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Does the Spanish language threaten or thread the American cultural identity?

¿La lengua española amenaza o entreteje la identidad cultural estadounidense?

La langue espagnole menace-t-elle ou entrelace-t-elle l'identité culturelle américaine ?

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Summary: This essay examines whether the Spanish language in the United States constitutes a threat to American cultural identity or functions instead as a connective thread within it. Perceptions of Spanish as a threat are traced to a binary, dominance-oriented worldview that prioritizes monolingualism and frames linguistic difference as discord. Using *threading* as an analytical metaphor, the study argues that languages actively interlace cultural differences, construct individual and collective identities, and generate unity through plurality rather than uniformity. By situating contemporary English-only discourses and challenges to English-Spanish bilingual practices within broader historical contexts and sociopolitical power structures, the essay reveals how language ideologies operate as mechanisms of cultural regulation and identity control. Rather than destabilizing American identity, Spanish emerges as a generative force that reconfigures national belonging as plural, relational, and historically contingent. Galvanized by Gloria Anzaldúa's theories on borderlands and the third zone, the essay reframes linguistic inclusion not as cultural erosion but as a vital condition for social cohesion and cultural resilience in a multilingual United States.

Keywords: Americans, bilingualism, code-switching (language), English-only movement, Spanglish.

Resumen: Este ensayo examina si la lengua española en Estados Unidos constituye una amenaza para la identidad cultural estadounidense o si, por el contrario, funciona como un hilo que la entreteje y articula. La percepción del español como una amenaza se vincula con una visión binaria orientada al dominio, que privilegia el monolingüismo y presenta la diferencia lingüística como una fuente de discordia. Mediante la metáfora del entretejido como recurso analítico, el ensayo sostiene que las lenguas enlazan activamente las diferencias culturales, construyen identidades individuales y colectivas y generan unidad desde la pluralidad, no desde la uniformidad. Al situar los discursos contemporáneos que promueven el uso exclusivo del inglés y los cuestionamientos a las prácticas bilingües en inglés y español dentro de contextos históricos más amplios y de estructuras de poder sociopolítico, el ensayo muestra cómo las ideologías lingüísticas operan como mecanismos de regulación cultural y control identitario. Lejos de desestabilizar la identidad estadounidense, el español aparece como una fuerza generadora que redefine la pertenencia nacional como plural, relacional e históricamente contingente. A partir de las teorías de Gloria Anzaldúa sobre las zonas fronterizas y la tercera zona, el ensayo replantea la inclusión lingüística no como una forma de erosión cultural, sino como una condición esencial para la cohesión social y la resiliencia cultural en el contexto multilingüe de Estados Unidos.

Palabras clave: alternancia de códigos lingüísticos, bilingüismo, espanglish, movimiento a favor del uso exclusivo del inglés, población hispana de Estados Unidos.

Résumé : Cet essai examine si la langue espagnole aux États-Unis constitue une menace pour l'identité culturelle américaine ou si, au contraire, elle agit comme un fil qui l'entrelace et l'articule. La perception de l'espagnol comme une menace est associée à une vision binaire orientée vers la domination, qui privilégie le monolinguisme et présente la différence linguistique comme une source de discorde. En mobilisant la métaphore de l'entrelacement comme outil d'analyse, cet essai soutient que les langues relient activement les différences culturelles, construisent des identités individuelles et collectives et produisent de l'unité à partir de la pluralité plutôt que de l'uniformité. En remplaçant les discours contemporains qui promeuvent l'usage exclusif de l'anglais ainsi que les remises en question des pratiques bilingues en anglais et en espagnol dans des contextes historiques plus larges et dans les structures du pouvoir sociopolitique, cet essai montre comment les idéologies linguistiques fonctionnent comme des mécanismes de régulation culturelle et de contrôle identitaire. Loin de déstabiliser l'identité américaine, l'espagnol apparaît comme une force génératrice qui redéfinit l'appartenance nationale comme plurielle, relationnelle et historiquement contingente. À partir des théories de Gloria Anzaldúa sur les espaces frontaliers (*borderlands*) et le *tiers-espace* (*third space*), cet essai repense l'inclusion linguistique non comme une forme d'érosion culturelle, mais comme une condition essentielle de la cohésion sociale et de la résilience culturelle dans le contexte multilingue des États-Unis.

Mots-clés : alternance codique, bilinguisme, mouvement en faveur de l'usage exclusif de l'anglais, population hispanique des États-Unis, spanglish.

Introduction

USAFacts reports that approximately 44.9 million people aged five or older speak Spanish at home in 2024¹. According to Neilsberg Research conducted in August 2023, by ethnicity, 60.81 million (18.44 % of the total population) are Hispanic or Latino (of any race)². Census Bureau's American Community Survey indicates, however, there were already 62.6 million Hispanics in the U.S. as of July 1, 2021—the largest racial/ethnic minority³. Instituto Cervantes published reports in the same year projecting that the U.S. would become the second-largest Spanish-speaking country by 2060, after Mexico, with Spanish speakers with more than 57 million native/heritage speakers, and learners of the language⁴; 42 million native speakers and 15 million bilinguals⁵. Research by the Pew Research Center indicates that linguistic competence and usage among U.S. Latinos are diverse rather than uniform. The Pew 2023 survey reports that 75 % of Latino adults say they can carry on a conversation in Spanish «pretty well» or «very well», while 63 % report using Spanglish, a combination of Spanish and English, at least occasionally⁶. This translates to nearly one-sixth of the U.S. total population of 341 351 064. These patterns suggest that Spanish-language use spans English-dominant, Spanish-dominant, bilingual, and mixed forms of communication. Demographically entrenched and regionally expansive, Spanish speakers are particularly concentrated in California, Texas, and Florida. Interpreting these findings, Spanish, especially Spanglish, can be understood not as one modality within a heterogeneous linguistic ecology but as a weaving thread that fills gaps, interlaces differences, and constructs an individual and a collective identity that sets the two languages in a yin-yang complementarity.

As Spanish becomes more publicly visible, it is culturally and ideologically perceived as a source of «discomfort» by some within the dominant English-speaking population. Their reaction stems from an anxiety that the status of English is being threatened. In this view, Spanish becomes «cacophonic» and out of step with the linguistic «purity» associated with being American. Thus, linguistic «cacophony» is cast as a threat to the supposed «symphonic» unity of the dominant language. Beneath this mindset of threat lies a rigid

¹ USAFacts, «How many people speak Spanish at home?», USAFacts, <https://usafacts.org/answers/how-many-people-speak-spanish-at-home/country/united-states/>

² Neilsberg Research, «United States Population by Race & Ethnicity», Neilsberg, <https://www.neilsberg.com/insights/topic/united-states-population/>

³ U.S. Census Bureau, «Hispanic Heritage Month 2022», Census.gov, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/facts-for-features/2022/hispanic-heritage-month.html>

⁴ Instituto Cervantes, *El español en el mundo: Anuario del Instituto Cervantes 2024*, Centro Virtual Cervantes, https://cvc.cervantes.es/Lengua/anuario/anuario_24/default.htm

⁵ Richard Rogers, «How many people speak Spanish in the U.S.», *Class Track*, February 21, 2024, <https://myclassstracks.com/how-many-people-speak-spanish-in-the-us/>

⁶ Pew Research Center, *Latinos' Views of and Experiences With the Spanish Language* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, September 20, 2023), <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2023/09/20/latinos-views-of-and-experiences-with-the-spanish-language/>

binary worldview, one that insists the language «I speak» must prevail, overpower, and ultimately erase the language(s) perceived as endangering it. Such a worldview centers the «I» or the «we», leaving little space for the coexistence of linguistic or cultural differences, let alone bilingualism and multiculturalism.

