero en la mano me	with their hats in their hands told
	decían	me
	"Pase Ud."	"Right this way, sir."
	"Pase Ud."	"Right this way, sir."
	¡Y reata!	And boom!
	Al baño.	Into the bath.
N:	¿Lo bañaron compadre?	They gave you a bath,

compadre?

J: Y con gasolina que fue lo peor. And with gasoline, which was
the worst part.

N: ¿Y cómo quedó? And how did you end up?

J: Pos todito arrugado y apestoso a Why all wrinkled up and
garage. [garatʃe] smelling like a *garage*.

Dominga falls for his line and proposes marriage. As they prepare to leave for New York, she asks what his name is there. He replies that the translation of his name is “John Pigeonhouse.” As his wife, she will be “Miss Sunday *Light* de Pigeonhouse.”¹⁴

My original impression of “The Mexican from New York” was that it was meant to present the language mixing character in an unfavorable light, as a sort of buffoon who was trying to put on airs and speak a language he barely knew. For this reason, I was surprised by an exegesis provided in an interview by Normalinda Monsiváis, who remembers seeing her parents perform the dialogue in their *carpa*. Asked to characterize Juan Palomares, she interpreted him as a sort of evangelist, spreading the good news about America and teaching English to the ignorant *ranchera*. His description of his experience at the border prompted her to recall being punished for speaking Spanish in school as a child in Kenedy, a practice that she attributed to “ignorance” on the part of the teachers. Asked whether Juan Palomares seemed smart or stupid, she replied that he seemed smart, expanding on her ideas as follows.

He's using his little knowledge to ...**get** himself the **lady** and you know
I thin— yeah I think he's a little smart there.

Probably hasn't gone to **school** but he's picked up [P: Mhm]

That's the way my parents learned. They didn't go to school.

In Ms. Monsiváis's interpretation, Juan Palomares's use of his "little knowledge" of Spanish recalls the everyday struggles of people without education to survive by their wits and pick up what knowledge they can, a struggle she witnessed directly in the lives of her parents, who taught her to read and write Spanish before she entered school.

Asked to contrast Juan Palomares with Mary Lou Taguada, the *agringada* of the previous dialogue, she replied that "in her very small words she [Mary Lou Taguada] put down ... Mexico, you know ... while this guy is building up [America]." In saying this, Ms. Monsiváis hit on a key asymmetry in the dialogues. While men are satirized for accepting English and U.S. values, they are not, as women are, shown angrily rejecting Mexico and *lo mexicano* ("Mexican-ness"). Ms. Monsiváis's positive evaluation of Juan Palomares, which is firmly grounded in her own sense of belonging in the United States, reminds us that these dialogues can be read against the grain, regardless of their appearance of ideological closure.¹⁵

Both Mary Lou Taguada of "Una mula de tantas" and Juan Palomares of "The Mexican From New York" are shown as boastful, ignorant, excessively motivated by fashion and prestige, and overly enamored of the United States and its consumer culture. But where the *agringado* is shown embracing "Americanness," the *agringada* is shown explicitly, even rudely, rejecting "Mexicanness." The contrast between these two characters is perhaps the clearest sign of a gendered asymmetry in the dialogues' critique of code switching and *agringamiento*. Of course, the dialogues draw on a long tradition of similar gendered asymmetries in many varieties of European and European-American

popular entertainment. English-language minstrel shows in the 19th-century United States, for example, satirized foppishness and dilettantism in both genders but were especially critical of women (Evans 1978:174-178; Toll 1974:184).¹⁶ In our San Antonio examples this class valence remains. The only monolingual character in the dialogues ever to respond favorably to a character who mixes English and Spanish, Dominga Luz of "The Mexican From New York," is portrayed as an ignorant peasant. By contrast, a codeswitching *tejano* dandy in "Cabrestea o se ahorca" receives a tongue-lashing from an educated Mexican woman (cf. Example 1 above). In the San Antonio context, of course, these class-based criticisms are mapped onto ethnic hierarchies and the hierarchical relationship between English and Spanish, such that an ethnic Mexican who seeks to speak English and pass for Anglo is seen as *presumida/o*. Here the codeswitching *tejano* becomes the butt of the harshest jokes.

