

I didn't write this for you!

## Using Translanguaging in Pages and in the Classroom

by Elena Foulis

In 2023, the Pew Research Center published information about how Latinas/os/es in the United States view Spanish language in their lives.<sup>1</sup> The study found that Latinas/os/es commonly use Spanglish—understood as the practice of using words from both Spanish and English interchangeably in speech and writing. The study also found that Latinas/os/es often experience ridicule and shame<sup>2</sup> for not speaking Spanish, and people wrongfully associate their ability to speak Spanish as a measure of Latinidad. These findings, although not surprising, are very troubling to a generation that fights for inclusivity and antiracism and to erase social inequities. Yet it is important to consider how assimilation and the pressure to fit in prevent and have prevented many Latine generations from using and speaking Spanish. Despite studies and recovery efforts that point to the origins of Spanish as an American language (Lozano 2018, Baeza et al. 2019, Gruesz 2020) Spanish in the U.S. has always been seen by the media and within educational systems as foreign, as other. Whether Spanish has been removed or denied in educational practices that demand English-only in schools as scholars have noted (Valdés 1996, Zentella 1997, Santa Ana 2004, Delgado Bernal, Alemán 2017, and Dávila-Montes et al. 2019), or whether people have been discriminated against for speaking Spanish in public (Zentella 2004), language inclusiveness in the U.S. has shown us that speaking Spanish or languages other than English is linked to otherness. In this article, I analyze poetry collections by Eddie Vega, the poet laureate of San Antonio, *Chicharra Chorus* (2019) and *Asina is How We Talk: A Collection of Tejano Poetry Written En La Lengua de La Gente* (2023), as works that disrupt standard language ideologies of English and Spanish by using translanguaging in his poetry to represent and uplift the Latina/o/e community's local cultural and linguistic practices.

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About the image: Excerpt from Eddie Vega's poem, "I didn't write this poem for you," (2019, 76), illustrated by Lisa Rathje.

Too often those who speak Spanish in the U.S. have experienced scrutiny and profiling, regularly linked with ideas of citizenship and belonging. John Baugh offers a description of linguistic profiling as when someone “make[s] inferences about the speech they hear, and then they act upon those inferences by denying goods or services to the speaker based on negative stereotypes about her or his speech” (65). While he is primarily talking about (standard) English speakers, those who speak languages other than English are always and already perceived as unbelonging. Furthermore, Mena and García (2021) use “converse racialization” to define an “on-going constitution as the social and political norm that maintains the domination of minoritized groups.” When applied to stigmatized groups such as speakers of Spanish in the U.S., educational institutions and educators can fall into the trap of erasing the experiences of these groups and end up creating, as the authors emphasize “a re-racialization that becomes more acceptable or less subversive from a historically legitimated institutional positionality” (348-49). While their study focuses on one university in the Rio Grande Valley, we can extend this to many other institutional contexts, including our K-12 system, that seek to avoid discussing how U.S. Latinas/os/es have been subject to oppressive measures to erase their language practices. This process can take a variety of forms, from encouragement to adopt a “better,” more privileged variety of Spanish to forgetting Spanish and speaking English only. Using the theoretical framework of soft linguistic terrorism, Mena (2023) assertively and compellingly illustrates that although U.S. Spanish speakers are no longer being physically or verbally punished for using their language, instead they are incentivized to adopt a “standard” Spanish to compete in a global economy. Problematically, this ideologically serves to recruit them to assert English dominance and/or accept Spanish “correctness,” often from a linguistic variety that comes from elsewhere, not their own local communities.

As we can see, the problem is not only about the language that is spoken but also who speaks it and hears it. Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa identify this as raciolinguistic ideologies (2015), which “produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white subjects” (150). As such, to understand how U.S. Spanish speakers<sup>3</sup> are racialized within a raciolinguistic perspective is “to understand how the white gaze is attached both to a speaking subject who engages in the idealized linguistic practices of whiteness and to a listening subject who hears and interprets the linguistic practices of language-minoritized populations as deviant based on their racial positioning in society as opposed to any objective characteristics of their language use” (150-51). For U.S. Spanish speakers, in addition to being objects of the white gaze, educators unfamiliar with U.S. Spanish or holding language ideologies of standard<sup>4</sup> Spanish (García and Solorza 2020) often create learning environments that further stigmatize U.S. Latinas/os/es’ linguistic practices, including those of their entire families and local communities. Even well-meaning educators who acknowledge the value of students’ home and community language practices (Alim 2010) often fall into the trap of devaluing a speaker’s usage. For example, an educator saying that a student’s Spanish is “inappropriate in academia or professional environments naturalizes the unequal treatment of language varieties and their speakers by disguising linguistic prescription as ‘innocent’ description” (Leeman 2005, 38). As a Latina scholar who is bilingual, an educator and mother of two U.S. Spanish speakers, I often reflect on the ways I became aware of my own linguist prejudice as a norteña fronteriza who grew up hearing and repeating that those on the U.S. side of the border did not speak Spanish properly, that they somehow spoke a broken Spanish, not correct Mexican Spanish. I also tell my students how my Mexican Spanish is full of derogatory expressions, which sometimes appear in my mind, and I

