

Euro-American and Hispanic Cultures in Dialogue

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Abstract

The article deals with the problem of verbalization of ethnic stereotypes in American English. Hispanic people make up about 38 % of the U.S. population. The number of Hispanics has doubled since 1980, because of a high birthrate in Spanish-speaking communities and high levels of Mexican immigration, legal and illegal. Euro-American ethnocentrism stipulates the development of two main tendencies in American society: political correctness, in terms of which ethnic prejudice and xenophobia are officially criticized, and ethnic stereotyping which includes anecdotes, explicit ironic statements concerning Hispanics in press and movies, functioning of derogatory ethnic names and slur terms. English is extremely sensitive to these tendencies. The author of this paper touches upon the question of changes in connotation which happen with Spanish borrowings in American English.

1. Introduction

Language is a guide to social reality. (Lado 1992: 441)

Co-existence of different ethnic groups on the same territory and cross-cultural communication stipulate mutual stereotypes of these ethnic communities. Mentality of any ethnic group is an integral part of its ethnic identity. It determines a subjective analysis of an objective environment. Ethnic stereotypes influence any language, so it is quite natural that today scholars of numerous interdisciplinary fields and Ethno-Linguistics in particular research cultural identity and ethnic stereotypes.

This paper deals with Anglo-American Stereotypes vs. Hispanic Identity. The urgency of the subject under consideration is on the one hand, determined by the clandestine immigration from the Spanish-speaking countries to the U.S., on the other hand, by the role which Hispanics play in American society.

The United States of America is a country of immigrants and Hispanic-Americans are an increasingly significant portion of the U.S. population. The statistics raises the question, will the traditional pattern of assimilation by the second and third generations repeat itself with Spanish-speaking immigrants today, or are their concentrated numbers too large? By July 2002, the Census Bureau reported that all together there were about 38 million (38.8) Hispanics or Latinos in the U.S., 60 percent of them born there. The rapid growth in the Hispanic component of the population nationwide has been fueled both by significant immigration and high fertility rates. Given this growth rate, one in five residents of the United States is expected to be Hispanic by 2020 (MacNeil, Cran 2005: 97).

Non-Hispanic white people are now a minority in California, many demographers believe that before 2040 or 2050, non-Hispanic white people will be a minority in the entire country. Between 1990 and 2002, the number of Spanish-language newspapers published in the U.S. grew from 355 to 652 (*Al Día, Laredo Morning Times*). The 2000 Census showed the states with the largest Hispanic immigrant concentration (based on those who speak Spanish at home) to be New Mexico, with 29 percent; Texas, 27 percent; California, 26 %; Arizona, 20%; Florida, 16%; Nevada, 16 percent, New York, 14 percent; New Jersey, 12%; Illinois and Colorado, each 11% (MacNeil, Cran 2005: 98). The U.S. government estimates that there are eight million illegal immigrants in the country, of whom 70% probably came across the Mexican border (MacNeil, Cran 2005).

2. "Hispanic Challenge"

A famous political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, chairman of the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, claims that "the single most immediate and most serious challenge to America's traditional identity comes from the immense and continuing immigration from Latin America, especially Mexico." In a book entitled *Who Are We?* Huntington says that Mexican immigration is unique and contradicts the tradition of assimilation. He summarizes his argument: "Previous ethnic groups arrived in waves that began and ended, giving time for the immigrants to be assimilated, whereas the Mexican wave is continuous. Mexicans, he argues, do not assimilate and become truly American, because they do not embrace American values and ideals: they do not share the work ethic inherited from America's Anglo-Protestant culture; they do not have the same hunger for education, fewer have incomes above \$ 50 000 a year; fewer hold managerial positions (MacNeil & Cran 2005). Huntington states that "The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril."

David Brooks, a columnist in the *New York Times*, wrote that the most persuasive evidence is against Huntington, because Mexicans are assimilating. Although there are some border neighborhoods where immigrants are slow to learn English, Mexicans nation-wide know they must learn it to get ahead. By the third generation, 60 % of Mexican American children speak only English at home (MacNeil & Cran 2005).

3. Definition of Stereotypes

However, Hispanic people are stereotypically seen in the U.S. It is noteworthy that stereotypes are a kind of a gossip about the world, a gossip that makes us prejudge people before we ever lay eyes on them. In his famous work "Don't Let Stereotypes Warp Your Judgements" Robert Heilbroner assumed that it is not surprising that stereotypes have something to do with the dark world of prejudice. If we explore most prejudices we will find a cruel stereotype at the core of each one. Stereotypes are resistible to changes and often lead to racial discrimination and xenophobia.

