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“Foreign Soundingness” and Code-Switching Instead of Translation:
An Examination of a Marketing Strategy in Contemporary Latino/a Music.

NERISHA DE NIL PADILLA CRUZ

In previous decades, Hispanic and Latino/a artists had to make several adjustments to enter the Anglo market, including recording their music in English. However, this has been changing in recent years thanks to the collaboration between artists of various musical genres. Recently, it has become more common to hear collaborations among artists that do not share the same background or language on the radio or digital music platforms. The new trend has exposed the listening public not only to a variety of styles, but also to a mixture of languages or accents in the same song. For many, this is innovative and interesting, but at the same time can create a feeling of strangeness in the listeners whose languages are involved in the production. It is then that the sentiment of strangeness becomes what is called “Foreign Soundingness,” a term described by David Bellos in his article “Fictions of the Foreign: The Paradox of ‘Foreign-Soundingness.’” He argues that foreign-soundingness is only a real option for a translator when working from a language with which the receiving language and its culture have an established relationship since “foreignness is necessarily constructed inside the receiving tongue” (Bellos 36). I argue that this “foreign soundingness” happens in two ways in songs of Latino/a artists that collaborate with English speakers. The first instance is the accent of the Anglo artist when singing in Spanish and the second one is the code-switching¹ or mixing of both languages, English and Spanish, in the same song.

The main reason for choosing these two languages as examples is due to their significant uses among bilingual communities in the United States, yet the phenomenon of mixing languages in the same musical production is not limited only to those two. For example, in recent years it has been common to see the inclusion of Portuguese and Spanish in songs like “Corazón” (2018) by a Colombian singer known as Maluma with Nego do Borel, a Brazilian artist. Also, as recently as June 2021 a Puerto Rican artist, Bad Bunny, released his song “Yonaguni” where he sings in Spanish, but the last verses are in Japanese. Now, even though these songs have gained popularity, the mixing of those specific languages—Portuguese and Japanese—is not frequent. Through the years it has been the combination of English and Spanish in the music market that has made a remarkable appearance.²

Collaboration among artists is an important part of the music industry not only for US Latino/a artists but also for English-Speaking singers. A variety of mainstream artists in the past, such as the Backstreet Boys, Celine Dion, and most recently Shaw Mendes— just to name a few— have teamed up to create bilingual songs, either completely in Spanish or with parts of it in this language. This phenomenon can be seen as a result of the growth of US Latino/a communities on the mainland which tend to maintain Spanish as part of their dialect.

Therefore, as the focus of this research is within the context of popular culture in the United States, I focus only on the use of Spanish with English within these artistic productions.

¹ The fluent and frequent intercalation of Spanish and English in a single conversation or literary work—sometimes within the same sentence (Lipski 236).

² Specifically, in the 60s the Puerto Rican singer-songwriter and guitarist José Feliciano was “one of the first Latin artists who managed to transfer his songs to the US market” (Arroyo Sotomayor 72). This was the case with his success with “Merry Christmas,” which even today is heard on the radio during the Christmas season.

To further analyze this phenomenon within contemporary Hispanic music, I use as examples three popular songs from Latino/a artists, whose versions have been released in Spanish only, and then compare them with collaborations with English-speaking artists. Specifically, I analyze the following songs; “Odio” (2014) by Dominican singer Romeo Santos ft. Drake, “Despacito” (2017) by Puerto Rican singers Luis Fonsi, Daddy Yankee ft. Justin Bieber³, and “Tusa”⁴ (2019) by Colombian singer Karol G ft. Niki Minaj. These three productions have a common denominator that at the time of release they managed to position themselves among the best, or number one, of the most listened songs both inside and outside the United States, in addition to being nominated for several awards within the music industry.

To begin with, Bellos states in his article that “in fact, the most obvious way to make a text sound foreign is to leave parts of it in the original” (32). He develops his argument in the context of literary translation expressing that as readers we want to imagine ourselves being in the “foreign” environment. However, applying his arguments to the collaborations among artists can become controversial. The effect of “foreignness” that stems from the mixing of languages in one song does not always have a positive impact on the audiences, especially when they might not fully understand one of the languages. Nevertheless, the songs I study were not only popular in the US, but also in the Caribbean and Latin America, where some of the population might not fully understand English, creating another sentiment of strangeness in the listener.