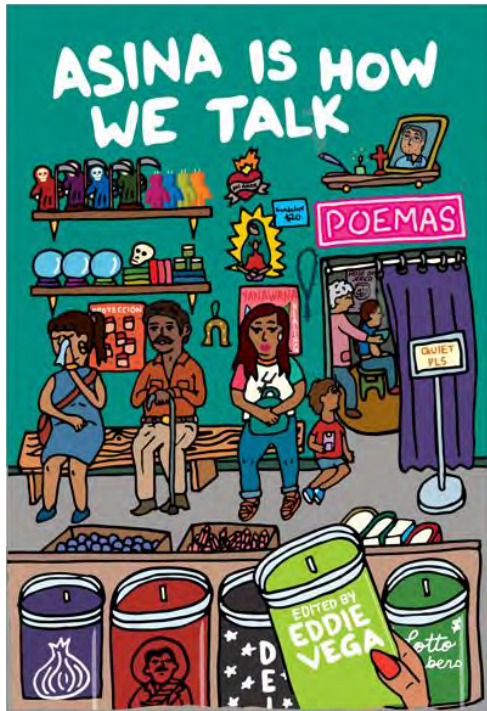
find myself erasing them from my own language practices, while fully aware that many Mexican Spanish speakers continue to use them and defend them as innocent expressions. These expressions are never innocent if they harm others individually and/or collectively.

In a class I teach focused on the Latina/o/e experiences of growing up bilingual and biliterate, we use the book *Words Were All We Had: Becoming Biliterate Against All Odds* (Reyes et al. 2011) to learn about the experiences of Latines in the 50s and 60s in U.S. schools. In this collection of essays, we learn from experiences in different states and authors from different backgrounds. Although it is illuminating to read about how they navigated policies and school culture that often saw them as “less than” for being Latina/o/e and for speaking Spanish, we also read about their resilience and tenacity in keeping their language and, as the book notes, becoming biliterate and bilingual against all odds. Importantly, these authors’ experiences are not far removed from those of my students. Many of the students, mostly Latine, in my classes have heard these stories in their own families and faced similar challenges. Indeed, the colonial legacy of English in U.S. society has resulted in language loss, and devaluing people’s language practices has affected generations for centuries (Cohen 1974, Fairclough 1989). In the U.S., Anglo norms continue to inflict linguistic violence and racism that insist on devaluing BIPOC communities’ identities and language and cultural practices.

The poems that I analyze here reclaim language practices of bilingual communities that assert their bicultural and biliterate ways of knowing and being. More specifically, the poems use translanguaging. García and Otheguy describe translanguaging as a practice that:

...interrogates named languages, pointing to an answer that includes their being constructed by nation-states as a tool for the domination of language minoritized communities. The named language tool excludes these communities from social, political and economic opportunities by authorizing, legitimating, naturalizing and opening paths only to those who speak what is constructed as the common, autonomous and whole, national language. (2020, 25)

Certainly, the use of translanguaging in Eddie Vega’s poetry collections intentionally interrupts dominant monolingual sensibilities, while at the same time demonstrating mastery of languages in their bilingual wordplay. In the foreword of Vega’s edited collection, *Asina is How We Talk: A Collection of Tejano Poetry Written En La Lengua de La Gente*, Carmen Tafolla, an educator and poet herself, writes, “*Asina is How We Talk* is an instrument of cultural survival, pride, and understanding, and a celebration of a dynamic translanguaging that brings laughter, growth, and healing. More importantly, it is a reflection of who we are, because *Asina* IS how we talk!” (xv) Indeed, language is central to identity. Yet it was often taken from our communities and in educational institutions so that Latinas/os/es spoke one way at home and another in school. Those of us who are educators can engage in critical language awareness, understood to be a critical pedagogy practice that must be “locally situated and constantly negotiated” (Alim 2010, 213) to reclaim the language as spoken by many of our Latina/o/e bilingual students and their communities—one that mixes español and inglés as a reflection of the history and resilience of this community. Although *Asina* represents bilingual practices in the South Texas region, language mixing happens in border regions and among immigrant populations everywhere because language



is dynamic and integral to cross-cultural understanding and necessary for economic, social, political, and everyday life. In my review of this collection, I write that:

