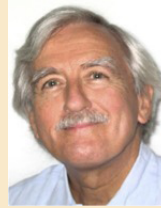


BY THE WAY

by Tony Beckwith,
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Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He came to Texas in 1980 and now lives in Austin where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist.

Spanglish

English was my first language, my mother tongue. It's what my family spoke at home and in our social circle while I was growing up. But outside that circle we spoke Spanish because we lived in Montevideo, Uruguay. We were *ingleses*, members of a bilingual community made up of people like my parents, whose own parents came out from England just before the First World War. There was also an assortment of expats from many different countries, and English was the lingua franca at our social gatherings, sports events, clubs of various kinds, and the local British School.

At the school — affectionately known by its de facto name of *El Breeteesh* — we were forbidden to speak Spanish. Most of the teachers were imported from England, and valiantly struggled to instill in us the basics of a classical Cambridge syllabus, just as the sun was setting on the British Empire. In the

playground, however, we spoke a language of our own, a hybrid concoction called Spanglish.

Spanglish — the name just rolls off the tongue! — was a brilliant blend, a splendid synthesis of our two languages. It wasn't until much later in life that I came to understand that the linguistic gymnastics involved in speaking Spanglish transported me to a level somewhere beyond the venerable Arthur J. Hobson's grammar class. He taught us the rules, but Spanglish taught us how to bend them.

As in border regions all over the world, our linguistic frontier inevitably led to an overlapping that not only produced the usual code-switching and word substitution; it also created half-breed words and unwritten rules that governed their use. This whole exercise provided the outlet for those subversive forms of expression that are so essential to

adolescence, and gave us the delicious sense that “they” could not understand what “we” were saying. This was, of course, not entirely true, since most of the adults had learned how to fracture the languages in pretty much the same way when they were kids. A decent command of both English and Spanish is really essential to a thorough appreciation of the scope and beauty of Spanglish, so I won’t go into much technical detail here. Anyone who speaks more than one language is perfectly familiar with the idea.

I should mention that the Spanish we spoke at that time and place was the Uruguayan version, which is similar to the Argentine, since both were strongly influenced by Italian migration during the settlement of these neighboring countries of the Río de la Plata region. Some words are actually spelled differently in this kind of Spanish. But the main difference is in the inflection, which falls closer to the end of words like “dec*í*me” (“tell me”) and “escuch*a*me” (“listen to me”), compared to the emphasis favored in Spain and other parts of Latin America where one says “d*í*me” and “escú*ú*chame” instead.

Spanish verbs end in “ar,” “er,” and “ir”. “Caminar” means “to walk,” “comer” means “to eat,” and “escribir” means “to write”. English has many verbs that end in “ate,” such as translate, emulate, and compensate. When this ending is cobbled onto a Spanish verb, “caminar” morphs into the Spanglish “camate,” keeping the same meaning. It is conjugated thus: I caminate, you caminate, she caminates, etc. We can also say “caminating” and “caminated” and so on. By

a happy twist of serendipity, English words like contemplate and accommodate are also full-fledged Spanglish words, though there is little serious doubt about which came first. In certain forms of American English, one occasionally hears the noun “conversation” transformed into the verb “to conversate” (as in “I enjoyed conversating with you”), but that’s a different phenomenon altogether.

Verbs are the most fertile ground for outbreaks of Spanglish. For example, the Spanish verbs “dejar” and “jorobar” have various shades of meaning, but for our purposes here we will use “to quit” and “to pester,” respectively. The Spanglish for “quit pestering me, will you!” borrows the reflexive and the syntax from Spanish and becomes: “Dejate yourself from jorobating, do you want!”

Spanglish offers endless opportunities for entertainment in other areas as well. It permits the speaker to stubbornly translate words in an intentionally literal way, to ignore conventional syntax, and to manipulate the spelling of words in one language to create new ones that masquerade as real ones in the other. This produces sentences of haunting beauty such as, “the tranquil doesn’t come well to me;” “they want to independizate themselves;” “a splinter off the old wood, eh?” and “there would arm itself a scandal of the first.” These are the immortal words of Basil Thomson, to whom Spanglish is deeply and forever indebted. Thomson, under his initials de plume “B.T.” wrote a humorous column – “Ramon Writes” – in the Buenos Aires Herald for almost 30 years during the mid-twentieth century. He was

born in the Argentine province of Tucumán and, like many of his generation, volunteered to fight in the Second World War and was “commissionated” by the British Army. What that experience did to his command of language, and to his sense of humor, has been the subject of awed speculation ever since.

Many years after reading “Ramon Writes,” I realized that, by deconstructing two languages and assembling a hybrid version out of the parts, I learned something about how languages function. While my brother was taking motorcycles apart to see how they worked, I was putting languages up on a virtual hoist and dismembering them, phoneme by phoneme. Spanglish and other similar homemade tongues encourage the mind to loosen its grip on the essential but rigid linguistic forms and structures taught by an academic education. I discovered syllables that way, and came to understand their vitally important role, especially in poetry. I learned to see words embedded in other words, and to scramble the letters into anagrams. When a word is seen as a single unit, it is a firm, unyielding plank; but it has an entirely different range of flexibility — and will confide clues concerning its origins — when viewed as a sequence of independent syllables. I think the melody in a language flows from the syllables, just as the sound emanates from the vowels. When playing with words and meanings, stretching and reassembling them into endless alternatives, it becomes evident that just as some words have many meanings, some meanings have many words. Insights like this can expand horizons at a dizzying rate.

As a translator, there comes a time when I feel the need to pull away from the structure of the text and immerse myself in its essential meaning. This is not always as simple as it sounds, for me at any rate. The source language is seductive and exerts a powerful influence over the translator’s perception of the nuances of the original. But all that syntax, all those words, must be temporarily set aside in order to allow the underlying meaning to float free and be reinterpreted in the target language. I believe that Spanglish provided the experimental and boundlessly playful environment where I learned how to encourage that process to unfold in my mind. Spanglish helped give me a way with words.