

A review of bilingualism in the USA:

The case of Chicano English

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The linguistic environment of the United States of America (the USA) has long been a significant field of research. Through the case of Chicano English as an illustration, this paper attempts to review the multilingual and heterogeneous linguistic situation in the USA. In this paper, the background of Chicano English functions as a base for analyzing the phonological features of Chicano English as an individual English variety. Some clarifications upon certain misconceptions regarding such an English variety are put forward. These misconceptions include Chicano English as a learner language or “Spanglish”. This paper also discusses some sociolinguistic concerns of bilingualism in the USA, such as the mixed attitudes toward Spanish, code-switching between English and Spanish, and the results of language contact.

1. Introduction

As a multiethnic nation, the United States of America (the USA) is a country which congregates citizens of different ethnic and social backgrounds. Bilingualism, or even multilingualism, is a phenomenon observed in the mainland of the USA. By this, bilingualism here means the ability to speak two languages, while multilingualism suggests the ability of speaking more than two languages. In the paper, bilingualism and multilingualism are used interchangeably to refer to the language competence of using two or more languages. In the case of the USA, the languages spoken include mostly English, Spanish and some other languages.

The linguistic environment of the USA has long been a significant field of research of scholars. According to the statistics collected by the Modern Language Association (2006)¹, 82 % of the USA population speak English and 10% of them speak Spanish and Spanish creoles, where Spanish creoles are the variations of Spanish spoken as the mother tongue by Hispanic descendents living in the USA. Apart from African American English, there is one variety among the vernacular varieties of English in the United States which plays an important role in demonstrating some of the bilingual complexity in the country. This variety is Chicano English.

Until today, there is still a heated debate on the issue of the status of Chicano English: “whether it is an epiphenomenon of language contact or an autonomous dialect” (Santa Ana 1993: 3). However, the problem is not an easy one to solve due to the complicated structure of the Latino population in the USA. With the elaboration and explanation on what Chicano English is and some of Chicano English features, this paper aims to deconstruct some misconceptions led by people, including the distinction between Spanglish and the interlanguage of Spanish speakers. This paper also discusses the linguistic complexity of the Chicanos, the problems that bilingualism faces in the USA, such as language attitude toward the two main languages, English and Spanish, and code-switching, and the results of language contact in the USA.

¹ Statistics of languages spoken in the United States collected by Modern Language Association in 2006. Retrieved from http://www.mla.org/census_map.

2. Some background about Chicano English

Chicano English has been an important linguistic field of study because it demonstrates how bilingualism affects and shapes a new language variety. According to the clear summarized account of Tottie (2002: 228), Chicano English is “spoken by descendants of Hispanic immigrants from Mexico”. That is to say, Chicano English is a dialect of English “spoken by people of Mexican ethnic origin in California and the Southwest” (Fought, 2006: 234). Chicano English is one of the non-standard varieties of English, i.e. Latino English. It resulted from the language contact with, mainly but not exclusively, Spanish especially in phonological aspects (Fought 2006: 74). In fact, Tottie (2002: 228) further mentioned that,

“Chicano English is now spoken not only by people who know both English and Spanish, but by people who know no Spanish at all but who are members of a Hispanic community of Mexican origin. Chicano English has developed stable speech patterns and a distinct phonological system of its own, with several features that cannot be due to interference from Spanish.”

In addition to Tottie, several other scholars (see Selinker, 1972, as cited in Santa Ana, 1993) have suggested that Chicano English is not the “interlanguage” used by the Spanish learners of English, i.e. “a learner’s step [of Mexican immigrants] on the way to acquiring more or less Standard English” (Tottie, 2002: 228).