It is obvious that for the most part we do not first see, and then define; we define first, and then we see. Stereotypes are directly consequent from ethnocentrism which is the belief in the superiority of one's own ethnic group. In fact there are two main tendencies in American society in terms of political correctness: officially ethnic prejudice and xenophobia are criticized, on the other hand ethnic anecdotes have always been popular, derogatory ethnic names and slur terms are frequently used.

4. Stereotyping Hispanics

Historically, Latinos have been disadvantaged in the U.S. society. This is shown in the areas of education, the labor force, social status, and earnings. It is a common knowledge that many Hispanics don't feel quite the citizens of the USA. They are regarded as immigrants, "illegals", "undocumented aliens", to be more specific these people are stereotypically seen by English speakers of Anglo ethnic affiliation. It has resulted in the socio-cultural and communicative conflict of Hispanics and Euro-Americans/Anglos in the USA.

Since I am aiming at defining linguistic consequences of prejudices against Hispanics found in American English, one of the key goals of the paper is to contrast Hispanic national

character and cultural identity to existing “xenostereotypes” (I have introduced a new alternative term, which is a "xenostereotype" (xenos *Greek* = alien).

A national character is more objective than an ethnic stereotype: it is a combination of common national psychological features of mentality, values, world picture, national traditions and customs which have been formed under the influence of climatic and geographical factors, peculiarities of historical development, religious views of a particular nation, etc. As a matter of fact, "xenostereotypes" are judgements about the national character of other ethnic groups.

Stereotypes are, first of all, reflected in American English vocabulary (derogatory names), borrowing which is frequently accompanied by deterioration of connotation. Stereotypes are reflected in speech and discourse, we can point out “speech stereotyping” (see *Figure 1*, too).

Speaking about the national character of Spanish-speaking communities, I would like to stress that Latino people often place a great emphasis on the family and family obligations and believe the family is honored through strong work ethics and by providing good financial support. Gender roles are clearly defined in Latino families with males being in superior roles within a well-defined family hierarchy. The male as head of the household sets the rules and actions. Hispanics often have large families and offensive word *sexican* – *US slur term* Hispanics, refers to how fast the Mexican-American population is increasing.

Mexican Macho vs. U.S. Macho

One of the core notions which reflect the peculiarities of the cultural dialogue of Euro-Americans and Spanish-speaking cultures is "*macho*". *Macho* in Spanish means masculine, vigorous, manly or virile. While macho remains an estimable characteristic in Latino cultures, in America macho men have come to be mocked in the post-feminist world for their strutting masculinity and ‘tough guy’ posturing. The word has been used by English speakers since the 1920s, but its change of meaning is very much product of feminist criticism. The generalization that Latin men embodied chauvinistic traits led to this interesting twist of semantics...The problem with the use of *macho* today is that it’s become an accepted stereotype of the Latin male. And like all stereotypes, it distorts truth (Guilbault 1992:36).

In Latin America women nod approvingly when they say “Es muy macho,” (he is a real man!). By this they describe a man they respect. But in the United States, when women say, “He’s so macho,” it’s with disdain (Guilbault 1992: 34). It is also noteworthy that "the Hispanic macho is manly, responsible, hardworking, a man in charge, a patriarch. A man who expresses strength through silence..." But at the same time the American macho is a chauvinistic, a brute, uncouth, selfish, loud, capable of inflicting pain, and sexually promiscuous (Guilbault 1992: 34).

An American soldier of European origin emphasizes this difference in meaning and connotation talking about his wound with a friend:

Getting shot should be an experience from which you can draw some small pride. I don’t mean the macho stuff. All I mean that you should be able to talk about it (Burke 1998: 218).

Thus, a normal expression of pride is contrasted to the *macho stuff*.

5. Hispanic Assimilation

Assimilation is a topical issue in terms of Hispanic question. Assimilation means becoming the same or blending in. Many ethnic groups have done this by taking on the language, values, and behaviors of the dominant group and abandoning the home culture and language. In the early part of this century, European immigrants came to the U.S. and assimilated by doing these things. The Latino experience has been different. They have not readily been molded

into the U.S. melting pot and have wrestled with adapting to the Anglo culture versus maintaining traditional beliefs and practices.

Those who have accepted the establishment policy are called *gringos*, *fake Mexicans*, *vendido* (*sell-outs*), *pochos*, *Tio Tacos*. A Puerto-Rican who immigrated to America when she was 6, remembers how she was dissatisfied by everything that she encountered there, the American atmosphere was alien to her:

The building we lived in was gray, as were the streets, filled with slush the first few months of my life there. The coat my father bought for me was similar in color and too big; it sat heavily on my thin frame (Cofer 1993: 180).