In his «The Hispanic Challenge», Samuel Huntington proclaims, «The persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages. Unlike past immigrant groups, Mexicans and other Latinos have not assimilated into mainstream U.S. culture, forming their own political and linguistic enclaves instead—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American Dream. The United States ignores this challenge at its peril»⁷. In Huntington's binary, a mindset shaped by nativism, monolingualism, and racial unease regards Spanish as a disruptor of the American language (English) and the Hispanic presence as a threat to the American way of life or as anti-American.

Whether perceived as threading or threatening American cultural identity, the Spanish language brings the discussion into an intersection of multiple dimensions that contour a culture's soul—languages, histories, cultures, literary narratives, and sociopolitical movements. In the U.S., March 2025 marked a political shift; an «English-only» sentiment has resurfaced, with its adherents scrutinizing and challenging English-Spanish bilingual programs and practices⁸. Projecting Spanish as a disruptor of linguistic cohesion and a threat to national unity has become a quite unvarnished discourse. In response to such perceptions in an environment where exclusion becomes more acceptable than inclusion, this essay postulates that Spanish is one of the major threads that weave an evolving U.S. cultural identity in the 21st century.

There is an extensive body of scholarship on linguistic boundaries that shape cultures, identities, institutions, and power structures. Among those with impactful theoretical apparatus, Geeta A. Aneja's «Rethinking Nativeness: Toward a Dynamic Paradigm of (Non)Native Speaking» argues that cultural identity is discerned through «native» vs. «nonnative» linguistic distinction and nativeness is framed as a discursive process (aka, «speaking») by the dominant group and their institutions⁹. Drawing on ethnographic research, James Collins' «Dilemmas of Race, Register, and Inequality in South Africa» asserts that South African apartheid lingers in

⁷ Samuel P. Huntington, «The Hispanic Challenge», *Foreign Policy*, n.º 141 (2004): 30, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4147547>

⁸ The White House, «Designating English as the official language of the United States», March 1, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/designating-english-as-the-official-language-of-the-united-states/>

⁹ Geeta A. Aneja, «Rethinking Nativeness: Toward a Dynamic Paradigm of (Non)Native Speaking», *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 13, n.º 4 (2016): 351-379.

education and how register (the language of standard, namely, English), sociolinguistic scale (local interactions with institutions and authorities), and racialization (racialized linguistic form) reveal multiscalar links between linguistic inequality and social inequality, despite the post-1994 constitutional commitment to multilingualism¹⁰. Collins' theories on racial register behind linguistic diversity and the correlation between linguistic and social inequality dovetail with the interplay between English and Spanish in the U.S. context. Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal provide a core theoretical framework in their «Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation» for explaining how «language differences» become socially meaningful and politically actionable in the case of Spanish in the U.S., pointing to the «threatening» bilingualism and what it represents politically¹¹.

The two opposing views of Spanish—as threat or thread—were already on a collision course during the Civil Rights Movement. Still, the literature that tackles the debates and discourses remains scant, undertheorized, and underdeveloped. Jack Citrin and his doctoral students provided embryonic forms of the two camps in their 2007 study:

What are the consequences for the country's sense of social solidarity and common identity? The burgeoning literature on this topic can be divided into two camps: the gloomy Cassandras who worry about the creation of a balkanized «alien» nation and the sanguine Pollyannas who say that. . . the experiences of today's immigrants will resemble those of their European predecessors in the American «melting pot».¹²

The binary «balkanized alien nation» vs. «Pollyannaish melting pot» metamorphosed into linguistic and racial colors «White» vs. «Brown» in Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores's study a decade later: «As a result of both Spanish and U.S. colonialism, many US Latinxs are confronted with reified national, linguistic, and ethnoracial borders between Latin America, which is often stereotyped as brown and Spanish-speaking, and the U.S., which is often stereotyped as white and English-speaking»¹³.

Moving beyond the «brown» and «white» binary, Rosa and Flores argue that racialized linguistic practices are experienced as «threatening» because they

¹⁰ James Collins, «Dilemmas of Race, Register, and Inequality in South Africa», *Language in Society* 46 (2017): 39-56.

¹¹ Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal, «Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation», in *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*, ed. Paul V. Kroskrity (Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2000), 35-84.

¹² Jack Citrin, Amy Lerman, Michael Murakami, and Kathryn Pearson, «Testing Huntington: Is Hispanic Immigration a Threat to American Identity?», *Perspectives on Politics* 5, n.º 1 (2007): 31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20446348>

¹³ Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores, «Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective», *Language in Society* 46, n.º 5 (2017): 626.

unsettle the «hegemonically positioned modes of perception through which these practices are apprehended»¹⁴. In their account, linguistic apprehension itself constitutes «a crucial component of raciolinguistic ideologies»¹⁵. Building on this binary paradigm and related sociolinguistic theories, this essay extends the raciolinguistic lens by reframing the opposition as *threat* versus *thread* to foreground the binary's parodic and paradoxical operations, with U.S. Spanish as a significant case in cultural studies.

The linguistic dimension of «threatening» and threading

A threat or a thread? Grammar itself points toward an answer: syntax is a philosophy in miniature, assigning agency and, with it, a stance toward life. English says «I dropped my keys», making the self the accountable actor; Spanish often says *Se me cayeron las llaves* («the keys fell on me»), casting events as something that happens to the self. In that small grammatical pivot—from the English subject «I» to the Spanish object «me»—lies a larger mindset: one language leans toward control and responsibility, the other toward circumstance and endurance.

Linguistics puts this intuition in precise terms. Annie Tremblay shows that Spanish reflexive passives redistribute agency: «In Spanish, subjects are licensed in a pre- or post-verbal position. Reflexive passives do not have an external argument in subject position; instead, the subject (in our case, “I”) undergoes the action(s) manifested by some implied Agent (the external argument, unexpressed)»¹⁶. In other words, *las llaves* function as the implied agent acting upon the experiencer «me» (an object in Spanish) whereas «English does not have a reflexive marker such as *se* to express the passive»¹⁷. Bruno Estigarribia, by contrast, underscores how English centers the subject as doer: «The term voice is generally known to speakers of English to refer to the active voice (when the subject of a verb is the actual agent of an action) and the passive voice (when the subject of the verb is the patient that receives or is affected by an action)»¹⁸. Read together, their accounts clarify why the grammar difference can feel like a difference in posture toward life: English more readily frames the self as agent and therefore accountable, while Spanish more readily frames the self as experiencer, someone to whom events occur.

¹⁴ Rosa and Flores, «Unsettling Race and Language», 630.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Annie Tremblay, «On the Second Language Acquisition of Spanish Reflexive Passives and Reflexive Impersonals by French- and English-Speaking Adults», *Second Language Research* 22, n.º 1 (2006): 34, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43103695>.

¹⁷ Tremblay, «On the Second Language Acquisition», 35.

¹⁸ Bruno Estigarribia, «Voice», in *A Grammar of Paraguayan Guaraní* (London: UCL Press, 2020), 203, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv13xpscn.12>

Translated into cultural terms, these grammatical habits become competing postures: an I-centered impulse to command outcomes versus a circumstance-oriented readiness to absorb the occurrences. That tension surfaces in the U.S. whenever English and Spanish meet, shaping how Spanish is judged and rejected as a circumstantial threat to the subject or embraced and absorbed as a threading skill for the subject. Grammar—whether in English or Spanish—shapes how speakers perceive the world and communicate. It encodes ways of thinking and feeling, and its structures can distance English and Spanish speakers even when describing the same event. Because cultural memory, geopolitical histories, and ideological boundaries are inscribed in language, shared linguistic lineage can soften «us vs. them» divides. But in the U.S., the encounter between English and Spanish often activates these encoded tensions, making the act of threading the two languages together appear as a cultural «threat».

At the national level, Spanish—more than any other non-English language—threads itself into U.S. cultural identity. U.S. Latinos have made Spanish the country's largest minority language and one of the most significant Spanish-speaking communities worldwide¹⁹. In this essay, «Hispanics» refers broadly to people from the Spanish-speaking world, while «Latinos» emphasizes origins in Latin America; both terms shift with historical and sociopolitical context yet consistently mark a shared *hispanidad* in U.S. culture. Given the size of the Hispanic population and the language's everyday reach, Spanish remains one of the most widely chosen foreign languages in U.S. K-12 and higher education²⁰.