Ever since the Mexicans’ immigration to the southwestern part of the USA since the 1960s, namely to California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, those previously Spanish-speaking adults had to integrate themselves into the English-dominant community in their new country (Fought, 2006: 234). However, the main focus of Chicano English is not on this group of immigrants because, according to the definition of Chicano English, they do not speak the language. The second or later generations of the Mexican-Americans, who speak English since they were born and were educated in the USA, might also use Spanish at home or within their community. These factors contribute to the development and stabilization of Chicano English as an individual variety of English itself, and they also contribute the bilingual situation in the USA (Fought, 2006: 234).

3. Some phonological features of Chicano English

As mentioned above, Chicano English is unique as it has its own phonological features in contrast to other vernacular varieties of English in the USA. Moreover, it has been affected by many features of Spanish. That is the reason why people, upon listening to Chicano English, think Chicano English speakers are non-native speakers of English. According to Fought (2006: 80 – 82), several characteristic phonological features can be identified in Chicano English.

3.1 Reduction of diphthongs to glides

To begin with, one of the main phonological features is the lack of glides. A glide can also be called a diphthong, which is the union of two different vowels. For instance, the diphthong of the word *sale* is [eɪ], which is the union of the vowel [e] and [ɪ]. In Chicano English, glides are usually pronounced as monothongs, which is similar to the corresponding vowels in Spanish (Santa Ana, 1991, as cited in Fought, 2006: 81). One possible reason of the phenomenon is that glides are not common in Spanish. For the case the *sale*, the vowel maybe reduced to a simple [e].

3.2 Less vowel reduction

Secondly, Chicano English tends to have a less frequent vowel reduction than other vernacular varieties. While other English speakers in the USA tend to reduce the unstressed vowels to schwas, Chicanos still pronounce them in a way as if they are in stressed positions (Santa, 1991, as cited in Fought, 2006: 81). This might be due to the fact that in Spanish, the pronunciation of the vowels never changes either in stressed or unstressed positions. To illustrate this, in other American dialects, the first syllable of the three-syllable word *together* is normally reduced into a schwa [ə] instead of being pronounced as [u:] in the word *to* itself. However, the vowel [u:] is often not reduced to a schwa, i.e. a short vowel, so it might sound like a stressed vowel and has a different rhythm from other English varieties in the USA.

3.3 Reduction of consonant clusters

Apart from that, there is a large variety of reduction of consonant clusters in Chicano English compared to other varieties of European-American English (Fought, 2006: 81; Tottie, 2002: 228). Even though other types of vernacular varieties also demonstrate this type of reduction of consonant clusters, it may be even more commonly-observed in Chicano English than the others (Fought, 2003: 69). To illustrate this with an example, for instance, the phrase *It's kind of hard* might become [ɪs kənə hɑr] in Chicano English (Tottie, 2002: 228). In this reduction, the consonant cluster [ts] in the end of the word *it's* is reduced to [s]. Furthermore, the consonant [d] at the end of the word *kind* is reduced and it merges with the next word *of*, while the pronunciation of the word *of* is changed from [ɒv] to [ə]. Finally, the final consonant [d] of the word *hard* is being eliminated. In this sentence, every consonant cluster is reduced and a completely different set of pronunciation is formed.

3.4 Aspiration and intonation patterns

Another distinctive feature of Chicano English is its unaspiration of the aspirated consonants. Chicano speakers tend to adopt the Spanish unaspirated pronunciation patterns. Besides, for intonation patterns, Chicano English speakers use a unique pattern, which is totally different from the other varieties of English spoken in the USA. In Chicano English, the prosody is syllable-timed instead of stressed-timed prosody as in Standard English (Fought, 2006: 82). That is to say, the length of each syllable is the same in Chicano English whereas the length should vary according to the stress pattern in Standard American English, with stressed syllables having a longer length and unstressed syllables having a shorter one.