In some years everything was different; speaking about her preferences she actually defines her cultural identity. The speaker's identity is obviously American:

This is not some primitive island I live on. Do they expect me to wear a black mantilla on my head and to go to mass every day? Not me. I'm an American woman, and I will do what I please. :... I never speak Spanish in public... I can pass for an American girl anywhere – I've tried it:. At least for Italian. I look better than any of these humildes. I hate rice and beans, that's what makes these women fat (Cofer 1993: 185).

6. Ethnic identity

In general Latinos retain a strong sense of ethnic identity regardless of the length of time or number of generations in the U.S. or the level of education attained. The factor with some influence on cultural identity is that of age at immigration. Younger children (preschool versus adolescence) are more likely to have a bi-cultural identity. This does not mean a total rejection of their ethnic origin and assimilation into the Anglo mainstream but rather being bi-cultural, (a synthesis of U.S. and Latino cultures). Ethnic identity is manifested in a strong sense of community and in allegiance to Latino concerns. Although Latinos learn English with each successive generation in the U.S., children are bi-lingual and continue to learn and use Spanish and English. This reflects positive attitudes Latinos have towards their language and the desire to preserve it as part of their culture.

7. Verbalization of Stereotypes

A Social Survey conducted by Carol Losh (2002), which was based on interviews and questionnaires, showed that:

Hispanic Americans are stereotyped as poor rather than rich, lazy rather than hardworking, violence prone, unintelligent rather than intelligent; non-Hispanic white respondents say that Latino people lack commitment to fair and equal treatment. Hispanics are seen as a group not having much influence and has not made an important contribution to the development of the United States.

We have pointed out a set of the most widely spread "xenostereotypes" of Euro-Americans about Hispanics:

1. Hispanics are lazy, hate to work, and will put off until "manana" anything that can wait (the stereotype resulted in the *never-sweat* slur term).

2. The most common image of Hispanics is the sombrero-clad peasant lying under a cactus plant or tree. It's the hard working Hispanics that are rarely portrayed.

3. Hispanics are violent knife-wielders (resulted in the *bean bandit* derogatory name): In many books and media, Hispanics solve their problems through violence. It's the great majority of Hispanics who aren't gang members and aren't engaged in violence.

4. Hispanics are either foreigners or illegal immigrants (*illegals*, *undocumented aliens*, *wetbacks* or *wets*, *scratchbacks*):

We confronted a lot of people who would spit on us and say : “Go back to Mexico, you wetbacks!” (Cadena 1992: 117).

However, most Hispanics living in the U.S. are U.S. Citizens and have been here for generations.

5. Hispanic men are womanizers, oppressive to women, and in a word, "macho". Sexism exists in every culture, but takes on different forms. The changing roles that are now occurring in homes are rarely portrayed.

6. Hispanic women are submissive housewives who are at the beck and call of their menfolk (*humildes*). Women are often portrayed as housewives and mothers. Statistics show that many women do work outside the home and are active in every aspect of life.

7. Hispanics all look alike. The image given by media is of Hispanics who are short and swarthy, with long black hair and men with moustaches. However, Hispanics range from dark-skinned to light-skinned, curly to straight and dark to blond hair, and short to tall.

8. Hispanics are poor (*bean –eaters, poor – beaners*); cheap labors: (berry-pickers, fruit-pickers, orange-pickers, drywallers, etc.):

We need a supply of cheap labor and where get it better than by encouraging these wops and hunks and spigs and so on to raise as many brats as they can? (Lewis 1978: 116). It is noteworthy that many Hispanics are successful and occupy managerial posts.

9. Hispanics all speak with thick accents and are unintelligent (*spic, spiggoty, “dumb Pancho”*). The majority of Hispanics speak English without a trace of an accent, many fully bilingual:

You’d put your kid in school with a lotta niggers and kikes and wops and spics? (Westlake 1978: 39).

As it is seen from the above given examples, derogatory slur terms correlate with definite stereotypes. However, official ethnic names can function as pejorative in speech and discourse depending on their role in certain communicative situations. Another stereotype is: Hispanics are inferior. This is mostly reflected in discourse and aided by invective and taboo words. White Americans are often led by the so-called humiliation strategy:

“You Cuban?” one man asked my father, pointing at his name tag on the navy uniform... “No”, my father had answered, looking past the finger into his adversary’s eyes. “I’m Puerto Rican”. “Same shit”. And the door closed (Cofer 1993: 180-181).