U.S. Spanish education carries a key caveat: the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) rates proficiency on a five-level scale, from zero («no proficiency») to level 5. A level 3 listener «readily understands high-frequency vocabulary» and only partly grasps idioms and cultural references²¹, while a level 2 reader can handle factual texts such as news items, routine correspondence, and clear descriptions²². Yet many Spanish majors, shaped by English-dominant environments, remain uneasy with spontaneous listening, new vocabulary, or idiomatic expressions. With AI tools now mediating much of their reading and communication, this gap can widen. As a result, companies often prefer native speakers for global work because many non-native speakers do not reach ILR level 5.

¹⁹ See USAFacts, «How many people speak Spanish at home?»; U.S. Census Bureau, «Hispanic Heritage Month 2022»; and Instituto Cervantes, *El español en el mundo: Anuario del Instituto Cervantes 2024*.

²⁰ In this essay, the term Latin America refers exclusively to Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. Portuguese-speaking Brazil and French-, Dutch-, and English-speaking territories such as Suriname and Guiana are not part of this study.

²¹ Interagency Language Roundtable, *ILR Skill Level Descriptions for Proficiency Revisions*, prepared by Hanan Agag, Rachel Brooks, Beth Mackey, and David Sawyer, ILR SLD Revisions Committee, May 14, 2021, 15, <https://www.govtilr.org/Calendars/ILRSLD.pdf>

²² Ibid., 16.



Even with these disadvantages, Anglophone students view Spanish as the most practical subject for career advancement. In fields like computer science, nursing, business, accounting, and customer-facing industries, a Spanish minor or major boosts marketability. For heritage speakers, Spanish also offers an efficient way to satisfy language requirements; many place out of basic courses through exams before ever entering the classroom. Together, these factors drive the surge in Spanish enrollments. As C. J. Alonso argues, «Spanish should no longer be regarded as a foreign language in this country; and consequently, we should undertake an institutional rethinking and reshaping of the place occupied by the Spanish language and culture in the United States academic world»²³.

Scholars view Spanish as a central educational and cultural thread in U.S. academia. At many liberal arts colleges, enrollment in all other foreign languages combined does not reach half of Spanish enrollments. This prominence fuels national debates among sociolinguists, educators, and politicians: a foreign language is one thing, a national language another. In the U.S., Spanish functions as both, acting as a barometer of the cultural and political shifts of a multiracial, multicultural society, a point Alonso underscores when he observes that «the key issue that departments of Spanish are currently facing is their change in status from a department of foreign language to something resembling a department of a second national language and culture in this country»²⁴.

As Spanish's threading presence edges toward the symbolic status of a second national language, it becomes a psychological and cultural flashpoint for anti-immigrant and right-wing actors who imagine a monolingual English-speaking nation on the verge of Latino «takeover» and the consequent «browning» of an American culture long coded as White and Anglophone. Beneath this fear lies a sharper question: whether Latinos will erode the power and entitlement Anglophone Americans have held for 250 years. Any audible trace of Spanish—its sounds, grammar, and public circulation—invites scrutiny from politicians, nativists, journalists, educators, and scholars, transforming «Hispanic» into «His Panic», a linguistic condensation of fantasies about «Mexican invasion», «not speaking American», and the imagined displacement of English as the national language. Such reactions reveal how tightly American identity is policed through an Anglophone heritage presumed to be culturally definitive. Behind classrooms and public spaces, the threat-thread dialectic is animated by intangible but deep historical stakes that illuminate why the mere presence of Spanish continues to unsettle the nation's cultural boundaries.

²³ Carlos J. Alonso, «Spanish: The Foreign National Language», *Profession* (2007): 222, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595869>

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 220.



The «threat» of the Spanish language throughout U.S. history

History explains the present. A revisit of U.S. history reveals the root cause that treats Spanish as a threat to American cultural identity.

Linguistic elimination and competition in U.S. history

The United States was shaped by successive tides of immigrants, arriving from the earth's farthest reaches, each bearing the steadfast American Dream. From its earliest days, English helped bind together a nation that gave little thought to how a multilingual, multicultural, multiracial society might function. Yet, like a modern «Promised Land», the country has long drawn on the image of the «poor, tired, and huddled masses yearning to breathe free». As the Statue of Liberty account notes, «Since its dedication in 1886, the Statue of Liberty in Upper New York Bay on Liberty Island south of Ellis Island has been standing silently, witnessing and welcoming millions and millions of immigrants who have sailed across oceans and landed on these shores»²⁵.

Nonetheless, the American Dream of freedom, equality, and opportunity has never been equally accessible. Unlike the Founding Fathers, not all newcomers were White, English-speaking, Protestant, or from across the Atlantic. The vast diversity of race, religion, language, ideology, and background has shaped unequal paths to that Dream. As a result, hierarchies emerged, among them a linguistic hierarchy intertwined with the nation's broader racial and cultural «pecking orders» and social and political power structures.

Nothing is more visceral than a mother tongue when a nation is being born and defining its ideals, character, and values. Naming a language as the «mother tongue» was itself a political act, and in the new republic, that power defaulted to those atop the colonial hierarchy: Anglophone, Protestant Americans. Even after the Revolution, many colonists continued to imagine the British Empire as the «Mother Country», a view that fueled their sense of self-righteous proprietorship in encounters with Native peoples and non-Anglophone European settlers. English, along with the religious and cultural values rooted in British traditions, became the sanctioned blueprint for the nation, affirmed by the Founding Fathers. Anything outside that mold was cast as less than American, if not entirely un-American.

²⁵ Mimi Yang, «The American Dream: Immigration and Formation of Cultural Identity in the United States / El Sueño Americano: inmigración y la formación de la identidad cultural en los Estados Unidos», *Diálogos*, 2020, 180.

This Anglocentric logic has endured. For more than 250 years, non-Anglophone immigrants have been framed as cultural threats, their languages treated as signs of encroachment rather than enrichment. Beneath this anxiety lies a persistent fear of losing English's dominance, and of sharing «unalienable rights» with non-White and non-English-speaking people as equals. «His Panic» is simply the latest expression of a long lineage of nativist recurrent dread that America is, and always has been, «browning».

The dominance of English in North America stems largely from the determination and organization of 17th-century Anglophone-Protestant settlers, qualities not mirrored in Spain's early presence. Led by John Winthrop, the Puritan settlers regarded the Massachusetts Bay Colony «as a promised land where they were destined to build a model city for the world to see»²⁶—a «city on a hill». Yet this ideal was reserved for White, Protestant, English-speaking men. Native Americans and enslaved Africans were excluded from Winthrop's American Dream, their labor and lives conscripted into supporting the freedom of their White masters. Racial hierarchy determined who belonged in this «Promised Land», and the languages and cultures of Indigenous peoples and African slaves were pushed to the bottom of the social order. English speakers defined the terms of inclusion and exclusion.

English thus emerged as the founding language of the nation. The English-only mindset has long shaped the U.S. linguistic landscape. It is in English that immigration policies are crafted and national unity fostered, even as English is simultaneously used to cast multilingualism as foreign, divisive, and destabilizing. As Alonso notes, «the English-only movement may have been successful in quashing the local and state initiatives that sought to recognize the ascendance of Spanish in the United States»²⁷. Historically, this simultaneously unifying and excluding function of English mirrors the threat-thread duality projected onto Spanish. Periodic debates have unfolded between defenders of monolingualism and advocates of multilingualism, each contesting the role of language in education, identity, and public life. Within this hierarchy, English continues to compete with Spanish and other so-called «threatening» languages for cultural and political dominance.

