

## Language and Empire: A Conversation with Ilan Stavans

VERÓNICA ALBIN

**Verónica Albin: Are words neutral?**

Ilan Stavans: Language obviously, isn't an empty bank of conventionally-accepted sounds and graphs. It is infused with history. Each of the words at our disposal has undergone a series of permutations. A word's etymology only points to its roots. The permutations enable us to peel away the layers of meaning accumulated through time. Take "Bible," for instance: a designation we use for the sacred Jewish and Christian scriptures consisting of the Old and New Testaments. It comes from the Greek "*βιβλία*," that is, "the books." Upon being exposed to it, an Extraterrestrial wouldn't appreciate the accrued meanings. How did a classical term—not Aramaic, not Hebrew, not even Latin—become the most influential term in the world?

**VA: You've been quite a controversial figure in the study of language. Are you a linguist by training?**

IS: No, but neither were Antonio de Nebrija nor Andrés Bello. Being an amateur allows for enormous freedom.

**VA: Have your studies in the history of language turned you into a linguist, though?**

IS: I prefer the word "philologist." Like the word "humanist," it has unfortunately gone out of use; in American English, at least. But it is closer in spirit to the approach I believe one needs to take to understand language.

**VA: How would you describe that approach?**

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IS: An all-encompassing one. If language is history, one needs to use whatever tool is available to appreciate it: sociology, philosophy, science, anthropology, religion, lexicography, politics, literature...

**VA: What does a philologist do?**

IS: Philology is the study of language in all its possibilities. In other words, the study of culture.

**VA: But should a philologist studying an emerging way of communication also translate a work of literature into it, as you did in rendering the first chapter of *Don Quixote of La Mancha* into Spanglish?**

IS: It is a mistake to hide behind the coldness of the scientific method. The scientist tackles a phenomenon from the outside, uncommittedly. How could that succeed when language is everything—our speech, our dreams, our ideology, the food we eat, the fashions we embrace, etc.? A philologist cannot look at language from a distance. He needs to get his hands dirty. His explorations are forms of advocacy.

**VA: Does it bother you to be the target of animosity? The reaction to your reflections on Spanglish has generated a world-wide debate.**

IS: Academics love to build self-enclosed turfs through obscure, obstructing jargon. It's nonsense. Ludwig Wittgenstein said it best in 1922, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: "What can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent." By the way, I believe silence should also be an area of study for linguists. It is an essential aspect of communication.

**VA: You've also perfected the genre of the interview... *Dominical*, the Sunday supplement of *El Mundo* in Spain, called you "*un comunicador nato*." Do you have any idea how many media Q&A you've done in radio, TV, and newspapers?**

IS: Several dozen, perhaps over a hundred.

**VA: I gather you've been thinking about language since childhood. When did you begin studying it in a more systematic way?**

IS: The moment I emigrated to the United States in 1985, I became fascinated with the topic of translation. About a decade later, I embarked on an exploration of the twists and turns of Spanglish. This led me to do sustained readings in linguistics, religion, and politics. I became interested in the development of Spanish, English,

French, Portuguese, and German as self-sufficient tongues and in their vicissitudes through time. How to explain their life cycles? To what extent did conquest and colonization change these languages? Lexicons became an obsession. What role do dictionaries play in their maturity? In regards to the transition from *castellano* to *español* to the Spanish spoken in the Americas, the work of Amado and Dámaso Alonso, Arturo Capdevila, Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Raimundo Lida, Ángel Rosenblatt, Fernando Ortíz, Fernando Lázaro Carreter, Rafael Lapesa, and Antonio Alatorre was invaluable. In retrospect, I see what I've done as simply connecting the dots.

**VA: Is Spanglish a language in formation?**

IS: It has been moving from the purely oral to the written realm. There are novels, poems, stories, essays available in it already. These include Ana Lydia Vega's "Pollito Chicken," Giannina Braschi's *Yo-Yo Boing*, María Eugenia Morales's "T'was the Night," Felipe Alfau's *Chronos*, Cecilio García-Camarillo's *Talking to the Río Grande*, and Suzanne G. Chávez-Silverman's *Killer Crónicas*, as well as the music of Juan Luis Guerra, Café Tacuba, and Cypress Hill. People are looking into a standard orthographic spelling, even for a systematic syntax. But Spanglish is also something else: a state of mind. It allows us an opportunity to appreciate the creation of a new minority culture in the United States. As the discovery of new galaxies allowed astronomers to better understand the secrets of our universe.

**VA: Yet Spanglish has often been seen as a bastardization of the language of Castile, an inferior mode of communication, a 'restricted' code of the impoverished classes. You have brought this construct under attack, remarking on its richness.**

IS: Why shouldn't the zest and improvisational drive of Spanglish-speakers be applauded? Who establishes the parameters of richness and poverty in language? When I come across a fluent Spanglish-speaker, I'm in awe at the versatility of the language. It seems not to know any barriers.