In the remaining dialogues that use English extensively, the male and female characters speak and mix English and Spanish with equal fluency, not using the caricatured "Anglo Spanish" register of "Una mula de tantas." These dialogues, however, show an additional gendering of codeswitching, because the bilingual *agringadas/os* appear as transgressors of the conjugal home and of accepted ideas of masculinity and femininity. In "Es mi hombre," we find a husband waiting for his wife ("mi *honey*"; 'my *honey*') to return home at three o'clock in the morning. Although her absence bothers him, he demonstrates little resolve about the matter. His wife then waltzes casually into the house and explains her lateness.

(13)

Nothing wrong Fred.

Hoy fue el <i>birthday</i> del <i>manager</i>	Today was the <i>manager's</i> <i>birthday</i>
Y dio un <i>party</i>	And he gave a <i>party</i>
Y todo los empleados asisitieron al <i>dance</i>	And all the employees went to the <i>dance</i>
And you?	And you?

Jealous of "el *manager*," the husband protests, and an argument ensues, peppered with English, which finally leads him to ask for a divorce and announce that he will leave the house immediately. Furthermore, he acknowledges responsibility for the whole situation, saying that the whole problem stems from the fact that he has granted his wife's every whim since they were married.

At this demonstration of resolve his wife reveals, almost entirely in Spanish, a complex deception which is typical of comic afterpieces of the Spanish-language stage (Ramírez 1990:39). "El *manager*" is, in fact, her brother, and the two have conspired to make her appear to be a defiant uncontrolled libertine in order to force Fred to recover his proper masculine authority in the home. Now that he has demonstrated himself a worthy husband, there is a job waiting for him as his brother-in-law's business partner. The couple's reconciliation and the ostensible restoration of the home's structure of authority coincide with an almost complete abandonment of English by the characters, what Auer and others have called a "second-order" shift from a mixed to an unmixed variety (1998:16). If the linguistic message of the dialogue is clear, the overall message about male versus female authority, in which the wife must defy her husband to restore him to his position at the head of the household, remains an unresolved paradox.

At the end of the dialogue, a relieved Fred compliments his wife, saying “Y yo que te creía de *estay*” (‘And here I thought you were *estay*). She responds, “Él que iba al *estay* eras tú, pero te he salvado” (‘The one who was going into *estay* was you, but I’ve saved you’). The word *estay* also occurs in “La canción del pizcador” [“The Cotton-Picker’s Song”] (Anonymous Author 1929) in a similar context.¹⁷ In interviews, some former tent-show performers have suggested to me that the Rodríguez duo is using the English word *style* here. Raymond García and his wife Virginia interpreted this word as related to the phrase *entrar al estilo* (lit. ‘enter into the style’). For Mrs. García, the phrase refers not to becoming fashionable (i.e., adopting a style of dress), but rather to adopting a style of life outside of the conjugal family, “la moda de que todas las mujeres hacen que se divorcian y luego les hacen que le den dinero” (‘the fashion that all of the women do in which they get divorced and they make them [their ex-husbands] give them money’). To enter into “style,” then, is to abandon family life and the security of patriarchal gender norms, embracing instead *el vacilón* (‘good times’), the domain of recreational sexuality and hedonistic consumption of commodities. In greater Mexican tradition, *el vacilón* is somewhat more accessible to “respectable” men than to “respectable” women, but in the dialogues, “style” refers both to men and to women.

The phrase *entrar al estilo*, interestingly enough, also occurs in another recorded dialogue, “La póliza de a daime” (“The Dime Policy”) (Rodríguez-Valero 1931). In this piece, a naïve *ranchero* played by Jesús pays a visit to his *comadre* (the mother of his godson), played by Netty, only to find her appearance completely changed. Astonished, he asks what happened, and she replies,

(14)

Pos ya ve.	Well, just look.
Me entré al estilo.	I entered into the style.
Me corté el pelo	I cut my hair
me rizaron a la	they gave me a permanent
permanenete	
me masajaron las arrugas	they massaged my wrinkles
y aquí me tiene	and here you have me
peor que nueva.	worse than new.