The first song to analyze in regard to the phenomenon of mixing languages in the same track is the one by Romeo Santos ft. Drake, “Odio” in which the main theme is the feeling of resentment of him towards another man who is now with the girl that once was his lover. It begins with Romeo Santos speaking in English referring to the title of the song itself and then quickly switching to Spanish, the language that predominates in the song.

Yeah
 Envy
 Is a sign of admiration
 Hate
 It’s the epitome of destruction

 Tal parece
 Que mi amor crece y crece... (00:01- 00:18)

Now, Spanish is not only sung by Romeo Santos, but also by Drake whose pronunciation of the language is almost perfect.

Celo sus besos
 Sobre tu cuerpo
 La envidia se apodera
 Así de mí

³ It should be noted here that this collaboration occurred after Justin Bieber himself heard the song in a club in Colombia and contacted Fonsi’s recording company to show interest in making a remix. (Kaur)

⁴ According to the Real Academia Española (RAE) the word “Tusa” is defined in various ways including “despicable” and “of little dignity” or “excessive and painful effort.” However, the connotation Karol G gives in the song is to refer to a disappointed love.

Y te quiero aquí
 Odio ese hombre
 Porque está a tu lado
 Perdí tu amor
 Soy un pobre diablo
 Sin tu amor yo no soy nada
 Nada (01:16 - 01:41)

Both Romeo Santos and Drake contribute to the code-switching by singing in English and Spanish in different parts of the song.

Now, we can argue that the mixing of languages, English and Spanish, has a specific purpose. Specifically, Romeo Santos singing in English for the first few seconds of the song can be seen as a way to capture the attention of the English-speaking audience in the first place, or more specifically the bilingual one. Drake singing in Spanish and Romeo Santos in English help both artists to insert themselves into the culture and music market of each other, but more importantly, the mixing of the languages in the song represents the communication patterns of the Latino/a community in the U.S. It is well known that “code-switching has long been recognized to be an important identity marker in bilingual populations” so when we have two recognized artists switching languages, it helps to normalize this phenomenon that characterizes the Latino/a community (Sarkar et. al 2059).

On the other hand, the sense of “foreignness” in the song occurs with the choruses in English by Drake. Precisely in one part of his choruses, he says “Look don’t worry about it Keep speaking Spanish I’ll get it translated You know you my baby” (3:01-3:03). With this verse, it is implied that the original song and its lyrics are addressed to a woman whose main language is Spanish. It is well known that at the beginning of his solo career the success of Romeo Santos was within the Latino/a community in the Caribbean. However, the success of “Odio,” which debuted at #45 on the Billboard charts helped him to enter the American mainstream with more US English speakers as his listening public.

However, it is important to understand that even when this strategy can be beneficial for the artist and the communities that identify with them, the mixing of the two languages in songs is not always accepted by the audience. Examples of this phenomenon are the remix of “Despacito” and “Tusa.” Even though “Despacito” was #1 on the Billboard charts for 11 weeks consecutively and “Tusa” reached the #42 position in the same chart, they were more susceptible to criticism. The strong English accents of Justin Bieber and Niki Minaj while singing in Spanish (not their native language) create a strong sense of “foreignness” for the audience.

In the case of the hit “Despacito,” unlike the original song whose release served as tourist propaganda in Puerto Rico after the passage of Hurricane Maria, the remix with Justin Bieber begins with him singing in English for the first forty seconds.

Comin’ over in my direction
 So thankful for that, it’s such a blessing, yeah
 Turn every situation into heaven, yeah
 Oh-oh, you are
 My sunrise on the darkest day
 Got me feelin’ some kind of way

Make me wanna savor every moment slowly, slowly
 You fit me tailor-made, love how you put it on
 Got the only key, know how to turn it on
 The way you nibble on my ear, the only words I wanna hear
 Baby, take it slow so we can last long (00:01-00:40)

Again, we see the use of English as a strategy to capture the bilingual or English speaker’s attention. Then, like what happens in “Odio,” it is Fonsi’s voice that continues with the original verses of the song in Spanish: “¡Oh! Tú, tú eres el imán y yo soy el metal Me voy acercando y voy armando el plan Sólo con pensarlo se acelera el pulso (Oh, yeah)” (00:41- 00:50). From this moment on Justin Bieber is only heard as part of the choruses when his voice is always overlapping with that of Fonsi or Yankee. The few times that he sings in Spanish by himself is to say “despacito.” This strategy employed by the singers can be seen as a form to preserve the intonation and rhythm of the original song.