To further illustrate this, an example² by Baugh (1999) is quoted to show the unique features of Chicano English, including the syllable timing nature of the intonation and the unaspiration. For the Chicano English clip, the supposedly aspirated consonants [k] in calling, [p] in apartment and paper, and [t] in advertised becomes unaspirated. Also, when it is compared to the Standard English clip, it is obvious that the prosodies are totally different, with the Chicano one being syllable-timed. In addition, the consonant

² Example: "Hello, I am calling about the apartment you've advertised in the paper". Retrieved from <http://www.stanford.edu/~jbaugh/baugh.fft>.

cluster [nt] is being reduced to [n] in the word apartment, which is also an obvious illustration of the variety. Besides, by noticing the way hello is pronounced in each case, in Chicano English the diphthong is reduced to a monothong [o] in the second syllable which makes it sound more “Spanish” than the Standard English one.

However, these are only some of the most salient features of Chicano English. There are still a lot more notable differences between Chicano English and other varieties of English. Nonetheless, although these examples seem to validate the misconception that Chicano English speakers must be Spanish learners of English, this notion will be proven false in the next section of this paper.

4. Some myths and realities of Chicano English

In addition to the phonological features, the grammatical features which are beyond the study scope of this paper also make Chicano English special. However, they can all be traced back to the Spanish grammar and, thus, may be redundant to be mentioned here.

4.1 Chicano English is NOT “Spanglish”

One of the important points about Chicano English is that, while Spanish elements are found in the language used in Chicano English, people might make the overstatement that the speakers are simply using “Spanglish”. This is yet another important issue of Chicano English. Some people may argue that Chicano English is the same as Spanglish, this can, however, be falsified by several reasons. Firstly, the definition of “Spanglish” is that it is the code-switching to-and-fro between Spanish and English in an utterance (Fought, 2005: 75). However, Chicano English is English itself, and it may or may not contain Spanish lexical items in the utterances.

Secondly, the plugging-in of Spanish lexical items does not necessarily equal to speaking “Spanglish” or, in other words, code-switching. A key element of the phenomenon of code-switching is that speakers should have attained a certain level of proficiency in both languages so that they can use the two languages interchangeably while speaking (Fought, 2006: 236). In fact, most Chicano English speakers cannot speak Spanish at ease due to their low Spanish proficiency. As said by Fought, “a

large number of the [Chicano English] speakers born [in the USA], especially from the third generation onwards, are completely monolingual in English” (Fought, 2006: 70). Since the conditions of code-switching cannot be satisfied, Chicano English does not equate with “Spanglish”.

4.2 Chicano English is NOT an interlanguage

Apart from the fact that Chicano English is not “Spanglish”, let’s come back to the false assumption that Chicano English is the “learner language” of Spanish-dominant speakers. Let us look into the community of the Chicanos more closely: Santa Ana (1993: 4) observed that one source for the debate lies in the “nature of the multilingual heterogeneity of the Chicano language setting”. The two languages, English and Spanish, are the major languages in the Chicano English setting.

As mentioned, the Chicanos are mainly immigrants of other Spanish-speaking countries such as Mexico, Cuba and Puerto Rico, etc. These immigrants learnt English as their second language but are not speakers of Chicano English. Only the second and later generations of Chicanos can claim themselves to be speakers of Chicano English because in order to be a Chicano English speaker, one has to be a native-speaker of English. Let us look at the Chicanos again. When the second generation emerged, they started off speaking and learning English at school and were expected to use English as the other Americans did. This generation is English-dominant. They might understand Spanish but might not have a native fluency as their parents or ancestors do. The language used by the third or later generations is even harder to examine due to the fact that the language choice is highly dependent on the attitudes of these generations toward English and Spanish. Nonetheless, these three generations belong to the same community. Since the language setting is so complicated, Chicano English might easily be mistaken as an interlanguage. However, to recap, Chicano English is only spoken by native-speakers of English of Mexican or Hispanic descent.