The intonation with which Netty Rodríguez delivers the last line, *peor que nueva*, suggests a certain ironic self-deprecation on her character's part. The listener, in other words, is led to assume that the character is making a joke and that in reality she feels that her appearance is much improved. When the *compadre* (fictive co-parent) asks where the money for all these improvements came from, she replies, "De la póliza de a daime" ('From the dime policy'). As the discussion continues, it is revealed that "Doña Póliza" ("Miss Polissy") is not a person, as the *compadre* initially thinks, but an insurance policy that provides money when one's relatives die. Suddenly concerned, the *compadre* asks where his *ahijado* ('godson') is, and the *comadre* reveals a gruesome story. The *ahijado* is dead, and when the family received the insurance payment, her husband decided to quit work and strangle one of their 18 children every 20 days to make ends meet. When he finally turned on his wife, she managed to kill him before he killed her, collecting a handsome check in the process. The dialogue presents this nightmarish situation as a caricature of life in the United "Estates" where, in the *comadre*'s words,

"todo es dinero" ('everything is money'). The protagonists of this last group of bilingual dialogues inhabit this same world of anomie and hedonistic individualism. Unlike the wife of "Es mi hombre," who in the end is only faking, most of the characters have entered into the style. They have been seduced by the allure of American consumerism, and lacing their speech with English, they leave family and national identity behind in an amoral pursuit of commercialized pleasures.

The relationship between the ideological formation presented in the dialogues and the sociolinguistic situation of their audience is difficult to determine. Were we to take the dialogues as transparent reflections of social reality, we might infer that *mexicanas* in the San Antonio of the 1920s and 1930s were more motivated by prestige, more attracted to the dominant language and culture, more inclined to reject their Mexican heritage, and more likely to mix English and Spanish than their male counterparts.¹⁸ Although I have little historical information about gender differences in language use among *mexicanas/os* in San Antonio specifically, one survey conducted in 1921 in Los Angeles actually found that a larger percentage of Mexican men than women were able to speak English (G. Sánchez 1990:256). The dialogues, in other words, may show the reverse of the actual sociolinguistic situation of their audience. The critical question of the effects of gender on access to English among *mexicanas/os* during the period in question remains to be investigated and is beyond the scope of the present study. The key issue for interpreting the dialogues is the symbolic weight ascribed to women's, as opposed to men's, mixing of English and Spanish.

The gendered asymmetry in the dialogues' evaluations of male and female speech may be related to disturbances of *mexicana/o* gender norms and family life occasioned by

adaptation to the socioeconomic reality of the early 20th-century United States. Both ethnic Mexicans and those Anglo reformers who hoped to "Americanize" them during this period saw women as "the 'glue' that [kept] ... the Chicano [sic] family together" and therefore as "responsible for the maintenance of Mexican tradition" (251). Sánchez notes that the pressures of acculturation on children born and raised in the United States often led young women to run away from home to escape the discipline of their Mexican-born parents (260). In a similar vein, García observes that in San Antonio, increased access to extradomestic wage labor and home production led to "an intellectual pattern of independence ... in young single women and in widowed and divorced ones" (García 1991:124). This pattern led to clashes within families over standards of comportment that linked ethnic solidarity to the fulfillment of proper gender norms. As one father told a local schoolteacher, "I follow my Mexican customs and I won't change them for anything in the world. I haven't let my sisters cut their hair nor go around like the [non-Mexican] girls here ... with all kinds of boys" (134). Such sentiments were partly a reaction to the growing involvement of ethnic Mexican women on both sides of "the" border in an increasingly libertine youth culture. As historian Vicki Ruiz has noted, ethnic Mexican women in the United States of the 1920s and 1930s faced contradictory pressures from their families' traditional expectations regarding their behavior, from the economic need to support those families through wage labor, and from the allure of the U.S. mass media and commodified fashion (1993:123). The ideological formation observed in the dialogues, then, can be related to the disruptions arising from the *mexicana/o* community's experience of changes in gender norms occasioned by a new socioeconomic reality in the United States. (cf. Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994 for an insightful

account of similar dynamics among contemporary Mexican immigrants). In this environment, previously naturalized expectations regarding gender were brought into question, leading "ethnic traits" to be "attached to gender terms" (Wong 1992:117).

