



BACK IN TIME

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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 multicultural 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 Schools.

At school—affectionately known as *El Breeteesh*—we were forbidden to speak Spanish. Most of the teachers were imported from England, and valiantly struggled to instil in us the basics of a classical Cambridge syllabus. 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. You might say he gave us an instrument, and Spanglish taught us how to play it. In retrospect I realize that, by deconstructing two languages and assembling a hybrid version out of the parts, I learned something about how language functions. While my brother was taking motorcycles apart to see how they

worked, I was dismembering languages, syllable by syllable.

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 an 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, nonsense 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. I won't go into much technical detail here, since 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; both were strongly influenced by Italian migration during the growth of these neighbouring countries in the latter half of the nineteenth century. 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 “es-cuchame” (“listen to me”), compared to the emphasis favoured in Spain and other parts of Latin America where one says “d*í*me” and “escúchame” instead.

Spanish verbs end in “ar,” “er,” and “ir.” “Caminar” means “to walk,” “comer”





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means “to eat,” and “escribir” means “to write”. English has many verbs that end in “ate,” such as translate, emulate, pontificate, and concentrate. When this ending is cobbled onto a Spanish verb, “caminar” morphs into the Spanglish “caminate,” 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 the American English spoken in southern states, one occasionally hears the noun “conversation” transformed into the verb “to conversate” (as in “I enjoyed conversating with you”), but that’s a different story 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;” and “there would arm itself a scandal of the first.” These are the immortal words of

Basil Thomson, to whom Spanglish is deeply and permanently 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 commissioned by the British Army. What that experience did to his command of language, and to his sense of humour, has been the subject of much speculation ever since.

When I left school I stopped speaking Spanglish regularly, and these days I only speak it once in a while. But I still think about it. I was recently in touch with an old companion of class, one of that bar beloved of those times, and after salu-dating ourselves and putting ourselves to the day, we put ourselves of accord in that if we festejated our birthdays this year we would invitae ourselves, without fault. I wish I could tell B.T. that Spanglish lives on.