However, the code-switching in this song not only takes place at the beginning with the voice of Justin Bieber but also is a strategy adopted by Fonsi. While he mostly sings in Spanish, he also uses English as part of some of the verses of this new version, particularly in the last minute where he sings “This is how we do it down in Puerto Rico I just want to hear you screaming, ¡Ay, Bendito! I can move forever cuando este contigo, báilalo!” (03:14- 03:22). Now it is important to notice that Fonsi does not translate the original verses “Vamo’ a hacerlo en una playa en Puerto Rico Hasta que las olas griten “Ay, bendito” Para que mi sello se quede contigo (báilalo)” from Spanish into English; instead, the translation of the original is changed to fit the context of the new song. Specifically, the Spanish verse alludes to an intimate encounter between a couple at a beach in Puerto Rico. The literal translation would be “let’s do it on a beach in Puerto Rico. Until the waves shout: ‘ay Bendito!’ So my impress remains with you. (Dance it)”. The translation is more general, and the intimate connotation is not as explicit.

The code-switching employed by both singers can be seen as a demonstration that the language barrier is penetrable at the moment that both Fonsi and Bieber sing in languages that are not their native ones. However, this collaboration between Puerto Rican and Canadian artists became controversial when Bieber was filmed in a club trying to perform the lyrics of the song by himself and could not remember it. In the video, he is seen to start making sounds that mimic the phonology of the Spanish lyrics and the rhythm of the song, but no coherent words. In other words, this type of situation shows that for this collaboration among artists to take place it is not necessary to be fully bilingual and it is mostly a marketing strategy for them. This is particularly the case with Latino/a artists who do not have to fully sing in English anymore to become part of the Anglo music market.

Now, this is paradoxical since it is understood that the intention of these collaborations is for both artists to be able to approach and make themselves known in the culture of the other. It is understood that “an individual’s choice of language signals a specific social identity and/or belonging to a particular community” (Luna and Peracchio 760). Therefore, when the artists involved in the collaboration do not fully speak one of the languages, the phenomenon can be seen more as a *marketing* strategy, beyond cultural intentions. In the case of Latino/a artists, this can be proved when even their appearance is not limited to the music industry. It has become common to see them on the covers of U.S. major magazines and on late-night talk shows that are well received by English-speaking consumers of American pop culture. On the other hand,

English-speaking singers get to have a close look at the Latin pop culture while making their name heard outside of the US.

In addition, the insertion into the culture of the other is not always easy or welcoming as expected, as the case of Niki Minaj shows in her collaboration with Colombian Karol G in the song “Tusa.” As opposed to Drake or Justin Bieber, Minaj’s effort to sing in Spanish became the reason for mockery by audiences and led to the creation of many memes on the internet. Minaj, at fifty-eight seconds into the song begins her part singing in Spanish with the following words: “Pero hice todo este llanto por nada Ahora soy una chica mala.” Then she continues in English, “And now you kickin’ and screamin’, a big toddler Don’t try to get your friends to come holler, holler” (00:58-1:07). The problem with the verse in Spanish was her pronunciation of the “d” in words like “todo” and “nada,” which was confused with the sound of the “r” and changed completely the meanings of the words. “Todo” which means “everything” in English was understood as “toro” which translates to “bull” and “nada” which means “nothing” was understood as “nara” which has no meaning in the Spanish lexicon. The mix-up sound of these two words completely altered the meaning of the entire verse to something with no logic for a native Spanish speaker. This causes a sense of “foreign soundingness” for Spanish speakers in their own language. The audience perceives that the collaborations are not a natural way for the artist to get close to their culture and language but are mostly a commercially beneficial agreement for both artists. However, it is important to note that these sound changes, which are studied more thoroughly in linguistics, are products of speaking or using Spanish as a second language. Minaj is not bilingual and therefore it is to be expected that her pronunciation will not be the same as someone who knows Spanish and speaks the language daily.