Contestation and Contradiction

As I have suggested, neither this critique of language mixing nor its accompanying ideology of gender were without ambiguities and contradictions, and neither went uncontested. One of the most important contradictions lies in the use of jokes and puns based on misunderstandings of English and mistranslations of Spanish. Jokes such as the naïvely literal translation of the name Juan Palomares as John Pigeonhouse or the misunderstandings between the interlocutors in "Una mula de tantas" (cf. Example 2 above) presuppose at least some knowledge of both English and Spanish and direct the attention of audiences toward this presupposition. Quite apart from their referential content, then, these jokes amount to acknowledgments of the coexistence of English and Spanish among speakers and hearers. As José Reyna has noted, they allow "the Chicano [*sic*] to exalt his [*sic*] own position over the Anglo and the Mexican, neither of whom understands both languages" (1980:38, quoted in Ybarra-Frausto 1984:50-51). Their presence is thus anomalous in dialogues whose primary point is to condemn language mixing. I think it is fair to see these bilingual jokes as moments when the dominant discourse of purity enters into tension with a translinguistic creativity that confounds any movement toward rhetorical and ideological closure.

Another important countercurrent in the dialogues may be seen in the numerous references to U.S. films and celebrities, which seem to compromise the overall message of Mexicanist cultural purism. In one particularly ironic example, the rich Mexican

tourist in "Una mula de tantas" ends the dialogue by declaring to the *agringada* that he plans to take her to Mexico to exhibit her. She assumes that she is to be shown in Mexico's *Palacio de Bellas Artes* ("Fine Arts Palace") for her movie-star beauty, but he contracts her, saying that the place he will exhibit her...

(15)

por vieja fea	as an ugly
ridícula	ridiculous woman
mexicana renegada	as a mexicana in denial
es en un circo como animal raro	is in a circus like a strange animal
diciendo que es Ud. la mujer del	saying you're the mate of King
chango King Kong.	Kong, the ape.

That a dialogue like this should be able to presuppose knowledge of the film "King Kong" shows the degree to which U.S. popular culture influenced even those who sought consciously to distance themselves from it, perhaps on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border. Here, U.S. consumer culture appears not as the Other against which an enclaved *mexicana/o* identity could be defined but as an unmarked part of the audience's frame of reference.

A further countervoice within the dialogues themselves comes from their critique of domestic violence. In many of the bilingual dialogues, as I have already noted, the commodified, libertine, *agringado* world of *el vacilón* appears as a negative example that presupposes a more or less unified, harmonious Mexican family in which the husband is in charge and the wife knows her place. Some of the dialogues, however, examine the contradictions of that home, turning their critical gaze on abusive husbands. In some of

these examples, unfaithful wives turn out to be almost sympathetic figures, and in quite a few of them, the husband is portrayed as ultimately venal, allowing his wife to be unfaithful in exchange for the money her lovers leave and beating her to salvage his male ego. In others, he is simply stupid. In either case, the unfaithful wife emerges as a trickster figure of sorts. One example of this pattern is "Tres por tres son tres" ["Three Times Three is Three"] (Rodríguez-Valero 1936c). In this dialogue, a language-mixing husband exhorts his wife to hurry up and follow him to San Antonio's "St. Peter's Park" so that they can see the shout of independence at the Cinco de Mayo celebration.¹⁹ She is nine months pregnant and protests that she does not want to walk. An argument ensues, and finally the husband threatens her, saying "Soy capaz de matarla hasta con mi sombra, ¿l'oye?" ('I'm capable of killing you even with my shadow, y'hear?') At this point it comes out that he is angry because the two have only been married three months, and he suspects his wife's baby is by another man. She responds by explaining that the three months she has known him plus the three months he has known her, plus the three months they have been married add up to nine; "*Believe it or not*, tú eres el papá" ('*Believe it or not*, you're the father.') At first suspicious, he finally accepts her arithmetic. Most of the dialogues that feature abusive or threatening husbands seem to reserve similar fates for them.²⁰

