

CHICANO CULTURAL INHERITANCE, IDENTITY & AWARENESS

CULTURE, FOLKLORE AND LANGUAGE

SOUTHWESTERN CHICANO DIALECTS

When Queen Isabela of Spain asked for a justification of the creation of a Spanish grammar by Antonio de Nebrija, she was told "your majesty, language is the instrument of empires." This quote reveals not only the political motives of Spain but it also reveals Isabela's dominance of her Castille over Aragón. Thus, language is also the instrument of culture; it reveals attitudes, folkways, dialectal preferences, and worldviews. Chicano dialects as a phenomenon of interaction between various cultures are first studied by Aurelio M. Espinosa in New Mexico.¹ Particularly unique in New Mexican Spanish are the archaic Spanish expressions. While many New Mexicans, proud of their Spanish heritage (ergo, their insider term of *Hispano*), would like to link their *Southwestern* brand of Spanish to Spaniards, it is more of a case of isolationism that permitted the maintenance of archaic Spanish expressions in the geographically detached northern New Mexico. The rural *campesino* and syncretic Native- American south of the border also has retained many archaic expressions. In this case, social and racial discrimination forced the isolation of these poor socio-economic groups in Mexico over a period of 300 years of colonialism. Examples of archaic expressions include *mesmo*, *onde*, *trujo* and *asina*. This type of lexicon is found to be found in the classic Spanish works of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, *La Celestina* and *El poema del Mio Cid*. Ironically, when Anglo-American Spanish teachers castigated and humiliated Chicano students for using *onde* and *asina*, they did not know, in their ignorance, that these were true Castillian words from classical works of the past.² Some expressions evolved between the archaic level and the contemporary level e.g. *asina* (from *ansi mesmo* to *ansina mesmo* to *asina mismo* to *así mismo*) while others developed during colonial times e.g. *muncho*, as used by Friar Juan de Pineda.³ Unique to the speech of South Texas is the use of accenting the first syllable of the first person subjunctive e.g. *háyamos*, *póngamos* etc. and the use of *semos* for *somos*. Both are expressions that were in use of the XV and XVI centuries.⁴ Other archaic terms in current use are *vide* for *ví*, *estilla* for *astilla*, *culeco* for *clueco*, *vagamundo* for *vagabundo* and *rede* for *red*.⁵

Another language system that plays a significant role in the development of chicano dialects is *Aztekah Náhuatl*. The impact of this language is certainly understood from a historical and geographical standpoint. There are literally thousands of words in current usage in the language of all Spanish- speakers from Mexican ancestry. Even the Spanish criollos after one generation were using different vocabulary, much of which was "mexicanized" i.e. from an *Aztekah Náhuatl* derivative. Of the many lexical terms used growing up as a Chicano in South Texas included *esquite* for popcorn (from *esquitl*); *zoquete* for mud (from *zóquitl*); *zacate* for grass (from *zákatl*); *pisca* for cotton picking (from *pixka*); *cuates* for buddies (from *kóatl*); *mayate* for black person (from *máyatl* or black bug) and *calcos* for shoes (from *kactli*). Other words derived from *Aztekah Náhuatl* include *escuincle*; *tacuache piocha*, *nel* and *yanqui*.⁶

Among the *barrios*, and in particular to street youths is the use of *Caló*. Essentially, it is the argot introduced by the gypsies into the Americas. It is found in every Spanish speaking country in the Americas including Spain. In Mexico it sometimes is referred to *Caliche* while in Spain it is called *germanía*.⁷ Because of its esoteric qualities and its intention to not be understood by the authorities, it is seen as an underground language. It is very much alive and well in the federal penal institutions. It is plastic and metaphoric and often