In the founding era, the language to prevail would unite the nation and build a much-needed national identity, which was never irrelevant to power competition. The English-only ideology targets not just languages relegated to the lower rungs of the linguistic hierarchy (Indigenous and non-European

²⁶ Mimi Yang, «Tracing the Roots of Anti-Chinese Sentiments in U.S. History» (IntechOpen, 2023), 3, <https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.107016>

²⁷ Alonso, «Spanish: The Foreign National Language», 221.

languages); it also contends with the very European languages that once rivaled English in the imperial competition for the New World. In the 1810s, English speakers «Americanized» the German-speaking congregations by petitions and proposals to allow English services in Pennsylvania's largest Lutheran church, St. Michael's and Zion in Philadelphia. The Americanization of language choice had evolved into physical fights, violence, and death threats²⁸. The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 etched enduring Francophone roots into the state's linguistic landscape, and the legacy of that rivalry with English still lingers; even today, Louisiana has no law declaring either English or French its official language.

Then, the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) expanded the U.S. territory. When more than half of Mexican territory was ceded to the United States, formerly regions where Spanish and Indigenous languages were spoken—today's California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado, along with parts of Oklahoma, Kansas, and Wyoming—entered a linguistic interstice between Spanish and English. Their Spanish-speaking populations became subject to English-dominant institutions without having crossed into a new host country. Geographer and historian Lawrence E. Estaville compares French and Spanish as two nonassimilable languages in the Anglicization in early America:

Yet two major exceptions to this assimilation model for European settlers stand out in our nation's history - French Louisiana and Spanish Southwest. The French and Spanish did not migrate into a dominant English-speaking culture; instead, thousands of Anglos came to occupy and control the American homelands of these people. Indeed, the French and Spanish resisted Anglicization, particularly the use of English.²⁹

After the U.S. annexation of former Mexican territory, Spanish did not immediately give way to English; in both New Mexico and California, it remained deeply embedded in public, legal, and political life for decades. In New Mexico, where Spanish had been used in administration, law, and everyday life since the colonial period, the territorial era was marked less by an abrupt language shift than by a prolonged coexistence and contestation between Spanish and English. Spanish-language newspapers, legal records, and public documents testify to the continued visibility of Spanish well into the late nineteenth century, even as the expansion of Anglo political power, public schooling, and state institutions increasingly privileged English and

²⁸ Friederike Baer-Wallis, «They "Speak Irish but Should Speak German": Language and Citizenship in Philadelphia's German Community, c. 1800 to 1820», *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 128, n.º 1 (2004): 5.

²⁹ Lawrence E. Estaville, «The Louisiana French Language in the Nineteenth Century», *Southeastern Geographer* 30, n.º 2 (1990): 107.

stigmatized local Spanish varieties³⁰. California presents a similar but more sharply documented case. The state's 1849 constitution was produced in both English and Spanish, and Article XI, Section 21 of the official Spanish translation required publication of laws and decrees in both languages, indicating that Spanish was recognized at the outset as a language of governance and civic participation³¹. Yet this bilingualism proved temporary during the linguistic transition. As later legal and educational changes narrowed the public space available to Spanish, English gradually became dominant, and Spanish was increasingly recast as foreign rather than vernacular³².

For both demographic and linguistic reasons, Puerto Ricans make up the second-largest Latino group in the United States. The linguistic experience of Spanish and English on the island bears some resemblance to the Southwest after the U.S.-Mexico War, but it stands apart due to its status as a double colony when the island changed hands from Spain to the U.S. in 1898 during the Spanish-American War. Under the Treaty of Paris (December 1898), Spain relinquished control of Cuba and ceded sovereignty over Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines to the U.S. Under the second «colonizer», English advanced through government and schooling, while Spanish ceased to be the only official language and remained dominant in private realms³³.

Puerto Rico exemplifies a politically charged form of bilingualism and biculturalism precisely because it still occupies an unresolved position between statehood and colonial subordination. A history of double colonization shapes its linguistic landscape—first by Spanish rule and later by U.S. governance—leaving the island in a liminal political space where neither full incorporation nor full sovereignty has been granted. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, yet the island lacks the full rights of a state; the former imperial language—Spanish—remains the dominant language yet English carries the weight of ongoing imperial authority. Spanglish embodies the very hybridity of Puerto Rico in its perpetual negotiation between languages, cultures, and political identities. Ana Celia Zentella notes that Puerto Rico «has been linked to Spanglish—both the style of speaking and the label—since the term was coined by a famous island detractor in 1948».³⁴ This link makes the island central to the genealogy of

³⁰ Arturo Fernández-Gibert, «The Politics of Spanish and English in Territorial New Mexico», in *A Political History of Spanish: The Making of a Language*, ed. José del Valle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 281-288.

³¹ California, *Constitution of the State of California*, official Spanish translation (San Francisco: Imprenta del Oficio de Alta California, 1849), art. XI, sec. 21.

³² Janet M. Fuller and Jennifer Leeman, *Speaking Spanish in the US: The Sociopolitics of Language* (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2020), 181-183.

³³ Puerto Rico Official Languages Act, Act No. 1 of January 28, 1993, sec. 1, <https://bvirtualogp.pr.gov/ogp/Bvirtual/leyesreferencia/PDF/2-ingles/1-1993.pdf>

³⁴ Ana Celia Zentella, «Spanglish: Language Politics vs. el habla del pueblo», in *Spanish-English Codeswitching in the Caribbean and the US*, eds. Rosa E. Guzzardo Tamargo, Catherine M. Mazak, and M. Carmen Parafita Couto (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2016), 11.

debates over mixture, bilingualism, and linguistic legitimacy in U.S. Latino communities.

In U.S. history, the marginalization of Spanish manifested through regionally specific configurations, yet each configuration ultimately discloses the same underlying ideological project: the progressive consolidation of English as the hegemonic linguistic order, institutional supremacy, and unquestioned locus of institutional authority.

The origin and the place of Spanish in the U.S.

Unlike many other minority and immigrant groups, Spanish speakers' influence in American national history has been present from the beginning³⁵. Mimi Yang argues that the Hispanic presence in North America preceded the Anglophone one:

Spanish footprints in North America came earlier than English or other European presence. In 1570, 36 years before the founding of colonial Jamestown, Spanish Jesuit priests planted a mission to the local Indians in coastal Virginia. The Spanish named it la Bahía de Santa María, today's Chesapeake Bay. During the 1520s, Spanish navigators and explorers had already mapped New England's coast from Cape Cod to Bangor. All this, eighty years before John Smith sailed the Atlantic and met Pocahontas.³⁶

The Spanish language reached the present-day United States with the Spanish Jesuit Mission of Ajacán in 1570 in the Virginia Peninsula. Earlier, in 1565, the Spanish language was heard again when Spanish admiral and explorer Pedro Menéndez de Avilés founded the settlement of St. Augustine in Florida—the oldest continuously occupied European settlement in what is now the continental U.S. Méndez became the first governor of La Florida. Today, California, Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Florida have the highest density of Spanish speakers, although they can be located throughout the country.

Spanish was never classified among the «barbaric» languages in colonial North America. Owing to the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Central and South America—except Portuguese-speaking Brazil and the French, Dutch, and English territories of Guiana and Suriname—Spanish became the imperial lingua franca of the hemisphere. Its reach extended into what is now the U.S. Southwest, where it functioned for centuries as the dominant administrative and cultural language. Yet within the linguistic hierarchy of

³⁵ Donald E. Worcester, «The Significance of the Spanish Borderlands to the United States», *The Western Historical Quarterly* 7, n.º 1 (1976): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/967540>

³⁶ Mimi Yang and W. Thompson, «Setting the Record Straight», *Racine Journal Times and Kenosha News*, September 25, 2022.

the United States, the English-only ideology collapsed Spanish into a single «inferior» tier beneath English. The Anglo-Spanish competition dates back to the late sixteenth century, when Elizabeth I's defeat of Philip II's «Invincible Armada» shifted the balance of imperial power. That victory not only secured England's maritime future but cemented a zero-sum rivalry between the two empires that reverberated across Europe and the New World, where one empire's rise necessarily meant the other's decline and diminishment, militarily and linguistically.