A final rupture in the discourse of purity comes not from within Netty and Jesús Rodríguez's oeuvre, but from outside it, in the repertoire of the Carpa García (cf. Haney 1999 for a detailed treatment of the Carpa García). By the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Texas-born sons and daughters of Manuel García and Teresa González de García had become the principal figures in their family's *carpa*. In tours through southern Texas and

the neighborhoods of San Antonio, they experienced firsthand the linguistic diversification that was underway among ethnic Mexicans in the state. Perhaps for these reasons, the bilingual jokes and sketches that the Garcías have related to me in interviews do not seem to stigmatize bilingualism or language mixing. Furthermore, although patriarchal, normative portrayals of gender and family life do occur in the García family's repertoire, these portrayals are not linked to language use. In one dialogue, as described by Rodolfo García, a city man and a *ranchera* are on their way to the city, and the woman announces her intention to take her shoes off. Disgusted, the man upbraids her for her display of countrified manners:

(16)

Le digo "Tanto tiempo fuera del
rancho
y lo: ...zurumato nada que se le
quita."

I say "So much time away
from the countryside
and you're still just a dumb
zurumato
[immigrant]."²¹

Le digo "Acuérdese que estamos a
este lado del charco.

I say "Remember that we're
on this side of the
puddle.

Y si no platica como aquí se
acostumbra, len— le dicen: eh
que no sabe hablar inglés que es pura
mexicana del otro lado."

And if you don't talk like
people do here the—
they tel:l you eh
that you don't know how to
speak English that

you're just a Mexican
from the other side." ²²

The woman takes this as a challenge, and the two begin an exchange in which each tries to match the other's ability to alternate between Spanish and English:

(17)

Entonces me dice ella	So she says to me
“¿Adónde vamos a dar el <i>ride</i> ?”	“Where are we going to go for a <i>ride</i> ?”
Entonces le digo	So I say to her
“Oh pos <i>come on</i> .	well <i>come on</i> .
Caminamos cuatro cinco <i>blocks</i> .	We'll walk four five <i>blocks</i>
Llegamos hasta 'ónde está la <i>house</i> de la <i>court</i> .	We'll go to where the <i>house</i> of the <i>court</i> is.
[P: Mhm] Y allí <i>stópete</i>	[P: Mhm] And there <i>stop</i>
Hasta que llegue el <i>car</i> .”	Until the <i>car</i> arrives.”

After a series of exchanges like this, the man asks, in English, if the woman would like to dance. She replies, “Yeah,” and the two end the dialogue with a song and dance. In this example, as in the Rodríguez dialogues, many of the uses of English relate to commercialized recreation and the institutions of the dominant society. Here, however, the display of competence with English vocabulary is seen not as cultural treason but as a sign of sophistication. In other words, the Garcías' dialogue maintains the valuation of English and Spanish as outgroup and ingroup varieties but approaches the dichotomy from a different direction, with different rhetorical ends, and without the gendered critique. Indeed, it is hard to escape the sense that the mixed English/Spanish variety

itself has become a sort of ingroup solidarity code of its own, perhaps not “unmarked” in Myers-Scotton’s (1988) sense, but nevertheless a “norm.” If we look to the early bilingual theatre for the seed of a contemporary Chicana/o sensibility, it is in examples like these and in the bilingual jokes from the Rodríguez dialogues discussed above that we may find it.

Conclusion

These Depression-era dialogues represent language mixing as part of a process of surrender to alien values and gender norms that threatened to send the Mexican colony into a state of anomie. Although it was not necessarily politically radical, this ideological formation defined itself against U.S. laws, customs, and authorities, blaming these institutions for exacerbating the tensions in *mexicana/o* families. Furthermore, it demonstrated a profound and visceral distrust of the commodified logic of U.S. society, even as it used the circuits of U.S. consumer culture to propagate its own message. Indeed, we might see a homology between the paradox of using consumer culture to advocate a return to use value and the paradox of performing codeswitching in order to discourage it. These examples support Woolard and Schieffelin’s observation that language ideology should be understood less as a “homogeneous cultural template” than “as a process involving struggles among multiple conceptualizations and demanding the recognition of variation and contestation within a community” (1994:71).

By presenting bilingual Mexican Americans as failing to communicate with monolingual Mexicans and descending into amoral, individualistic lives of consumption, the dialogues warn of fragmentation within the *mexicana/o* community. Cameron’s observations about the social implications of linguistic purism are highly applicable here:

... the anxiety that gets expressed as “if we don't obey the rules we won't be able to communicate” might equally be defined as an anxiety about moral relativism or social fragmentation. ... Most forms of verbal hygiene are practiced in order to ward off the threat, by making language a fixed and certain reference point (1995:25).