Juan Cadena is a former director of the Muscatine Migrant Committee. He tells about his frustrating migrant experience: "When we first came to Muscatine it was like I was wearing a sign on my forehead, “I’m Mexican”. That’s not true anymore, but that was the situation when we first came here in 1971. It was a little cultural shock for me too, because I was confronted with this, “You’re a Mexican”. I knew I was a Mexican, but I didn’t want people to look at me like, “Hey, Mexican!” Another time I called this number for a house to rent. I guess he was busy and didn’t notice that I had an accent. So when we got there he said: “Stop right there, I’m not renting to no Mexicans!” You know it was kind of comical. I said “Did I hear what you said?” He said, “That’s right, I don’t rent to Mexicans” (Cadena 1992:116).

In a talk with Juan Cadena a white speaker expresses his indignation concerning Mexican people:

“We don’t want all those Mexicans coming into town. They park their cars and half of the time they’re leaking oil and they leave all those oil spots all over and all that” (Cadena 1992: 117).

Later the Euro-American speaker decides to apologize and when apologizing he goes on being xenophobic and, thus, ridiculous:

Well, I’m sorry what I said about Mexicans” : it’s not only Mexicans that do that, niggers and Puerto Ricans do the same” (Cadena 1992: 117).

8. Pejorative and pseudo Spanish

In a 1995 paper, the linguistic anthropologist Jane Hill argued that the register of "Mock Spanish" serves as "a site for the indexical reproduction of racism in American English". The fact is that English speakers of Anglo ethnic affiliation make considerable use of Spanish in casual speech, in spite of the fact that the great majority of them are utterly monolingual in English under most definitions. Pejorative and pseudo Spanish exemplify a strategy of dominant groups in which "whiteness" is "elevated" (Hill 1995). J. Hill uses the term *Mock Spanish* to refer to Spanish-origin or Spanish-emulating linguistic forms as used by English speakers. Examples of this include expressions such as *hasta banana*, *amigo* and *adios*. J. Hill points out that Mock Spanish is not only prevalent but considered harmless and even flattering by many of its users. However, native Spanish speakers are likely to find it insulting.

Mock or pejorative Spanish is directly consequent from existing "xenostereotypes", so it brings about racist discourse. There are four outlined strategies which occur in the borrowing of words from Spanish into Mock Spanish:

1) semantic derogation, in which a positive or neutral Spanish word becomes a derogatory term in Mock Spanish:

"Hasta luego, amigo", he chirped. "Don't forget my ten bucks. Pay the nurse" (Chandler 1992: 131). It is clear from the farewell that "hasta luego" does not mean "see you soon", it rather means "never come back", as well as "amigo" is obviously not "friend" judging from the given context.

A person who has been ignored uses the word *adios* instead of *good-bye*:

...Billy Holtzner's attention has shifted to a woman who was brushing her teeth in a lavatory with the door open...."Adios", I said, walking away from the trailer with Helen (Burke 1998: 83).

The speaker's *adios* is sarcastic and even hostile.

As for the purposes, semantic derogation is used to express negative emotions in a sarcastic way, to demonstrate negative attitude to the interlocutor, to reach a humorous effect. All purposes are stipulated by xenophobia and racism.

2) euphemism, in which negatively charged words from Spanish are borrowed into Mock Spanish as euphemisms for their English equivalents (*caca de Toro*, *caca pasa*);

3) affixation of Spanish grammatical elements to result in non-Spanish forms; and pejorative Spanish is actually more discourse than language phenomenon, which suggests deterioration of Spanish borrowings' connotation (sometimes even denotation) in American English (e.g. *paisano*, which means a peasant, village-dweller or a countryman in Spanish, is getting negative and sarcastic connotation in American English. It is quite obvious that *braceros*, immigrants from Mexico, who get low-wage jobs in America, are thought to be meant for the low qualified labor, and are not capable of mastering highly qualified professions. Overall, Latinos are more economically disadvantaged than non-Hispanic whites and Asians, who are thought to be more progressive. Pejorative Spanish reflects the mentioned prejudices as it is practically semantic derogation.

Pseudo Spanish lexical units are of derogatory and humiliating nature, they are artificially constructed in American English on the base of English/Spanish morphological elements (e. g. *el cheapo* "cheap, of poor, bad quality" is a nomination that doesn't exist in Spanish at all, but it has Spanish definite article *el* and Spanish suffix – *o*). As a rule, pseudo Spanish reflects Anglo-American stereotypes about Hispanics and imply inferiority of those, whose origin is Latin American.