*Asina* represents what many of us are doing with our Latina/o/e students in the classroom, whether in K-12 or college: We want to provide curriculum that is culturally and linguistically relevant and that problematizes the way mainstream culture has commodified and sometimes censored our community’s way of speaking. As educators, we want students to feel validated in their use of U.S. Spanish—which is diverse, rich, and an American language—and speak freely using their full linguistic repertoire, which includes allowing translanguaging in the classroom. As importantly in *Asina*, neither words in English nor Spanish are italicized, which signals the fluidity of uninterrupted language and the often otherized marking of languages that are not English. (2023, 68)

Ochoa in her analysis of Mexican and Mexican American women’s resistance and collaboration in Los Angeles County’s La Puente community notes that, “In a white supremacist society where emphasis is placed on assimilating to Anglo norms, practices, and values, claiming an identity, maintaining one’s language, and affirming one’s culture are all individual acts of resistance” (1999, 4). In this sense using translanguaging becomes a tool that disrupts ideas of correctness or standard language practices. Crucially, Eddie Vega, through his poetry, opens a valuable discussion of linguistic trauma as he questions and reclaims Spanish into his life and as a reflection of how Spanish in the U.S. is spoken. Yet he does not shy away from naming the community’s own complicity in ascribing and desiring linguistic practices they deem pure. In doing so, he calls for our own self-reflection on language ideologies that have continued to inflict soft linguistic terrorism by expressing shame of our own language varieties. Indeed, in Vega’s use of translanguaging in his poetry, he “incorporates an understanding of how different modes, including our bodies, our gestures, our lives, etc., add to the semiotic meaning-making repertoire that is involved in the act of communication” (García and Otheguy, 24), which makes his poetry, an inherently performative creative exercise, able to embody language in the pages we read and in the classroom as we discuss and analyze its meaning.

In Vega’s *Chicharra Chorus* (2019), his first full-length poetry collection, his poem “Don Emiliano” tells the story of coming and going to Mexico, of reconnecting with his family, and of time spent with Don Emiliano, an Indigenous man who had valiantly rescued his wife and daughter from Chiapas after a volcano erupted. Through storytelling, he begins to understand a complicated relationship between belonging and unbelonging and of deep-seated colonial ideals that exist in this town, in his childhood memories.

The last two stanzas illustrate a moment of deep self-reflection that, in my view, invite the reader to think about the ways our own language practices have oppressed others. He writes:

I am not sure if he was telling me a story  
Or teaching me a lesson  
I have not since referred to anyone as “indio”  
I have trouble with “indian” too

I look in the mirror for non-European features  
My skin got darker the longer I stayed in Mexico  
I contemplate the parts of my self  
That I have been denying (2019, 33)

Vega, fully aware of how Spanish occupies a nonprivileged position in the U.S., points out how Spanish, too, can be used to oppress others who have often been excluded from dominant discourse, such as women and Indigenous communities. Yet through his poem and his exploration of the colonized mind and body, we witness how he deconstructs and constructs his racialized identity by focusing on the features of his complexion that speak of whiteness and the ones that highlight his, likely, Indigenous ancestry. An important poem for comparison here is Nicolás Guillén’s “Baladas de los dos abuelos,”<sup>5</sup> in which Guillén takes us through his white and Black lineage as he embodies both.

It is clear that Vega uses his bilingual and bicultural identity to assert his right to write using his full linguistic repertoire. In his poem, “I didn’t write this poem for you,” in the same collection, Vega reclaims the freedom to navigate between languages and the right to let the poem be written in the language that is created. In the first two stanzas Vega writes:

I was at the workshop  
Cuando les leí mi poesía  
A poem sprinkled with words in Spanish  
Like chili powder on fresh fruit slices of my English  
They said, “maybe you should translate more of your words  
Because not everyone can understand what you are saying.”

So I told them  
I didn’t write this poem  
For you  
So don’t ask me to change it  
For you (2019, 76)

In its content, Vega recovers and emphasizes the use of Spanish and translanguaging as an inherent feature of Tejano speech and culture, as one that does not need to adapt to a monolingual audience. Indeed, language is part of a person’s identity, and linguistic practices do more than just demonstrate bilingual or multilingual ability. They are attached to local cultural systems, regional variations of language, and in Vega’s poem, U.S. Spanish in Texas. However, reclaiming the right to translanguar in creative writing here, serves as vehicle to revisit the author’s parents’ generation

who experienced educational environments that denied them the right to speak Spanish as the poem shows:

I wrote it for my mom  
And her generation, punished in school  
Made to kneel in corners  
Their mouths washed out with soap  
For speaking their mothers' tongue (2019, 76)