Netty and Jesús Rodríguez's dialogues sought that fixed reference point in a “pure” standard Spanish, which itself became intelligible by virtue of its difference from the supposedly corrupt varieties that the performers sought to stigmatize. Perhaps the greatest irony of this project of verbal hygiene is that it not only failed to prevent the development of a mixed English/Spanish vernacular, but also may have contributed to the formation of a hybridized bilingual aesthetic. This may be attributed in part to the ruptures within the discourse, as noted above. I would suggest, however, that the very existence of these ruptures attests to the overwhelming influence of the social and economic processes of which language mixing was a part. The mingling of Spanish and English among ethnic Mexicans in the United States during the first decades of the twentieth century was the dynamic product of a time of rapid social change “marked by a great deal of mobility, geographical and social, where role differentiation and appropriation prepare[d] the ground for assimilation and language loss” (R. Sánchez 1993:139). In this context, both the purist ideology and the emergent hybrid aesthetic of the bilingual jokes may be seen as resources that ordinary *mexicanas/os* used to make sense of the contradictions of the world in which they had to survive.

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¹ In this article, I use *ethnic Mexican* (following Gutiérrez 1995) and *mexicana/o* broadly and interchangeably to refer to people of Mexican descent or heritage without regard to nationality, place of birth, or formal citizenship status, following what I take to be common practice in Texas. This usage differs from that of California, where *mexicana/o* usually refers specifically to Mexican immigrants. The term *Chicana/o* in this article applies to ethnic Mexicans who identify with the territory that is now the United States as a home and who assert a cultural nationalism inspired by the civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s.

² Readers who have understood "bilingual theatre" to be a "Chicano thing" may be surprised to learn that musical comedies employing a mixture of English and Spanish—including intrasentential alternation between the two languages—were popular in Mexico City during the early twentieth century. José F. Elizondo's *Chin Chun-Chan* (Medina and Elizondo 1904), the first Mexican theatrical production to be performed more than one thousand times (Reyes de la Maza 1985:340), makes extensive use of English, as does his later *El país de la metralla* (Elizondo 1913). The English use in these plays is similar in many ways to that in the Rodríguez dialogues.

³ In this transcription, line breaks separate phrases defined by pausing and intonation. Audible pauses occur at the end of each printed line. Elipses (...) denote audible pauses within a phrase that seems united by intonation. Periods, question marks, and exclamation points denote the discursive functions of sentences, not intonation contours. Elongation of sounds is marked with a colon, while cut off words are marked with a long dash. Periods and question marks are used in their traditional way, but they also tend to mark rising and falling intonation. Boldface type indicates emphasis on the speaker's

part. Underlining is used for features that I, the author, wish to single out for special attention. English words and English loan-words are italicized, both in the transcription and the translation.

⁴ For a nearly complete listing of the dialogues of Netty and Jesús Rodríguez, cf. Spottswood 1990:2261-2263. Four recordings not mentioned in Spottswood are listed in the online catalogue of UCLA's *Frontera* Music Archive, <http://unitproj.library.ucla.edu/music/frontera/index.cfm>. The dialogue "Me voy para México" ["I'm going to México"] (Anonymous Autor 1935e) has been anthologized in Kanellos et. al., ed. 2002a:438-440 (English prose translation) and Kanellos et. al. ed. 2002b:308-311 (Spanish transcription).

⁵ i.e., conservative supporters of the dictator Porfirio Díaz who was deposed at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

⁶ i.e., conservative supporters of General Victoriano Huerta, a Díaz supporter who betrayed the revolutionary President Francisco Madero and assumed the presidency after a coup in 1913, only to be deposed himself soon afterwards.

⁷ Jesús's experiences on the railroad may have inspired some of the jokes in a recorded dialogue titled "El rielero" ("The Railroad Worker") (Anonymous Author 1928a).

⁸ The dialogues attributed to Jesús were all recorded for Vocalion, although some Vocalion recordings are not attributed. None of the Blue Bird recordings are attributed.

⁹ *Taguada* is probably a joke, sounding as it does like the Spanish phrase '*Tá aguada*' ('She's sloppily fat'). I thank Norma Mendoza-Denton for pointing this joke out to me.