Now, it is valid to argue that for a Spanish native speaker the pronunciation of Minaj can sound different, but they can still understand and recognize the phonetics. Thus, the criticism against her can seem a little exaggerated, especially when due to globalization songs completely made in English have reached the pop culture of Hispanic countries and gained popularity even when the understanding of the language is not assured by the public.

According to Bellos, “English is heard around the world in pop songs, commercials, TV news broadcasts, and so on by millions of people who do not understand the words of the lyrics, jingles, and reports. As a result, there are a number of people who recognize the phonology of English—the kinds of sounds English makes—without knowing any English vocabulary or grammar” (32-33). Therefore, it is not necessary to do full translations of music to approach a specific audience. More specifically, the popularity of these songs usually comes from their melody and rhythm which is more beneficial for the artists. The main connection with the audience does not necessarily happen through the lyrics and language of the song, even when this becomes a plus under a marketing strategy.

Collaborations among artists with different backgrounds, as seen in the examples above, have become a new phenomenon in the music industry. We see that English is in contact with various dialectal varieties of Spanish including Caribbean and Colombian, communities that to some extent have managed to establish themselves in the United States. Thus, the diversity in these songs is not only because of the mixing of languages but also different dialects of the same language. The process of globalization has “led to an increase in the contact of speakers of different varieties of Spanish and other languages, in Spain and especially in America, both in

the United States and in other American countries” (Garrido 87).⁵ Consequently, collaborations in the music industry are propagating the idea of an acceptance of different dialects or languages within the same discursive act without minimizing the value of one over another.

Walter Benjamin argues that “all supra historical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: pure language” (257). In other words, the relationship between languages cannot be experienced in a single language. Thus, when we adapt Benjamin’s argument to the context of music and mixing languages, we can argue that the interrelationship between English and Spanish in U.S. society can lead to a balance between them. Specifically, it can open the idea of a bilingual society where Spanish and English share equal social value and both languages complement each other. As Jacqueline Toribio argues, “viewed from a properly linguistic perspective, the manipulation of Spanish and English by U.S. Latinos may be perceived as a viable form of communication that promotes the maintenance of the Spanish language in the context of English” (89-90). Consequently, these productions help with the maintenance of Spanish among the Latino/a communities in the U.S. As Toribio’s studies point out, in some way “Spanish-English codeswitching may be embraced and endorsed as affording US Latinos an authentic means of representing the juxtaposition of the Latino and US cultures” (90). Through the mixing of languages in the music of U.S. Latino/a communities, consumers have the opportunity to reflect upon their identity and the use of both languages as a representation of their hybrid culture.

On the other hand, for the artists, productions that combine more than one language show their ability to create multilingual content for a diverse public. Therefore, it can be argued that this type of production greatly helps to promote linguistic and cultural diversity. They not only represent the speech patterns adopted by the U.S. Latino/a communities —English-Spanish code-switching or vice versa — but also a variety of dialects of the same language. In addition, the artists involved in the productions come from different countries and music backgrounds, which helps to expand their listeners.

Now, the inclusion of English to create bilingual content can sometimes seem controversial. Toribio also affirms that for some Latinos/as, the simultaneous use of English and Spanish represents the contamination of the Hispanic culture due to its contact with the U.S. culture. In the same line of thought, Mona Baker and Luis Pérez-González in their article “Translation and Interpreting” argue that English as a lingua franca “influences other languages via processes of translation and multilingual text production” (47). Although this is seen as a problem for the most part, in the musical field it can be seen as an advantage. The inclusion of English in the previous songs takes place after the same song has been released in Spanish and has gained popularity. The artists do not change or translate their songs into English to accommodate the other singer; they just give them the space to collaborate and contribute to the product that the public already knows. So even when the influence of the U.S. culture is clear, not translating the entire song shows some resistance to social stereotypes about Spanish in the Anglo music market and society in general.⁶

⁵ My translation.