The colonial era cast the United States and Mexico as the blood, cultural, and linguistic heirs of England and Spain. After its defeat in the U.S.-Mexican War, Mexico ceded not only vast territories but also the Spanish language to an ascendant English-speaking power. In this transfer, the Anglo world, now American, once again positioned the Spanish-speaking world as the «loser» in an imperial contest. As bilingual scholars Florencia Regelhaupt, Roberto Luis Carrasco, and Elizabeth Brandt observe, «When the Americans acquired this territory in 1848, both Mexicans and Indigenous groups were considered conquered peoples. Immediately, an American policy of linguistic and cultural eradication was imposed for both Spanish and Indigenous language speakers»³⁷. A systematic subordination of Spanish ensued in the aftermath.

To «Americanize» the twice-conquered people, by the Spanish Conquest and by the U.S.-Mexican War, Mexicans were given U.S. citizenship through the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, and like Native Americans, Mexican kids had to go to segregated boarding schools to be taught in English. «Until the late 1960s, if teachers heard a language other than English in Mexican and Indigenous classrooms, they would hit their students' fingers/hands or their heads with a ruler»³⁸. The Americanization fractured the link between Spanish and its corresponding culture in the same way it did away with Native Americans' culture through the imposition of the English language. Throughout U.S. history, maintaining the linguistic «purity» of English means keeping the «purity» of the Anglophone values and status, by extension, Anglocized nationalism as an exclusive American value. Despite its earlier presence than English on the continent and especially in the Southwest, Spanish never climbed to the top of the linguistic hierarchy in the U.S.

Mainstream Americans give little thought to how Spanish has become, *de facto*, the second-largest language in the country. The historical brush by English-centered perspectives typically paints U.S. history from east to west and north to south without looking at the crosscurrents from Mexico, Cuba,

³⁷ Flora Regelhaupt, Roberto Luis Carrasco, and Elizabeth Brandt, «Spanish: A Language of Indigenous Peoples of the Americas», in *Nurturing Native Languages*, eds. Jon Reyhner, Octaviana V. Trujillo, Roberto Luis Carrasco, and Louise Lockard (Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University, 2003), 132.

³⁸ Ibid.

Puerto Rico, the Caribbean, and the Spanish Peninsula. At the peak of the Age of Discovery and Exploration, navigators, explorers, settlers, and colonizers were imperial rivals, mainly from the Spanish, English, French, and Dutch empires. However, the European competition over footholds in North America and over control of the trade and Indian tribes is largely examined through the British, French, and Dutch powers, marginalizing the Spanish Empire and its early linguistic presence in North America.

Erecting a linguistic hierarchy in the U.S.

The linguistic landscape of the U.S. reflects long-standing imperial competitions, from the suppression of German during World War I to the gradual delegitimization of French in Louisiana³⁹. Although French once shaped Louisiana's Creole and Cajun cultures, blended with other European immigrants' and Indian languages, the 1921 state constitution and subsequent institutional shifts—schools, churches, and public life—elevated English as the sole legitimate language⁴⁰. As a result, generations of French-speaking Louisianans came to view their own language as culturally «illegitimate»⁴¹.

In the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, English-only policies and laws were rolled out systematically in nation-building and culture-defining. Despite insurmountable differences and rivalries, the English language glued Native Americans, early slaves, successive waves of immigrants, and descendants of various early European origins to a coexistence, happily or unhappily. In the meantime, the linguistic hierarchy was firmly planted in this land, with English at the top, followed by French and German, then speakers of other European languages, including Spanish, inherited by many Latin American countries, and finally the languages of Native Americans, Africans, Middle Easterners, and Asians at the bottom.

Nonetheless, the linguistic vicissitudes throughout U.S. history have never diminished the presence of Spanish. Spanish is the only language that has withstood the English hegemony and survived with enough speakers to form the second-largest language, after English, in the country. Spanish gained moments of formal legitimacy through key legislative milestones. In 1849, the California constitution explicitly recognized Spanish language rights, signaling that Spanish held a sanctioned place alongside English. More than a century later, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Hart-Celler Act) further strengthened Spanish's presence by abolishing the national origins

³⁹ Vasiliki Fouka, «Backlash: The Unintended Effects of Language Prohibition in U.S. Schools after World War I», *The Review of Economic Studies* 87, n.º 1 (2020): 204.

⁴⁰ Barry Jean Ancelet, «A Perspective on Teaching the "Problem Language" in Louisiana», *The French Review* 61 n.º 3 (1988): 348, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/393154>

⁴¹ Ancelet, «A Perspective on Teaching the "Problem Language" in Louisiana», 348.

quota system and enabling large-scale immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean. This shift in immigration patterns significantly expanded the use of Spanish across the country, underscoring that its legitimacy was not merely cultural or demographic, but also rooted in federal policy.

The linguistic hierarchy reinforces an Anglophone structure of authority, with Spanish shifting in status across historical moments. Once language and territory fused, national identity came to be equated with English. This hierarchy cultivated, and continues to sustain, an «English-only» culture, premised on the production of linguistic uniformity in the name of cultural «purity» and «unity». «Americanness» is thus measured against an English-only standard. As an exclusionary tool, English-only functions as cultural marker, ideological shield, and racial filter. In 1919, addressing immigration and assimilation, President Theodore Roosevelt declared, «We have room for but one language in this country, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not dwellers in a polyglot boarding house . . . that is loyalty to American people»⁴².

The president's remarks reinforced a national identity anchored in an English-only creed that casts multilingualism (polyglot) as disloyal, a logic that has shaped policy since the 1880s, when English-only laws gained overwhelming support from Anglophone voters. Contemporary measures such as «English for Children», which restrict bilingual education and professional use of Spanish, echo earlier exclusionary regimes, from Roosevelt-era language mandates to the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act's nativist quotas. In this climate, Spanish is increasingly framed as a threat to a monolingual Anglophone identity, especially given the demographic rise of young Latinos, who have driven 56 % of U.S. population growth since 2000⁴³, and the white population has declined. Although English becomes dominant by the third generation, Spanish remains widely spoken, sustaining the perception that Latino bilingualism unsettles the boundaries of American belonging.

Many conservative and anti-immigrant patriots equate English with patriotism and loyalty with identity. Spanish, by contrast, is entangled with rhetoric about «illegal immigrants», «Mexican rapists», and «drug dealers from the South», exposing long-standing racism and xenophobia toward Spanish-speaking communities. As anthropologist Leo Chavez argues, «Latinos are often depicted by controlling images of what anthropologist Leo Chavez refers to as the Latino threat narrative, in which men are constructed in political rhetoric and the media as illegal, criminal, and

⁴² David Mikkelsen, «Theodore Roosevelt on Immigration», Snopes, April 11, 2006, accessed April 11, 2024, <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/sole-loyalty/>

⁴³ Gabriel Piña and Gustavo Martinez, «Key Facts about U.S. Latinos», Pew Research Center, 2025.

culturally and intellectually deficient, and women and children as public resource drainers and, ultimately, a threat to White hegemony»⁴⁴.

Conversely, English is cast as the guardian of patriotism, shielding Americanism from the supposed cultural or linguistic «terrorism» of Latinos. Today's push for English-only Americanism echoes long-standing nativism and White nationalism, reviving the old linguistic hierarchy and placing it squarely back at the center of cultural and political life.

The thread of the Spanish language: interlingual and intercultural identities

The United States is inherently multilingual. Alongside English, the number of Spanish, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, and other language communities has grown markedly in recent decades. Yet no minority language rivals the demographic weight of Spanish or provokes comparable anxieties about threats to Anglophone traditions. Most languages are expected to dissolve into English within the melting pot, leaving monolingualism weaponized as Americanism, undisturbed. Spanish alone has the numerical and cultural presence to unsettle this «English-only» order, positioning it to reshape notions of American identity by threading together multiple cultural and sociopolitical milieus.

