



Mock Spanish? No Problemo

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Mock Spanish is...

A term coined by anthropologist and linguist Jane Hill to describe the incorporation of grossly non-standard and ungrammatical utterances into an English discourse.

Mock Spanish can be found in the following forms:

1. Semantic Derogation: borrowing of neutral or positive Spanish loanwords.
2. Euphemism: borrowing of negative Spanish words.
3. Affixing: borrowing of Spanish morphological elements.
4. Hyperanglicization: absurd mispronunciations.

Examples

“Baja Bennie’s” Restaurant in Tucson serves almost exclusively Anglo customers. It advertises a lighter menu option titled “El Figuro Trimmio”, explaining underneath that it is “Bennie’s answer to the ‘Border Patrol’, sort of our Mex-er-size area”. (Hyperanglicization)

The former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Madeline Albright, was speaking in front of the Security Council after Cuba had shot down a plane manned by Cuban exiles. When speaking of Fidel Castro she said he had not shown “**cojones, but cowardice**”. *Cojones*, in Spanish, is the pejorative way of saying “testicles”. In this context the term refers to bravery or masculinity. (Euphemism)



“Contents” furniture store in Tucson. To promote their sale they advertise “Contemporary and Southwestern Dining, For Pesos”. (Semantic Derogation)



Mock Spanish in the Workplace

Rusty Barrett, an employee in an Anglo-owned Mexican restaurant in Texas named Chalupatown, published an article summarizing his experience with Mock Spanish in the workplace. He noted that the restaurant’s customers were overwhelmingly middle class Anglos, the kitchen staff was all Spanish-speaking and the wait staff was almost completely Anglo. During his employment at Chalupatown he noted many examples of Mock Spanish.

Example 1
Server: Will you ask Luis to refill the ice bin?
Bartender: OK... How do you say “ice”?
Server: I don’t know? Ice-o? (both laugh)
Bartender: (to buser who is passing through the wait station): *Mas ice-o, por favor*
Buser: *Qué?*
 **“What?”
 [The server and bartender both laugh. The buser turns to Rusty, tilts back his head, and turns his hands up to indicate that he wants an explanation.]
Rusty: (to buser) *No quiere nada.*
 **“He doesn’t want anything.”
 [Buser exits the wait station.]

Example 2
Manager: You have to finish *todo esto, porque* I have other things to do.
**Todo esto “all this”, Porque “because”.*
Manager: (later to Anglo employee) Did you see that? He didn’t finish that – he didn’t do what I told him!
Rusty: Maybe he didn’t understand you.
Manager: Oh, he understood me all right, he’s just lazy.

Rusty was also in charge of translating announcements from English to Spanish. He had been explained not to worry if the grammar and spelling were correct when translating because **most of “them”, the Spanish-speaking employees, couldn’t read anyway**. Rusty noted from his experience at this restaurant that English speakers often asked a bilingual for help learning a derogatory phrase to use as a comeback. **He was never asked to say something like “how was your day off”**. He also pointed out that most of the Anglos had enough competence to effectively communicate in Spanish but simply chose not to.

He concluded that the use of exaggerated non-native pronunciation reproduced a negative racial stereotype for Anglo amusement and that because of inadequate Mock Spanish directives the **Spanish-speakers were left with insufficient information for performing their jobs but they were still at risk for the repercussions**.

Mock Spanish Racist? Dual Indexicality

Jane Hill proposes that Mock Spanish is racist because of its “dual indexicality”. She explains that when a person uses Mock Spanish, they are consciously communicating a set of direct indexes, and also subconsciously communicating a set of indirect indexes.

Direct Indexicality: conveying the speaker has desirable qualities such as a good sense of humor, an easy-going personality, playfulness and regional authenticity.

Indirect Indexicality: implying the Spanish-speakers have undesirable qualities such as being grossly sexual, corrupt, lazy or having disorders of language.

*Indirect indexicality may be subconscious, but to be understood it is dependent on shared imagery of Hispanics between interlocutors.

What’s Intended by the Users?

