

Spanglish as a Discourse

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I chose to analyze the discourse of children of Mexican immigrants as it is something that has been deeply ingrained in my life. Specifically, I will analyze the literacy aspects surrounding the discourse because of the weight and the power that language carries. I see discourse as what I present to those around me. What I show to one discourse group may be different from what I show to another. I believe that calling this discourse “Spanglish” is simplifying it because there is such an enormous range of language that it could encompass, but that is exactly what this discourse is. It is an uncertain meeting of two “Lifeworld Discourses,” creating one that lives in between (Gee, 1996, p. 154). As a child of a Mexican and born in the USA for a better life, I feel that there is a sense of urgency to show my parents that the decision they made to come here was for the best. The Spanglish Discourse is a complex blend of two discourses colliding and creating a discourse that stands on its own.

As a child of Mexican immigrants, I am stuck in this in-between space. I do not know if I should greet people by saying hola and giving them a hug and a kiss, or if I should just shake their hand and say hello. I may have a preferred language, but that does not mean that it is the easiest way to be understood or to speak to people. Sometimes I forget words in one language, and I can not always use the other to compensate, because not everyone speaks that language. I am stuck going to Google Translate, knowing that growing up with both languages was a blessing but at the same time realizing that I may not have these issues if I had grown up listening to only one. I distinctly remember once in my adult life while working at a bank, I spoke to clients in Spanish instead of English when I did not mean to. I had heard them speaking in Spanish to each other, so my mind automatically responded in like, despite them not having requested it. I was originally mortified when it happened because people are often offended when they are spoken to in something other than English.

This discourse gives allowances, but it also takes. It gives opportunities to the speaker, but it may take credibility when someone hears the accent that they speak with.

Elizabeth B. Moje (2009), a college professor and one of the authors of “Literacy and Identity: Examining the Metaphors in History and Contemporary Research,” describes how literacy can be a social construct (p. 417). People will judge how literate I am by how I look or sound. When I sound different, society takes note, and I am judged on this. Some people do their best to avoid being different, but an accent is not easy to change. Being different due to an accent in the U.S. sometimes means that I am an

outcast. Most of the population speaks English, and many speak two languages, but showing more than one nationality is frowned upon in some circles. It takes practice and a separation from our Lifeworld Discourse to speak English like most do in the USA. This Lifeworld Discourse is the primary discourse in most cases. It is something that I have developed in order to face all parts of our world and our lives. Changing something so vital to the way I have portrayed myself to the world seems like giving up a part of myself (Moje et al., 2009, p. 427), as if I am turning my back on the culture where I was raised because I do not want to be viewed as different in society.

James Paul Gee (1996), an ASU professor and successfully published academic author, speaks on this in *Ideology in Discourse*, stating that, "Discourses are resistant to internal criticism and self-scrutiny since uttering viewpoints that seriously undermine them defines one as being outside them" (p. 159). The way that he describes it, I am an outsider to the discourse of those who had Spanish as a first language, and to those who had only English as a first language.

Spanglish speakers are straddling two discourses and are creating one that exists between the two in the process.

I stand alone as a first-generation Mexican American, but am still surrounded by others who share my experiences. I am not just Mexican and I am not just American, so I will never fit into those groups. Instead, I must stand in the doorway of both rooms with one foot on each side. I am in a constant state of change because I want to be better at speaking Spanish and not stutter through the sentences even though I am considered "fluent." All the while, I am complimented by those who do not understand and are teased by those who understand too well that I do not fit. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), the author of *Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, explains the concept well when she says, "Alienated from her mother culture, 'alien' in the dominant culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner life of her Self. Petrified, she can't respond, her face caught between *los intersticios*, the space between the different worlds she inhabits" (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 20). She is describing the way it is to be stuck between two discourses, two cultures, and not be fully accepted into either.

Moje et al. (2009) state, "...[T]he self exists because people are aware of their relation to the social process as a whole and to the other individuals participating in it with them; they are reflexive, taking the attitude of the other toward themselves and consciously adjusting themselves to that social process" (p. 423). I see the authors'

point about the "Social Formation of the Self" as wishing that languages could flow without intermingling. It depends on who I am speaking to at any given moment; if I am talking to a person who only speaks Spanish, I am more likely to be embarrassed if I mispronounce words. On the other hand, if I am speaking with someone who resides in the Spanglish Discourse and I stumble over my words or use both languages cooperatively, it is not as embarrassing. As it happens, many people expect it and will help by making suggestions for words. As a member of the discourse, I have conversations where I blend the two languages, much like Gloria Anzaldua does in *Borderlands*. She even offers a term to explain the blending and combining of the two languages when she says, "We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages" (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 55). That forked tongue may sound something like, "Vamos a parkear la troka aqui." *Parkear* and *troka* are not considered real words in Spanish or English. They are a blend of the two languages, not fitting in either discourse.

Even though I am in this border space alongside every other child of immigrant parents, I am also alone because there is such a wide spectrum of language.

Some know only basic Spanish and speak it with a thick accent; others prefer Spanish and will taunt people like me. This is because while I do not speak with an accent to my ears, I do not know the proper words or pronunciations, so I start creating them. There are sentences that I remember speaking to my family in Mexico that were a mix of an English and a Spanish word mashed together. Words like "parkear" or "toallita," were met with strange looks and requests for clarification. I do not know the proper terms for many things, so I am stuck performing charades and showing examples when I want to communicate with my family. At home with my family and friends, I constantly speak in this Spanglish slang, with Spanish and English intermingling. I forget that along with entering a new country, I am also entering a completely different discourse.

Although the Spanglish Discourse may be difficult to navigate, it is also where I find my community. I find people who share many experiences with me as children of Mexican immigrants. I have heard many of us comment about being in the same, or in a similar situation when our report cards would come back as kids. Because of the contradicting languages, we struggled in the required English classes at school, and it showed in our grades. Our parents all seemed to have the same reactions, which we find funny now as we look back. They would ask us how we could speak English every day and still fail it. There are also similar situations when our parents would

ask us to translate something that came in the mail. As children we often did not deal with professional documents at school, so we found this request difficult. However, when we explained that to our parents, they were always confused. Speaking and connecting with others in this complicated discourse helps us feel heard. Developing these relationships with others and reminiscing about our similar childhood experiences feels somewhat therapeutic.

The Spanglish Discourse is extremely complex and has many moving parts. In this way, it contains almost too many facets to fit under the umbrella of discourse at all. The discourse feels more like a place where the children of Mexican immigrants can find others who understand the struggles they resonate with. It is difficult to be part of this discourse, but the benefits of having two languages outweigh the challenges that may come from it. Sharing the weight and the triumphs of those who are Spanglish speakers is what paves the way for others to try.

References