The English- and Spanish-speaking worlds converge in the making of the United States, producing a linguistic hierarchy that casts English as «native» and Spanish as «foreign». Yet in the hyphenated term «Hispanic-American», Spanish becomes a claim to belonging, transforming a once-threatening antithesis into an identity rooted in bilingual and bicultural citizenship. In the U.S., Americanization hinges on mastery of English, with accentlessness functioning as an unspoken measure of «Americanness». This linguistic hierarchy mirrors racial hierarchy, cultural preference, and economic stratification, shaping systems of inclusion and exclusion that fall most heavily on non-White immigrants, including Hispanics striving to weave a coherent American identity.

Threading the Civil Rights Movement and the Chicano Movement

Language always threads or threatens because it encapsulates history, identity, and power. In the U.S., landmark social movements have repeatedly redrawn cultural boundaries. The Civil Rights Movement of 1954–1968, led by Martin Luther King Jr. from Montgomery to Memphis, was a watershed

⁴⁴ Stephanie L. Canizales and Jody Agius Vallejo, «Latinos & Racism in the Trump Era», *Daedalus* 150, n.º 2 (2021): 152, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01852; citing Leo Chavez, *The Latino Threat* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, «Women and Children First: New Directions in Anti-Immigrant Politics», *Socialist Review* 25, n.º 1 (1995): 169-189.

for racial justice. Inspired by its example, Hispanics began asserting their place within an Anglophone-dominated national narrative. The mistreatment of migrant laborers under the Bracero Program drew national scrutiny and helped ignite the Chicano Movement—El Movimiento—led by César Chávez, Reies Tijerina, and Rodolfo Gonzales from the 1950s through the 1970s. Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans formed its core, mobilizing against structural racism, especially in border regions stretching from the West and Southwest into the Midwest.

The Chicano Movement crossed cultural and racial boundaries, enlarging the scope of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and introducing new leaders, strategies, and trajectories. César Chávez's campaign for Mexican American farmworkers drew the attention of Martin Luther King Jr., who, though he never met Chávez in person, corresponded with him about advancing civil rights across Black-Brown lines through nonviolence, boycotts, and coalition building. In a 1966 telegram, King affirmed their shared struggle: «Our separate struggles are really one—a struggle for freedom, for dignity and for humanity».⁴⁵ He recognized the alignment of Black and Brown demands for justice, praising Chávez and the farmworkers for their commitment to «righting grievous wrongs forced upon exploited people» and affirming their common determination to realize «a better tomorrow»⁴⁶.

Randy Ontiveros, in his «No Golden Age: Television News and the Chicano Civil Rights Movement», details the beginning of the Chicano civil rights movement in conjunction with the struggle to end Jim Crow:

Yet by 1965—the year that the National Farm Workers Association (later the United Farm Workers) declared its historic grape strike and the year sometimes cited as the beginning of the Chicano movement—television news had become a major institution in American society. As television critics have observed, the story that had facilitated this shift and made the evening news a nationwide authority was the struggle to end Jim Crow.⁴⁷

El Movimiento then adopted a distinctly Hispanic symbolic frame: the metaphor of the Spanish Reconquista transplanted onto U.S. soil:

On August 30, 1972, a small group of young Chicano and Chicana activists invaded Catalina Island. The action was part of what they called la Marcha de la Reconquista, a three-month-long «March of the

⁴⁵ Roberto Noriega-Rocha, «Biography: Martin Luther King Jr. Praised Cesar Chavez for His “Indefatigable Work”», United Farm Workers, 2019, accessed April 20, 2024, <https://ufw.org/biography-martin-luther-king-jr-praised-cesar-chavez-for-his-indefatigable-work/>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Randy Ontiveros, «No Golden Age: Television News and the Chicano Civil Rights Movement», *American Quarterly* 62, n.º 4 (2010): 900.

Reconquest» aimed at drawing attention to discrimination against Mexican Americans and at protesting what organizers said was the U.S. government's illegal takeover of Mexican land in 1848.⁴⁸

By invoking the Reconquista, Ontiveros signaled that Chicanos were reclaiming what was theirs—labor rights, land, and cultural heritage in a California once part of Mexico. El Movimiento confronted a wide spectrum of social, political, and economic injustices, from land-grant restoration and farmworkers' rights to education and voting access. César Chávez and Dolores Huerta co-founded the United Farm Workers to secure fair wages, safer conditions, and union protections; Huerta also propelled the movement's feminist dimension, advancing Chicana rights and popularizing «Sí, se puede». Rejecting racial caricature, resisting forced Anglophone assimilation, and revitalizing Mexican indigeneity fueled a lasting sociopolitical and cultural awakening across Hispanic communities and mainstream media. Whether through political action or cultural and linguistic affirmation, El Movimiento ultimately sought reinvention, self-definition, and the preservation of Hispanic cultural, linguistic, and religious life.

El Movimiento foregrounded «Chicano», a term transformed from a slur to an emblem of cultural and political mobilization. Its debated etymology is generally traced to the Nahuatl *Mexica* and the Spanish *Mexicano*, with the «xica» and «Xicano» sounds anglicized as «ch». The Mexica, 14th-century Nahuatl speakers who built the Aztec Empire and its capital Tenochtitlán, were conquered in 1521 by Spanish forces under Hernán Cortés, aided by rival Indigenous groups. Reclaiming *Mexica* and *Mexicano* counters Anglophone marginalization of Mexican Americans and affirms the legitimacy of Spanish in the U.S.; the anglicized «Chicano» anchors Mexican American history and culture within an English-dominant society, carving space for Latino origins, heritage, rights, and identity while prompting a broader reconceptualization of U.S. Hispanics. As a linguistic assertion of racial equality, cultural acceptance, and social justice, «Chicano» ultimately gave rise to Chicanismo—the civil rights legacy of El Movimiento.

Threading Chicanismo and Aztlán

Chicanismo threads a cultural homeland for U.S. Hispanics, especially Mexican Americans, by linking identity to el Movimiento's wide range of sociopolitical reforms: struggles for economic justice, labor and voting rights, Hispanic feminism, race relations, and multiculturalism. These are shared issues across U.S. Hispanic and other minority communities. From Central American and Puerto Rican participation to student walkouts, youth organizing, anti-Vietnam War activism, the resurgence of muralism, and

⁴⁸ Ibid., 897.

renewed Catholic expression, Chicanismo asserts the need for a common cultural ground—a site of affirmation, a basis for coalition, and an engine for collective organization across national origins. Chicanismo roots itself in Indigenous heritage and rejects one-way assimilation into the Anglophone mainstream. Aztlán gives *el Movimiento* its spiritual core. Derived from Nahuatl, it is believed, through linguistic genealogy, to lie in northwestern Mexico or the U.S. Southwest. Anthropologists trace a pre-Columbian migration from this origin to central Mexico, where the Mexica founded Tenochtitlán, though Aztlán's exact location remains uncertain. Its very elusiveness made it an ancestral, mythic homeland during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As Andouard-Labarthe writes, «The territory is nowhere and everywhere at the same time . . . ubiquitous, its actual location does not matter much as long as it inhabits the imagination». For 21st-century scholars, Aztlán resembles a cultural womb giving birth to origin, diaspora, and destiny for a displaced people seeking home. A spiritual beacon needs no coordinates; for the Chicano, Aztlán is «an instantaneous reserve of history . . . drawn nearer or held at a distance according to his need»⁴⁹.

More than a myth, Aztlán becomes the emblem of *el Movimiento*, urging Chicano intellectuals and artists to claim and create a social and cultural space for Spanish speakers within an English-dominant society. Aztlán holds the umbilical thread linking seemingly disjoint Americas. With Aztlán at its core, Chicanismo galvanized *el Movimiento*, as Aztlán «became a key rallying concept at the peak of the Chicano movement: a symbolic place on the map where Chicanos would trace their origins».⁵⁰ Aztlán mobilized participants of the *Movimiento* in their protests and actions, and transformed geopolitical occupation to geo-poetic force for cultural «orphans».