Another way to argue against the notion that “Chicano English is a learner language” is the ability of Chicano English speakers to distinguish certain native features and not committing learner-errors (Fought, 2003: 82). Moreover, Fought pointed out that Chicano English speakers can make a clear distinction between phonemic pairs which can be easily collapsed and become indistinguishable for most non-native learners (see Fought, 2003: 82). It shows that English was acquired as the first language of

these Chicano English speakers but not Spanish or other languages. In brief, Chicano English is spoken by second or later generations of the immigrants, where different generations might speak them differently with unequal motives and attitudes. These attitudes will be discussed later.

Nonetheless, a question remains: as both Chicano English and the English used by Spanish-dominant learners are quite similar, how could it be possible to distinguish whether a person speaks Chicano English or “Spanish-accented English”? Godinez (1985) has conducted research to investigate the differences of vowel production among Chicano monolinguals, bilinguals and general Californians. His results are insightful to the understanding of the differences between these groups of speakers.

According to Godinez, there are slight differences between monolingual and bilingual speakers of Chicano English, the differences can be minimal to the point that other people might not be able to notice them (Godinez, 1985). Nonetheless, he stated that, generally speaking, “the vowels of the monolingual Chicano English group are more like those of their bilingual counterparts” (Godinez, 1985: 56). In other words, the vowels pronounced by monolingual Chicano English speakers sound quite similar to those of the Spanish-English bilinguals. Why is that so? He continued to point out the vowel production, in this case the backness of /u/, of both Chicano groups may be influenced by the similar-sounding but slightly different vowel /u/ of Spanish (Godinez, 1985).

However, instead of “mother tongue interference”, he suggested that the continued language contact with Spanish Los Angeles is the reason for monolingual speakers of Chicano English to sound like bilingual speakers (Godinez, 1985: 56). He concluded his article by saying that “rather than being primarily determined by “interference” from Spanish, Chicano English represents an autonomous social dialect with distinct characteristics passed on by usual processes of linguistic transmission” (Godinez, 1985: 57). His concluding remarks further assured the point that Chicano English speakers speak a different language from the Spanish-dominant learners of English in the USA, in which only first-language speakers of English can be speakers of Chicano English. Also, their Spanish-like behavior of Chicano English may be a result from language contact but not the imperfect mastery of English.

4.3 Chicano English IS a variety of English

By now, in order to further elaborate the idea of Godinez that Chicano English is an “autonomous social dialect”, another model proposed by Butler (1997) is also taken into account. Butler suggested five criteria for English codes to be classified as a Variety of English (Butler, 1997). However, she also pointed out that sometimes these language communities are developing and may not yet have fully developed into a distinct variety.

In the case of Chicano English, certain criteria put forth by Butler (1997) have been fulfilled. Firstly, according to Butler, a variety of English has “[a] standard and recognizable pattern of pronunciation handed down from one generation to another” (Butler, 1997: 106). It is obvious, after the above discussion of phonological features of Chicano English and the reference to other sources concerning it, that a relatively stable system and pattern of pronunciation of Chicano English has been developed in the course of time that is known by both in-group speakers and other English speakers. It is also likely for those features to be passed on to the following generations.

Furthermore, another principal feature of a variety of English is that certain words and phrases are used to express “key features of the physical and social environment”, which “are regarded as peculiar to the variety” (Butler, 1997: 106). In the case of Chicano English, some Spanish lexicons are often borrowed and the speakers of Chicano English use a set of vocabulary items which are different from English and Spanish spoken in the USA or elsewhere. The lexicons of Chicano English have not only been affected by the social structure of the Chicano community, but also the English spoken in the USA. The unique choice of lexicon will be discussed further in the latter part of the paper (see Section 5.3).

The third proposed feature is that “this variety of English is the way it is because of the history of the language community” (Butler, 1997: 106). As discussed above, owing to the immigration from Mexican people to the South West of the USA in the 1960s, a totally different linguistic community has been created and their descendents speak English in a certain way which is called Chicano English. The history of Hispanic descendents in the USA contributes heavily to the creation and stabilization of Chicano English.