⁶ In the United States, English is considered the majority language associated with integration and vitality while Spanish is associated with low levels of poverty and inferiority (Luna and Peracchio 761).

As “translation can serve as a strategy of resistance against the linguistic and cultural dominance of English” these collaborations help position Spanish within an international market (Baker and Pérez-González 47). Implicitly, the Spanish language is given an equal value to English, capable of producing and creating content for an audience beyond the Hispanic communities outside of the U.S. Therefore, we can argue that the more these collaborations keep taking place in the music industry, the more the “foreign soundingness” effects will be reduced. The audience will get used to hearing different accents, dialects, and languages in one song and will cease to perceive these as foreign elements in the song. It is expected that the mixing of languages becomes a more frequent phenomenon in society. People will learn to enjoy the music even if they do not fully understand one of the languages. In addition, we can hope that this will generate enough curiosity and interest for the listeners to learn that second language they now heard in the songs of their favorite artists.

If bilingual communities keep growing in the US, it is expected that a reduction of monolingual artistic productions will occur. Now, this is something that is not necessarily new but has been happening since the early 2000s when “approximately 20% of consumers in the United States consider themselves bilingual (U.S. Census Bureau 2000)” (Luna and Peracchio 760). It is clear this number has changed in the past two decades. More specifically in 2015, the Pew Research Center published a study that shows that “Hispanics in the United States break down into three groups when it comes to their use of language: 36% are bilingual, 25% mainly use English and 38% mainly use Spanish. Among those who speak English, 59% are bilingual” (Krogstad and Gonzalez-Barrera). While translation will still be necessary for the legal, health, and government fields, in the entertainment industry things can shift leading to more bilingual productions where two languages share the same space.

With this change, it is expected that Latino/a artists will not be forced to substitute their language for English to be part of the Anglo market like what happened during the 90s with the so-called “Latin Explosion.” Back then artists like Ricky Martin had to sing in English to be able to participate in the Grammy Awards show. During this period, other Latino/a artists were also forced to change or adjust their music to comply with the demands of the Anglo market. However, this boom was short-lived as Harmeet Kaur mentions in his report: “after a few years, the so-called ‘Latin Explosion’ that promised to transform the U.S. pop market— as well as the US itself— imploded.” More specifically the names of the Latino/a artists that cross over to the Anglo market— Marc Anthony, J. Lo, Shakira, Ricky Martin— after positioning themselves in the Top 10 were forgotten by the media for the new trend of the moment. Even so, with the passage of time, the figure of Latin artists in the American mainstream would resurface. The only difference is that it would occur under their own conditions.

According to a CNN report in 2021, things have changed for Latino/a artists in relation to their participation in the Anglo music industry. Thanks to the new digital platforms, listeners themselves, including monolingual English speakers in conjunction with the bilingual audience, are the ones showing interest in the Latino/a artists’ music even if the songs are fully in Spanish (Kaur). This trend has brought new opportunities for the musicians, such as being able to participate in the Super Bowl half-time show in 2020. That year, a Colombian singer, Shakira, along with Jennifer Lopez, a well-known artist within the Latino/a community in the U.S. and outside, featured Bad Bunny and J Balvin. Together they combined English and Spanish as part of the performance.

The presence of Latino/a artists now in the American mainstream is constantly challenging the hegemonic music industry in the U.S. By singing solely in Spanish or mixed languages, yes, they can create a sense of “foreignness” for those who do not understand the language but are also showing how they are able to create and produce content that is not restricted only to the Spanish-speaking communities and includes a more diverse audience. Therefore, Romeo Santos, Luis Fonsi, and Karol G are clearly a small part of a new phenomenon that is being rapidly normalized at an international level and that will continue to increase in the coming years. The success of these productions differs from the ones of the 90s in that Latino/a artists are not switching from one audience to the other. More importantly, singing in Spanish, maintaining their regular followers, and adding a second language help to broaden their audience. Thus, they are less likely to suffer the same fate as three decades ago when they lost support from their Spanish-speaking audience due to recording only in English. We can expect an increase in music productions that not only combines English and Spanish but also other languages and artists from different backgrounds.

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