The thread between Aztlán and *el Movimiento* returns linguistic «orphans» to a maternal home. Spanish—already an imposed language that displaced Nahuatl in the Southwest—created the first hierarchy within Indigenous-Spanish bilingualism, and the Mexican-American War added a second conquest by superimposing English onto Spanish. As Prieto notes, Spanish in California has shifted «from a migrant language to a vernacular variety . . . a new dialect in the making»⁵¹. Descendants of the Mexica thus inherit dual fractures: Indigenous-Spanish and Spanish-English, and rely on the thread of Aztlán to stitch these fissures into a coherent American identity, one that generates its own emerging American dialect.

⁴⁹ Elisabeth Andouard-Labarthe, «The Vicissitudes of Aztlán», *Confluencia* 5, n.o 2 (1990): 83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2792192>

⁵⁰ Andouard-Labarthe, «The Vicissitudes of Aztlán», 79.

⁵¹ Carlos L. Prieto, «The (Pre)History of Literary “Spanglish”: Testimonies of the Californio Dialect», *Hispania* 97, n.º 3 (2014): 360, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24368810>

Chicano thinkers and writers emerge as key architects of this new American language, shaping an interstitial space that threads together Aztlán and the contemporary homeland. As Marlene Hansen Esplin notes, they resist «the notion of a monolingual literary text and the idea of a static linguistic community through code-switching, calques, translation, and other transgressive linguistic strategies».⁵² Nahuatl, Spanish, and Spanglish crosscultural boundaries to stitch the American tapestry from the far side of English, rendering these linguistic and cultural dimensions symbiotic, socially, politically, and economically, and flattening the hierarchy that once ranked them.

Linguistic thread: Spanglish

The U.S. linguistic hierarchy casts Spanish as inferior to English, yet sidelining the language of nearly 20 % of the population is economically impractical and politically risky. As Kirsten Silva Gruesz notes, «Spanish occupies an exceptional position in the cultural life of the U.S., as simultaneously the most widely studied and the most abjected language system other than English»⁵³. However, a caveat remains: ILR standards differentiate Spanish speakers across five proficiency levels, and the 18.44 % who speak Spanish do not share uniform mastery. Their skills vary by literacy, background, and personal or professional needs, producing widespread linguistic challenges.

The absence of full command in either Spanish or English opens a malleable and shifting «third zone», a space of hybridity, ambivalence, and unsettled identity. In this zone, a hybrid Spanish–English self can take shape. Chicano and Latino intellectuals deliberately cultivate this this linguistic in-between space as a foundation for a non-White, threaded American identity. Esplin offers a brief survey:

Ana Castillo emphasizes the strained and porous relations between Mexico and the United States by recalling Porfirio Díaz's famed characterization of «pobre México». Likewise, with only a capital letter and a diacritic, Tato Laviera signals the confluence and conflict of a dual national identity in his novel *AmeRican* (1985). Moreover, writers such as Roberto Fernández, Ana Menendez, Rolando Hinojosa, Sandra Cisneros, Junot Díaz, and authors more entrenched within the canons of U.S. and Latin American literatures, such as Cormac McCarthy, Rosario Ferré, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante,

⁵² Marlene Hansen Esplin, «Self-Translation and Accommodation: Strategies of Multilingualism in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* and Margarita Cota-Cárdenas's *Puppet*», *MELUS* 41, n.º 2 (2016): 176, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44155246>

⁵³ Kirsten Silva Gruesz, «Alien Speech, Incorporated: On the Cultural History of Spanish in the U.S.», *American Literary History* 25, n.º 1 (2013): 19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23358468>

incorporate Spanish, English, and Spanish-and-English into their narrations.⁵⁴

Despite their perfect English, writers make different linguistic choices: some write primarily in English with occasional Spanish for mainstream readers, others embrace fuller bilingualism, and still others move fluidly between both languages to escape the constraints of linguistic hierarchy and cultural boundaries. As Esplin notes, «through their multilingual acrobatics, Chicana/o and U.S. Latina/o authors forcefully pronounce the linguistic and social ambivalences of English and Spanish and the contours of a homeland where linguistic difference is a marker of identity and a tool of stratification»⁵⁵. Often writing in an autobiographical register, they seek to bridge two audiences or to reaffirm two sides of the self by reintegrating fragmented linguistic and cultural pieces. Gloria Anzaldúa's call, «Gringo, accept the doppelganger in your psyche»⁵⁶, frames the Mexican American as the Anglophone's double, expressed through her raw interweaving of Spanish and English. Neither fully in the English realm nor the Spanish domain, but in the third zone, the two languages merge organically, giving rise to and legitimizing Spanglish.

Published in the mid-1980s, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* reimagines the shifting borderlands as a fluid «Frontera», positioning her as a master creator of a third space that locates Aztlán in the hearts of countless wandering souls. Drawing on that ancestral energy, she legitimizes «Spanglish» as a bridge that places pre-Columbian and Spanish heritage and the English world on equal footing: «Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate»⁵⁷.

Translation collapses in Anzaldúa's world because it assumes two separate languages and two separate speakers. But when languages are tied to the body like an umbilical cord, how can they be severed into «one» and «another»? Code-switching keeps that cord alive, letting languages flow and thread as a single, uninterrupted current. Only Spanglish carries this intimacy. Anzaldúa invites her readers to weave English and Spanish together and step into the existence of a straddled being whose first, visceral tongue is Spanglish itself.

When Anzaldúa touches the topic of her mother and family, the linguistic threading reaches her deep roots, emotionally and seamlessly:

⁵⁴ Esplin, «Self-Translation and Accommodation», 176.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1999), 86.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 81.

«Drought hit South Texas», my mother tells me. «La tierra se puo bien seca y los animales comenzaron a morir de se. Mi papá se murió de un heart attack dejando a mamá pregnant y ocho huercos, with eight kids and one on the way. Yo fui la mayor y tenia 10 años. The next year drought continued y el ganado got hoof and mouth. Se callaron de droves, en las pastas y el brushland, . . . El siguiente año still no rain. Mi pobre madre viuda perdió two thirds of her ganado . . . No hablaba inglés, she did not know how to ask for time to raise money . . .⁵⁸

This marks the failure of translation. Born of code-switching, only Spanglish can rethread the fragmented self and offer a path toward reintegration. It is Spanglish that leads her back to Aztlán, a cultural and spiritual home free of accusations of illegitimacy, un-Americanness, or insufficient Spanishness. Aztlán receives her whole. It is the third zone she creates, and the one that, in turn, recreates her.

The one-way traffic of the U.S. linguistic hierarchy is telling: Hispanic and Latino communities are expected to master English to be considered American, while Anglophones feel no parallel obligation to learn Spanish. Spanglish, the language of culturally abandoned «orphans», is dismissed as illegitimate in mainstream society and unwelcome in the northern reaches of Aztlán. Yet it is also marginalized in the «pure» Spanish-speaking world. That double rejection deserves a study of its own.

In the Chicano Movement, Spanglish functions as more than a linguistic thread; it encodes a cultural and psychological frontera for subjects never fully accepted on either side. The figure of the half-bull and half-human Minotaur captures this condition: a being who understands both worlds yet belongs to neither, condemned to isolation in a labyrinth not of his making. Border subjects face a similar dilemma: either succumb to exclusion, as the Minotaur does, or thread, reinventing and claiming a new border identity. This «Minotaurian» space reverberates in Anzaldúa's vision of the borderlands: «The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture»⁵⁹.