The fourth and fifth criteria for establishing a new variety of English are that there is “a literature written without apology in that variety of English”, and that reference

works such as dictionaries are present to show how people in that language community perceive themselves and their own language instead of being judged by outside authorities (Butler, 1997: 106). Although it is not certain whether there are official references and literature works done by Chicano English speakers, there is a form of guide such as comedy shows conducted by Chicano English speakers like George Lopez and Cheech Marin. They are well-respected men in the Chicano community and their work on the television and comedy albums are presented based on a lot of satire, mockery and criticism as the main theme. This observation further supports that Chicano English may be a variety of English in the USA to a large extent.

In short, Chicano English can be regarded as a variety of English instead of “Spanglish” or an interlanguage. Nonetheless, in a broader view of the linguistic situation in the USA, the linguistic complexity also brings out several concerns. In the following section, bilingualism of Spanish and English is to be discussed in a greater depth.

5. Sociolinguistic concerns of bilingualism in the USA

5.1 Attitudes toward Spanish and Spanish-speaking individuals

Having clarified some of the misconceptions of what Chicano English is or is not, another important issue is the linguistic complexity of the Chicano community in the USA. It’s complexity of can be a representative case of the bilingualism in the USA. As stated in the introduction of this essay, the Spanish-speaking group is the largest foreign-language-speaking population in the USA. While English and Chicano English are spreading rapidly, English happens to be a killer language which is responsible for the disappearance of the Spanish language and heritage to a certain extent. Christian and Wolfham (1979) stated that “language attitudes are generally shared by members of a cultural group leading to a common evaluation of certain language patterns and the people who use them” (as cited in Galindo, 1995: 86). In other words, the same group of speakers generally shares similar attitudes toward the same languages, in this case Spanish and English.

In fact, in the USA “attitudes towards Spanish in general are often mixed” (Fought, 2006: 77). According to the research done by Galindo (1995), people speaking Spanish can be classified as “wetbacks” which is a strong derogation (Galindo, 1995: 86). Apart from that, the parents of young Chicano English speakers tend to favor English more because they want to prevent their children from being stigmatized as being educationally disadvantaged or with limited-English proficiency (Galindo, 1995: 88).

Nevertheless, not always has Spanish been regarded as an inferior language, using Spanish can also “promote solidarity and in-group identity among younger Chicanos” (Golindo, 1995: 86). The identity issue is one of the main forces for the Chicanos to preserve Spanish. For example, a Puerto Rican woman said that “If you [are a] Puerto Rican, you SHOULD know [Spanish], because that’s their blood, because that’s what they are” (Santa Ana 1997: 146)³. It demonstrates the importance of Spanish in terms of ethnic identity. Even so, there is still a seemingly irreversible trend of shifting to English or Chicano English. Fought (2006: 77) stated the reason as follows:

“At the same time, though, increasing language shift to English suggests that, despite the positive affirmations of the role of Spanish in Latino ethnic identities, little progress is being made in fighting the dominant US ideology that values English and associates Spanish with the poor and uneducated.”

In respect of this reason, Chicanos may want to use English more in order to gain a more superior economic and social status.

Apart from that, a study of Lopez (1982, as cited in Linton, 2002: 54), it shows a negative relationship between Spanish maintenance and economic status. Since English has long been regarded as a higher language, it is not surprising that the younger generation of Mexican-descent prefers English instead of Spanish in education and other more formal contexts. These factors act as the catalysts for the language shift from their ethnic language, Spanish, to English which is a more dominant or powerful language.

³ The original phrase quoted from Santa Ana (1997) is “If you Puerto Rican, you SHOULD know it, because that’s their blood, because that’s what they are. They should learn.” (as cited in Santa Ana, 1997: 146)

5.2 Code-Switching

Another issue is the existence of code-switching, i.e. using “Spanglish”. Bilinguals who can speak both English and Spanish usually take an ambiguous stance toward code-switching. Code-switching is the instance of switching from one language variety to another. It can be inter-sentential, that is within a sentence, or after finishing a sentence and start with the sentence with a new language. It can also occur in a single person’s utterance or when another person takes on a conversation between two or more individuals. In this case, the languages involved in this particular switch are Spanish and English.