4) hyperanglicization and bold mispronunciation of Spanish borrowings.

J. Hill demonstrates clearly that Mock Spanish depends on covertly indexing negative stereotypes of Spanish speakers. This is in contrast to similar borrowings from French, which often depend on the knowledge of prestige or classiness. The productivity of Mock Spanish, particularly among white college-educated Americans, provides evidence for what Hill refers to as a new kind of elite racist discourse.

Thus, certain modifications of the English language are directly consequent from Spanish influence. American language, culture and society have changed under the influence of Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican cultures. Political scientists, anthropologists, social scientists, linguists are deeply interested in further influence of Spanish and Hispanics on American English. Many are afraid of Spanish ousting English; some don't regard it as a threat, but as a factor enriching American English. Although white native speakers of English assume that they are getting more politically correct and stereotype-free, I believe this is a sanitized version of the real situation. The results of the research have shown that stereotypes are verbalized in various forms, either in language or in discourse (see *Figure 1*).

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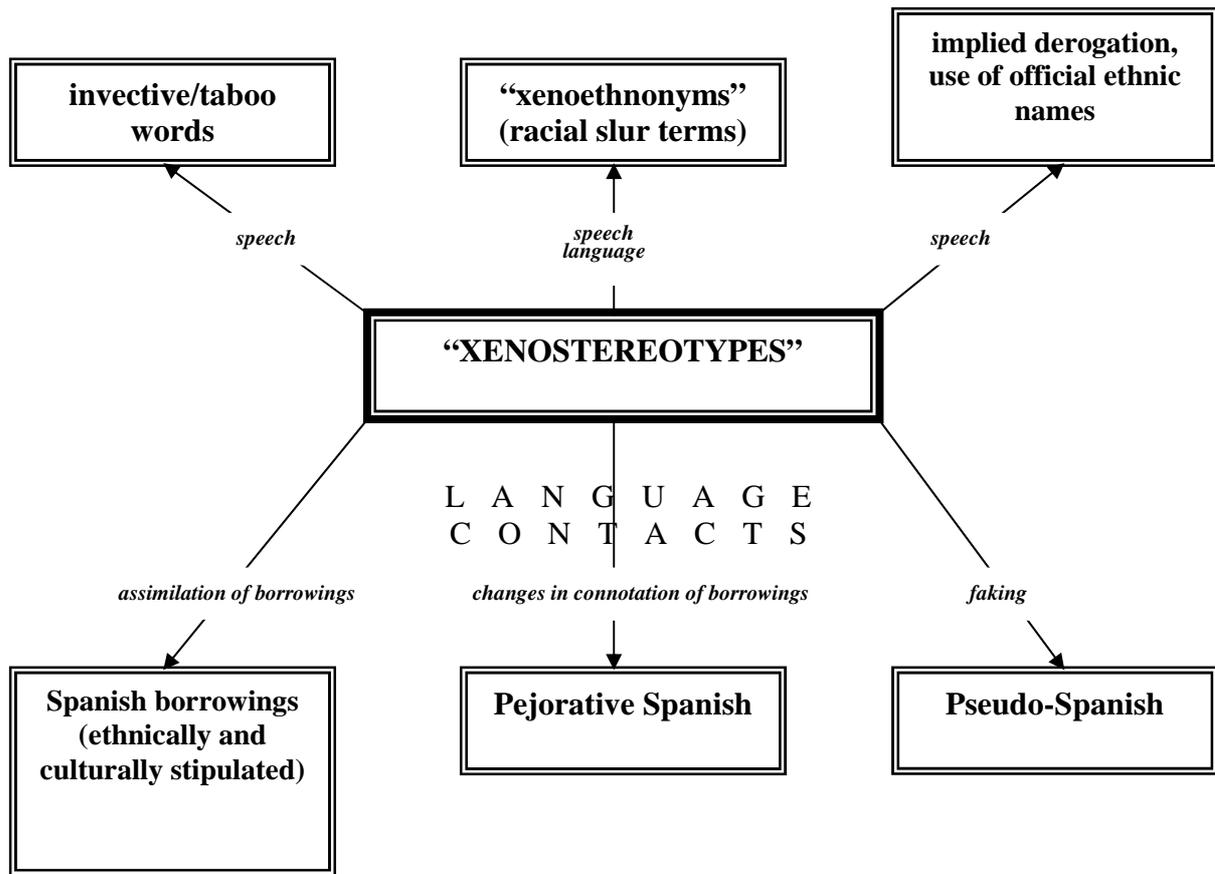


Figure 1 Verbalization of Ethnic Stereotypes

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