For Anzaldúa, the border is not merely geographic but a linguistic and cultural frontera woven into social structures and mental frames. Neither «pure» English nor «pure» Spanish can navigate this terrain; Spanglish becomes the agile vehicle that moves through and across it. In the multicultural United States, the threading of Spanish into English produces Spanglish as a hybrid identity forged in the interstice between competing,

⁵⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 25.

often rejecting forces—a survivor’s language born from the hemorrhage of a collision. In the chapter «How to Tame a Wild Tongue» of her *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa turns to Spanglish and code-switching to voice this condition of languagelessness and the struggle to inhabit the borderlands: «*Deslenguadas. Somos los del español deficiente*. We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic *mestizaje*, the subject of *your burla*. Because we speak with tongues of fire, we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically *somos huérfanos*—we speak an orphan tongue»⁶⁰.

Spanglish survives in the U.S. as an orphaned tongue— mocked as «your burla», «infant», «bastard», or «not approved by any society»⁶¹, dismissed as failed Spanish and unqualified English. Yet in its Minotaurian loneliness, Anzaldúa claims it as «my language . . . the language of the Borderlands»⁶², where cultures cross-pollinate and revive one another. Its speakers, borderland dwellers, need a home flexible enough to move with them, so they build it inward: heart, mind, soul. For Chicano thinkers, Spanglish is a lifeline, a language that births border subjects precisely because it belongs to no nation and crosses every border freely.

Conclusion

Under the current administration’s program of mass deportation and expedited removal, revived under the logic of the 1798 Alien Enemies Act, the presence of Hispanics continues to be cast as a threat. The idea of Spanish as a danger to Anglophone culture remains influential, upheld by scholars such as Samuel Huntington. In *Who Are We?*, he warns of «the danger of this new reconquista and of the cultural threat posed to American identity by Latino immigration»⁶³, reiterating the same binary he advanced in his «The Hispanic Challenge»: «two peoples, two cultures, and two languages»⁶⁴. This coercive English-only hegemony disproportionately targets U.S. Hispanics and Spanish speakers, treating them as uniquely destabilizing. Other immigrant languages lack both the deep historical roots and the demographic scale to unsettle the English-only mindset, and thus are framed as far less threatening than Spanish.

Historical wounds along the border and the realities of contemporary crossings continue to shape U.S. Hispanic experience. For many

⁶⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 20.

⁶³ Eugenia Casielles-Suárez, «Spanglish: The Hybrid Voice of Latinos in the United States», *Atlantis* 39, n.º 2 (2017): 149, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26426334>

⁶⁴ The identical wording appears in Huntington’s book and in his article «The Hispanic Challenge». See Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 256.

Spanish-speaking Latinos, Spanish is a core, non-negotiable element of identity⁶⁵, visible across schools, politics, and cultural life. Yet monolingual English speakers often demand that Hispanics «speak American», fueling direct linguistic conflict between the nation's two largest languages. As the largest minority group, Latinos have become the most sustained force resisting English-only nationalism. Research shows that the Hispanic Civil Rights Movement, demographic strength, and local political power have slowed and in some cases stopped state efforts to enact English-only laws.

Spanish and Spanglish have become impossible to dismiss. Even in today's anti-immigration, English-only climate, their economic and cultural force is unmistakable. The rapidly expanding young Latino populations pivot the nation's social and economic future. Media corporations recognize that reaching this audience requires more than monolingual outreach; it demands Spanish and Spanglish as needed business strategies. As Attig and Derrick's *Translating Spanglish in US Latinx Audiovisual Stories* shows, scholars across translation, sociolinguistics, and media studies trace how Spanglish marks identity and authenticity across film, television, advertising, music, and streaming⁶⁶. No longer treated as an «orphaned» or deviant form, Spanglish appears in storytelling, subtitling, dubbing, and captioning as a culturally meaningful repertoire tied to Latinx visibility, accessibility, and politics. While the political sphere may resist threading Spanish, the marketplace has already embraced and capitalized on its power.

Bad Bunny's 2020 guest appearance at the Super Bowl LIV halftime show and his 2026 Super Bowl LX halftime show bring Spanish straight into the core of Anglo-American mainstream culture. Singing entirely in Spanish on one of the country's most-watched stages, he rejects the idea that Latinx artists must switch to English to be legitimate or profitable. His refusal to translate challenges the hierarchy that places English above Spanish, asserting space for a language long marginalized in the U.S. Grounded in Puerto Rican identity and anti-colonial gestures, his presence turns the Super Bowl into a multilingual, multicultural America. His chart dominance, fashion influence, and global visibility further signal a shift in cultural power: Spanish is no longer peripheral but central. His repeated Super Bowl inclusion affirms Spanish as an American language and Latinx communities as integral to the nation. For Bad Bunny, Spanish becomes a claim to sovereignty, equality, and identity within the American story.

⁶⁵ Tommy Y. Davis and Wendy Leo Moore, «Spanish Not Spoken Here: Accounting for the Racialization of the Spanish Language in the Experiences of Mexican Migrants in the United States», *Ethnicities* 14, n.º 5 (2014): 676, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24735551>

⁶⁶ Rebecca Attig and R. A. Derrick, eds., *Translating Spanglish in US Latinx Audiovisual Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2025).

Within the Hispanic community, the English-Spanish tension also cuts inward. Immigration expands the number of Spanish speakers, yet schooling accelerates a shift to English, weakening intergenerational transmission. Many children grow fluent in English while drifting from the linguistic world of parents and grandparents, relying on Spanglish at home and inhabiting a «third zone» between cultures.

The mainstream often flattens the profound diversity within the Hispanic population. U.S. Hispanics have never been a single race or a unified voice. Shaped by the Spanish Conquest, colonization, the slave trade, and later European and Asian migrations to Latin America, they form what José Vasconcelos called a «cosmic race»—a spectrum of White Europeans, Euro-descendants, mestizos, Indigenous peoples, Asians, and Blacks. The colonial racial hierarchy still shadows contemporary institutions and everyday interactions across the Spanish-speaking world. Because of U.S. history in the Southwest and large-scale Latin American immigration (and far smaller flows from Spain)⁶⁷, U.S. Latinos now embody the full global range of the Spanish-speaking world, inserted into an English-dominant power structure. As Canizales and Agius Vallejo note, «Contrary to the belief that Latino population growth is driven by immigration, nearly two-thirds of Latinos in the United States are native born»⁶⁸. In the 21st century, this «cosmic race» is as vernacularly American as anyone born here, yet still treated as foreign and unassimilable. Racially mixed, culturally varied, and socially heterogeneous, U.S. Hispanics are held together by shared language and religion⁶⁹—making Spanish and Spanglish key threads that unite their internal diversity and fuel their collective fight for linguistic equality.

During the Chicano Movement, educator George I. Sánchez famously argued that acculturation should be reciprocal: Mexican Americans would become Americanized, and Anglos would become, in his words, «Mexicanized gringos»⁷⁰. Yet this remains aspirational in a nation still anchored by an unyielding linguistic hierarchy. Today's bilingualism and biculturalism operate asymmetrically; Hispanics, Latinos, and other non-English speakers are expected to carry the burden of linguistic and cultural flexibility, while those atop the hierarchy defend a monolingual notion of Americanness. So who counts as «more American»: the monolingual English speaker or the

⁶⁷ Spanish immigrants in the U.S. tend to identify themselves as Europeans rather than Hispanics.

⁶⁸ Stephanie L. Canizales and Jody Agius Vallejo, «Latinos & Racism in the Trump Era», *Daedalus* 150, n.º 2 (2021): 150, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01852; citing Jens Manuel Krogstad and Mark Hugo Lopez, «The Hispanic Nativity Shift», Pew Research Center, April 29, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2014/04/29/hispanic-nativity-shift/>

⁶⁹ Although not every Hispanic is Catholic, the majority of Spanish speakers in the U.S. are Catholic.

⁷⁰ Robert W. Train, «Becoming Bilingual, Becoming Ourselves: Archival Memories of Spanglish in Early Californian Epistolary Texts», *Hispania* 96, n.º 3 (2013): 438, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23608284>; quoting Rubén Salazar and Mario T. García, *Border Correspondent: Selected Writings, 1955-1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

bilingual Hispanic or Latino speaker? The answer turns on whether one chooses to see Spanish as a threat or a thread.

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