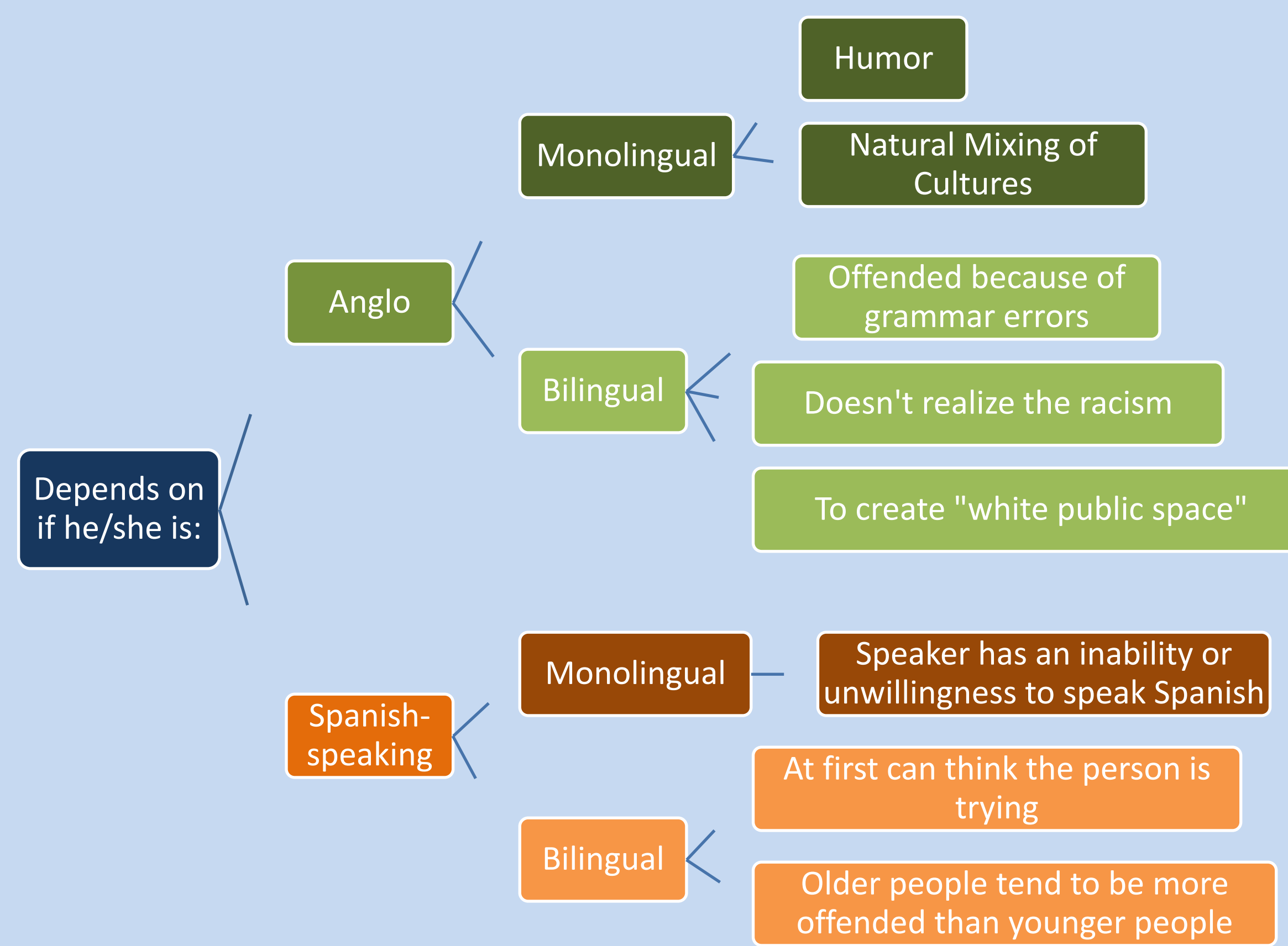
When speaking to other monolingual Anglos:

To convey, through indirect indexicality, positive characteristics of themselves (i.e. to be humorous). Possibly, also, a non-racist attitude or sympathy towards minority groups.

When speaking to Spanish-speakers:

- To make derogatory statements (most common).
- To put blame of restaurant problems on Spanish-speakers, (he understood me, he’s just lazy).
- To maintain social distance.
- To avoid being seen as identifying or supporting solidarity with them, because the full use of Spanish associates with the Latino race.
- At last resort, or in case of emergency, they would use their full capacity, otherwise they would speak in a more simplistic manner (chiquitafication).

What’s Heard by the Listeners?



White Public Space?

Linguistic disorder on part of whites is invisible and normative, but that of Spanish speakers is highly visible and object of constant monitoring. (Hill, “White Public Space”, 6)

“While nonstandard English marks familiarity, **nonstandard Spanish is used to maintain social distance.**” (Barrett, 32)

The refusal to put in full effort to communicate in Spanish “whitens” the speaker even more. For example, hyperanglicization can partly be explained by people expressing a discomfort and fear of sounding ignorant and this constructs a distance between the pronouncer and the language. **It is especially prevalent for academics.**

“It doesn’t facilitate communication but marks racial difference through self-directed humor, reflecting racial superiority.” (Barrett, 47) It excludes Spanish-speakers from interactions for purposes of self amusement, while **effectively communicating in Spanish might be seen as “un-American”**.

The unwillingness to use one’s full competence to communicate creates white public space, making sure that no connotations that come with the Spanish language are reflected on the speaker.

Mock Spanish in a Broader Context

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher, wrote on “Language and Symbolic Power”, analyzing French speech and its uses to create social, cultural and symbolic capital in society. Through empirical research, he showed that these linguistic forms of capital could be used to create inequalities. He quotes the following referring to French society and linguistics in general:

“Through a complex historical process [...] a particular language or set of linguistic practices has emerged as the dominant and legitimate language and other dialects have been eliminated or subordinated to it.” (5)

“The construction of a linguistic market creates the conditions for an objective competition in and through which the legitimate competence can function as linguistic capital, producing a profit of distinction on the occasion of each social exchange.” (55)

Can this framework be used to understand the legitimizing of English and its use as linguistic capital?

Has Spanish been subordinated to the “legitimate” English language in the United States?

Is the constant monitoring of Spanish-speakers’ English a way to maintain the linguistic capital of whites?

Failed Interviews

I tried to interview workers in various restaurants in the Chippewa Valley.

Unfortunately, after many phone calls and contacts with the corporate offices, I was unable to get permission to speak to their employees.

Could this imply something about the working conditions of these employees?

Either way, it indicates the need for further research.

Conclusions

Mock Spanish could be reproducing racist stereotypes through dual indexicality. If this is the case, it may be more powerful than overt racism due to the fact that the users of Mock Spanish don’t necessarily come off as racist. Is it then an accepted form of racism?

Mock Spanish can be used to maintain white public space and to legitimize discrimination of minorities.

More research is needed to understand exactly what people mean when they use Mock Spanish, and what is understood by the listeners. Could the use of Mock Spanish be more prominent in certain regions of the U.S. and among certain groups of people?

There is a need for the awareness of Mock Spanish and its racist potential. If more people are aware of this form of covert racism, it can be prevented and therefore the reproduction of racist stereotypes can be minimized.

Resources

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