And Vega's own growing up language journey includes shame for having kinship with the people in his school—janitors and lunch ladies—because the cool kids simply did not do that, as well as experiences of his own children, who struggle to learn Spanish and blame him for it. The poem is filled with popular cultural references like *El chavo del ocho*, Tejana singer Selena's songs, and social and political concerns that affect the Mexican and Mexican American communities such as Hollywood typecasting of Latino/a/e actors, border patrols, and the 43 disappeared and murdered students from Ayotzinapa, Mexico, signaling transborder sensitivities of pain and solidarity. The last two stanzas also critically address that speaking English does not guarantee acceptance because, as Rosa and Nelson contend, language and those who speak it have already been racialized. More specifically, they say, "raciolinguistic ideologies produce racialized speaking subjects who are constructed as linguistically deviant even when engaging in linguistic practices positioned as normative or innovative when produced by privileged white subjects" (2015, 150). Vega writes:

It's for anyone that's ever been laughed at for saying  
*Sangwich* or *liberry* or *picza* or  
Ever had their name butchered  
By some gringo that didn't even want to try  
Because there's no escoos for that

It's for being told to speak American  
On this soil  
Where we rolled tortillas  
Before we broke bread  
And there was a Santa Fe before a Plymouth Rock  
There was an El Paso before a Philadelphia  
There was a San Antonio before there was ever a Washington DC

And I did not write this poem for you!

I wrote it for me (2019, 78-9)

The poem's final verse reminds us that poets, as much as those who engage in translanguaging, have the right to write in the way that is most organic to them.



San Antonio mayor puts a medal on Eddie Vega during his investiture as San Antonio poet laureate, April 2024. Photo courtesy City of San Antonio - Department of Arts & Culture.

Vega's edited collection, *Asina is How We Talk: A Collection of Tejano Poetry Written En La Lengua de La Gente*, brings together local South Texas talent to write in the local language, often using code switching in more than one way. He says, "I offer this collection of poetry as a celebration of the pocho, mocho, Spanglish, Tejano, Tex-Mex lengua that the gente actually speaks" (xvii). Although the mixing of language is not new, its acceptance in the contemporary context has been difficult and slow moving, for many of the reasons addressed earlier in this article. Yet using this collection in the classroom integrates culturally responsive learning and teaching environments (Ladson-Billings 2021) by incorporating texts that speak of students' experiences and those of their families. Doing so is crucial to creating a classroom that is culturally and linguistically sustaining (Paris and Alim 2017) while pushing for language inclusion, dismantling ideas of privilege and prestige in Tejano Spanish, or U.S. Spanish. When we teach this collection, it will be important to unpack how the poems found here write about belonging and placemaking in their accounts of everyday life. For example, how much do the descriptions of local stores, food practices, music, and landmarks invite the reader to connect and/or explore Tejana/o/e identity? Vega's own poem in this collection plays with the smells and sounds that document his life in San Antonio. For example, in "Y Empieza La Cumbia," Vega takes us to his visit to the grocery store to capture the unique experience of visiting a Latino supermarket. He writes:

It doesn't matter  
It can be lunes o martes  
Sábado o a veces en el Sunday

Pero cada vez que entro al  
Culebra Meat Market

N'ombre pos,  
Empieza la cumbia!

Pero for real  
Se abren las puertas  
I walk in  
Y puro menea de mis hips  
Y mis hands go up  
Como asina (2022,10)

The poem offers an opportunity not only to decipher the Spanish words included but also the musical rhythms he describes. Overall, this collection is validation of linguistic practices and the embodiment of *júbilo desafiante*, the unapologetic expression of joy despite hardships.

If we are committed to linguistic transformation and decolonial practices in education, we must center authors and content that privilege the experiences of minoritized communities, as they express it and write it. Exploring the experience of *Latinidad* in the classroom invites us to discover the complexity of a community that is often considered unidimensional. This is far from true. Our experiences are marked by colonization, immigration, racial difference, and often the forceful erasure of our languages. Yet by building brave spaces of learning and engaging in diverse perspectives we can help our students see themselves in the texts we choose to study and expand their understanding of communities different from their own. In doing so, we provide them with the tools to face and confront social inequities and injustices in our world.

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## Suggested Reading for Educators

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-ethnicity/2023/09/20/latinos-views-of-and-experiences-with-the-spanish-language>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/09/20/latinos-in-us-spanish-language-skills-identity/70868753007>
- <sup>3</sup> I use U.S Spanish speaker specifically to refer to those who speak the language variety of U.S. Spanish, which can include borrowings from English, Spanglish, code switching, and translanguaging. Indeed, U.S. Spanish is often spoken by bilingual speakers.
- <sup>4</sup> Standard Spanish refers to a language register in speaking and writing that is academic, schooled, and also used by those of upper social classes. For some, it also signals prescriptivist language ideologies of what is correct or incorrect use, which often implies that language is “pure.” In the U.S., Spanish does not hold the same privilege as Spanish spoken elsewhere, such as Mexico, Spain, and other countries where Spanish is the most spoken language.
- <sup>5</sup> See full poem here: [https://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/escritores/guillen/poemas/poema\\_11.htm](https://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/escritores/guillen/poemas/poema_11.htm).

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