inventive in expression. It may borrow from *Aztekah Náhuatl*, Haitian or other foreign sources and adapt that vocabulary to its own argot. Pure *Caló* words include the following *baisa* (hands), *jura* (cops), *chavalo* (boy), *pápira* (money), from *Aztekah Náhuatl* we derive *calcos* or *cacles* for shoes; its Aztec word is *kactli* (shoes). In the same manner, *shante* (house) comes from *shantli*, also house in *Aztekah Náhuatl*. From the Portuguese word *pipiripao*, modern *Caló* derives *pipirín* (snack). Its expression may be exemplary of rhyme and alliteration e.g. "*ontablas que no te había vidrios*" from the Spanish *Dónde estabas que no te había visto* (where were you that I didn't see you?); *Está uno iguanas, ranas, tu sábanas* from the Spanish "*Está uno igual, tu sabes* (it is the same, you know); and "*branas las otrofas*" from the Spanish "*ahora las otras copas* (and now the rest of the drinks). During the *Chicano Movement* of the late sixties and seventies, the *Pachuco* argot of *Caló* became well accepted: the *Pachuco* was looked at as the anti-hero of the movement for his historic role in the Zoot Suit riots of the 40's in Los Angeles i.e. having stood his ground to the violent confrontation with Anglo-American sailors. From Mexican literature and/or cinema he is the *Periquillo* of Lizardi, the *Pito Pérez* of Romero or the *Tin Tan* of the Mexican cinema but in the Chicano sense, one that is activist and rebellious. Thus, the *Pachuco* was seen as a heroic model and his street speech was used not only by university students but by professors in their lectures during the Chicano movement of the sixties and seventies.⁸ The language system most readily seen as impacting the Chicano dialect is English. It has been referred to as Tex-Mex but this stereotype is not only inaccurate but is derisive in characterization. It connotes a bastardization of the Spanish language. While many English words do function as loans, as can be seen, the language of the Chicano/a is rich and varied and actually was four language sources to form its dialects i.e. archaic Spanish, English, *Aztekah Náhuatl* and *Caló* or *Romany*.⁹ With respect to English, it should be noted that since the Chicano/a is educated formally in English and is constantly bombarded with English by the media, it is only natural that he think and speak with English words. The impact of English, moreover, has been felt for sometime worldwide. In Mestizo-America it is so abundant that there is a dictionary of Americanisms. With the introduction of North American television programs, technical terms and North American companies into Mestizo-America, there is a veritable invasion of English vocabulary into Spanish speech. At one point smog was known as *neblumo* i.e. the combination of smoke and fog translated into Spanish. Now it is simply the same word with a slight Spanish pronunciation in Mexico. Instead of the diminutive *Pedrito* the phonetic representation of Pete is used i.e. *Pit* in Spanish. In the U.S., most interesting is the ability of the Chicano/a to code switch i.e. move from one language to another within a sentence. This is a natural process for bilingual/bicultural people as witnessed in the French speaking Canada, and some parts of Cajun country in Louisiana. While some expressions are direct translations (*ay te wacho*: I'll see you there) others are not e.g. *cuelgo los guantes* (to hang it up) when changed slightly to *cuelgo los tenis* means to die. The influence of English can be seen in *chispa* (meaning spark) for spark plug; *dai-me* for dime; *mama grande* for grandmother, but sometimes an authentic word in Spanish is used with a variant meaning e.g. *mecha* (wick in Spanish) but now meaning matches since it is similar phonetically. In some cases, there is simply no Spanish equivalent e.g. there is no position of sheriff in Spanish; thus, it is merely reproduced phonetically in Spanish i.e. *cherife*. Sometimes the Chicano will be creative and invent a word like *yuta* from *u-turn*. Without realizing he/she may use archaic Spanish expressions that English likewise has borrowed from Latin e.g. *ofertar* (to offer), *augosto* (August) and *liberarte* (liberate). It should be noted, however, that the Chicano's knowledge of Spanish may often be passive i.e. he knows or has heard the word before but was able to recall the English quicker since this was in the more active linguistic phase.

Finally, we can conclude that language can be a tool not only for communication but also for social and racial discrimination by dominant hegemonic groups. It should never be seen in a static purist state but rather as a dynamic, ever changing and evolving form of communication, representative of its historical relationship. The Chicano dialect in its richness and diversity must be seen as a natural phenomenon of a bilingual/bicultural person, one that projects itself in a multi-lingual and universal plane.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Aurelio M. Espinosa, "Studies in New Mexican Spanish," *Revue de Dialectologie Romance*, 1909-1415.

² This writer can attest to the negative attitudes of Anglo Spanish teachers of the 50's in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, not only was the Chicano student made to feel inferior but he was punished in Physical Education for using Spanish.

³ Fray Juan de Pineda, "Agricultura Cristiana," dialogo XXII: "Munchos bastardos...florecían por los discursos de los tiempos."

⁴ The original form in Latin was *sumos*, the intermediate evolved form was *semos* while the modern form currently is *somos*. This can be found in Ramón de la Cruz' *La presumida burlada* while *Háyamos* can be found in old *El Romance de Virgilio*.

⁵ See Carlos Martínez Vigil, *Arcaísmos españoles usados en América*, Montivideo (no date).

⁶ The early dictionaries created by Spanish friars were replete with inaccuracies. For an up to date reference work, see Santamaria's *Diccionario de Mexicanismos*. See also Juan Luna Cárdenas, *Tratado de etimologías de la lengua Aztékatl*, Mexico, 1950.

⁷ Other countries have the following labels: Portugal--*caláo*; Chile--*coa*; Brazil--*círia*; Argentina--*lunfardo*; Perú--*replana*.

⁸ Arnoldo Carlos Vento, "Estudio etimológico: una perspectiva socio-lingüística e histórica del habla Chicano," *Work, Family, Sex Roles, Language* (Berkeley, Quinto Sol/Tonatiuh, 1980), pp. 196-207.

⁹ Arnoldo Carlos Vento, "Estudio etimológico...p. 197.