Code-switching can be a tricky and complicated matter to deal with. In fact, there are mixed attitudes toward code-switching as reported by Fought (2006: 78). For negative attitudes, one of Zentella’s research subjects stated that code-switching is disapproved by her father and she was taught to speak one language at a time instead of code-switching (Zentella, 1997: 66). Some people think that using only one language at a time can make a person seem more educated in that particular language. Another subject cited code-switching as “confusing” (Zentella, 1997: 154). Code-switching is often been regarded as a bad habit in the education discourse because students are expected to learn how to use only one language at a time (Fought, 2006: 78). One possible reason may be that students know that code-mixing is preserved negatively when they go to work in the future.

Nonetheless, code-switching can still be used as a communicative tool to link speakers with their ethnic identity (Fought, 2006: 78) or, in other words, code-switching is the “act of identity” (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller, 1985, as cited in Zentella, 1997: 114). According to Zentella (1997: 114), “on the periphery of a prestigious English monolingual world and the periphery of a stigmatized Spanish monolingual world...[t]heir code-switching was a way of saying that they belonged to both worlds”, in which they are unwilling to give up one for another world, or ethnic origin, they belong to.

To be frank, being a bilingual actually puts people at the advantage to communicate with the speakers in both worlds. Certainly, having a good mastery of two languages is better than having only one, as they can enjoy the privilege of knowing the information and culture of the two languages at the same time. This is also the reason why a young Mexican-American speaker claims that it is better for him to speak two languages instead of one (Fought, 2003: 209).

5.3 Spanish influence on American English

Despite the fact that Spanish is being undervalued in the United States, language contact between Spanish and English is still contributing to the changes of lexicons in the languages of the USA. The features discussed below are salient in Chicano English, which show that Chicano English is indeed a stable variety of English. In fact, not only has Spanish affected Chicano English in terms of lexical items, but it also affects English in general in the United States. It is an undeniable fact that Spanish influences contribute to the distinctiveness of American English when compared with British English (González, 2000: 292).

Some well-known Spanish loanwords such as *siesta*, *fiesta*, *flamenco* and *señorita* have immersed into the American society with an already-diluted sense of Spanish origin (González, 2000: 294). These words no longer carry their original meaning but have been modified to the meanings that fit into the context of the USA. Another type of Spanish loanwords is known as “mock Spanish”, for example *hasta banana* instead of *hasta mañana* and *hasty lumbago* instead of *hasta luego* (González, 2000: 294). People play with the sounds of the Spanish words and substitute them with similar-sounding English words or phrases.

Another trace of Spanish influence is on English derivational morphology with Spanish suffixes added to English words, for instance *-teria* (washeteria), *el -o* (el cheapo), and *-ista* (Clintonista) (González, 2000: 294). However, these applications are not merely the plugging-in of Spanish suffixes, but often carry some kind of twisted or even negative connotations. The list of above-mentioned examples can go on forever as the language contact continues, and is important in giving evidence of the importance of Spanish in the American English lexicons.

6. Conclusion

In essence, the linguistic situation in the USA is a complicated one. Bilingualism, or multilingualism, may become a common trend in the whole world. Nonetheless, as illustrated by the case of Chicano English, it is apparent that the predominantly strong English language in the USA, on the one hand, is dominating over the weaker

language of Spanish, while, on the other hand, English cannot resist the flood of interference of Spanish because of language contact.

After all, with the information above, it is too superficial to project the future of Standard American English, Spanish and Chicano English. However, one thing which is certainly true is that, because of globalization, the language mixing phenomenon will only be more common and no language will be able to isolate and purify itself from other languages. Language contact may eventually become a force so strong that it may influence the meeting of the world cultures as well as contribute to the disappearance of many languages in the world.

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