¹⁰ This is one of many examples in the dialogues in which words may belong to either Spanish or English. In Mexican *revistas* ("musical revues") featuring Anglo-American

characters, the word is written as *mí*. However, in "El Chino" ["The Chinaman"] (1936a), a character who speaks Spanish with a "Chinese accent" does not use *mí* in subject position, suggesting that a reference to the English *me* is intended. Interestingly enough, the Chinese character is able to conjugate his verbs. The "gringo Spanish" also occurs in the speech of a stereotypical "Indian Chief" from the United States who rescues María Elena Velasco's "La India María" in the film *OK Mister Pancho* (Martínez-Solares 1979). It seems, then, that the register is supposed to characterize its speaker as influenced by English and semilingual.

¹¹ Underlining here is used to draw attention to unconjugated verb.

¹² Here, and in other transcriptions of interview discourse, my backchannel cues are inserted in brackets when they occur.

¹³ I have transcribed *'stá güeno* with what I understand to be an orthographic convention used to represent the stylized *costumbrista* ("local color") form of peasant speech that the couple repeatedly uses in this and other dialogues. These orthographic conventions can represent condescending attitudes toward peasant speech, although they can also signal a certain populism on the writer's part.

¹⁴ "Sunday *Light*" refers to the Sunday edition of the now defunct English-language newspaper, the San Antonio *Light*. The "John Pigeonhouse" joke was probably old when Netty and Jesús recorded it. Ybarra-Frausto (1984:50) also refers to it. Other similar jokes refer, for example, to a man named Pedro Meza who becomes Peter Table. Perhaps the most famous such joke is the song "Natalio Reyes-Colás," written and performed by Juan "El Piporro" González, in which a *bracero* (agricultural guest worker)

by that name immigrates to the United States and becomes "Nat 'King' Cole." I thank Georgina Rojas-García for putting me on the trail of this song.

¹⁵ Alicia Gaspar de Alba's adaptation of Stuart Hall's theory of cultural reception is relevant here. Ms. Monsiváis's exegesis of the dialogue would, in these terms, be a negotiated reading (Gaspar de Alba 1998:162).

¹⁶ I thank Richard Bauman for pointing out these parallels between Mexican American vaudeville and Anglo American minstrel shows. Although my analysis is keyed to the dialogues' relationship to their specific local setting and historical circumstances, they are part of a widespread tradition of popular comedy and may echo themes found in similar entertainments in other times and places.

¹⁷ In that dialogue, a farmworker proposes to a woman, and when she hesitates, afraid to lose her job, he suggests that they both work. She refuses, saying, "¡Qué pronto se ha vuelto al *estay*, Toribio!" ('How quickly you've turned into an *estay*, Toribio'), and argues that the man she marries must be her sole provider.

¹⁸ Jaffe (1999:107) notes a similar commonsense idea in Corsica, which blames women for the shift to French and views men as more likely to conserve Corsican values and customs.

¹⁹ As far as I know, nobody has ever seriously called San Pedro Park, which is named for the San Pedro Springs, "St. Peter's Park." The shout of independence is associated with the 16th of September, Mexico's independence day. The fact that the character expects it on the fifth of May, a holiday commemorating the Mexican victory in the Battle of Puebla, shows that he knows nothing about Mexican history or heritage. The fifth of May is, and probably was, more widely celebrated in the United States than in Mexico.

²⁰ These include "Los compadritos" (Anonymous author 1928b) and "Me cai gordo" (Rodríguez-Valero 1937). The one exception may be "Los mojados," which ends with a verse declaration that a man who wants his wife to love her must give her kisses and blows and that deportees should rejoice at their fate because they are being sent back to the land where the "pants" are in charge. I suspect that these statements are intended to be ironic.

²¹ In the original version of this essay, published in 2003 in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, *zurumato* was mistranslated.

²² From interview PH90-1-1:2, On file at the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio. The original tapes of all of my 1990 interviews are available at the Institute. Interviews from 1997, 1999, and 2000 are in my private collection. In other interviews, Mr. García and his relatives replaced the phrase *mexicana del otro lado* ('Mexican woman from the other side') with *Mexican grease*, although Mr. García appears to have balked at using that phrase in the 1990 interview quoted here.

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