**VA: In your introductory essay in *Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language*, which includes your explorations on the hybrid tongue (you refer to it as "la jerga loca"), a lexicon of approximately 6,000 terms, and your translation of *Don Quixote*, you mention that academicians are allergic to it. They itch and scratch and dismiss it as a nuisance.**

IS: Academics are eager to defend against all odds the security of their tenured

positions. They also pride themselves as educated. For them to get involved with the lower strata is a waste of time, a nuisance. More than once I've come across a linguist whose research involved exposure to a Spanglish-speaker. What does he do? He registers in a comfortable hotel. Once a day he spends a couple of hours in *La Losaida*, as the Lower East Side is known among Spanglish-speakers, then dines at an elegant restaurant. He shapes his paper in the isolation of his office in an Ivory Tower institution.

**VA: Octavio Paz claimed: "Spanglish is neither good nor bad. It's abominable."**

IS: Paz was utterly blind to the reality of Latino culture in the United States. The first chapter of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* is nothing short of embarrassing. It is ironic that so enlightened an intellectual should be so blind to a crucial aspect of *la mexicanidad*. Paz isn't the only antagonist, though. The list of Latin American intellectuals who have gone on record against it is long. In fact, during the *III Congreso Internacional de la Lengua Española*, celebrated in Rosario, Argentina, in 2004, whose theme was linguistic identity and globalization, José Saramago, Nobel Laureate from Portugal—a non Spanish-speaking country—stated that he hated Spanglish because it threatened to dilute the language of Cervantes into a broth that is fifty percent English and fifty percent Spanish. Saramago's equation is wrong, of course: Spanglish is never a 50/50 brew. In any case, I'm not surprised.

**VA: Why?**

IS: There is a sense in Latin America, and it obviously reaches as far as Portugal, that nothing good or worthwhile will come out of Hispanic culture in the United States.

**VA: Is this due to the construct of *rascuachismo*?**

IS: *Rascuachismo* is an esthetic of the dispossessed; it suits Spanglish to the dot. If Saramago and others who embrace a Marxist ideology paid closer attention to its social origins, they would embrace it wholeheartedly.

**VA: Is there an agenda on your part in endorsing Spanglish?**

IS: What kind of agenda?

**VA: By subverting the academicians' opinion of Spanglish being nothing more than a *jerga rascuache*, by transforming it from an unacceptable mode of speech to one that is hip, and interesting, and valuable, and worth studying you're also pushing for a**

**reconsideration of Latino identity in general, right?**

IS: Sure. There is nothing wrong with Spanglish. It is a legitimate form of speech. English is the only ticket to success in the United States. Every Latino needs to be fluent in it. But not at the expense of Spanglish. Why can't the two—or better, the three, for Spanish forms the triptych—coexist?

**VA: Doesn't this benefit you?**

IS: How so? To be honest, there are days when I tire of talking about Spanglish—not *in* Spanglish but *about* it. But then I recognize my role as agitator, with which I'm comfortable. Don Francisco, the host of the Univisión variety show *Sábado Gigante*, once introduced me as “the destroyer of the Spanish language.” He, needless to say, meant it as a joke, for he and his audience are fluent in it. Imagine what would happen if a single individual had, at the tip of his fingers, the power to unravel an entire language!

**VA: Some have also described you in *The New York Times* as an assimilationist, even branded you as an “Uncle Tom.”**

IS: *El Tío Tom*... I'm not making myself clear to them. Actually, I embrace the opposite principle: resistance through language. I often think of Jean Anouilh's version of Sophocles's *Antigone*, staged in Paris in 1944. His mission wasn't to stage a Greek tragedy as much as it was to incite his countrymen to rebel against the Nazi usurpers.

**VA: Should Latinos actively rebel against Americans, then?**

IS: Rebellion is most successful when it is subtle.

**VA: What does your friend Richard Rodríguez, author of *Hunger for Memory*, think of Spanglish?**

IS: I don't think it sparks his mind. He's mostly interested in miscegenation.

**VA: *Tu ¿at extent can an Spanish orthografy bi uzd tu reprizent English?***

IS: This movement is sheer folly. Although it was born in England in the 1950s when Mont Follik, a professor of comparative philology at the University of Manchester in his capacity as a Labour MP promoted a Spanish-based spelling system he had devised in the 1930s, it is currently kept alive by a bunch of *gringos* who argue that since the English language has an almost inscrutable orthography, and who posit that since a number of states in the Union will soon follow the route of California and

Texas—i.e., they will have a white minority and a multiethnic majority—propose teaching English to all—Latinos and Anglos—using the phonetic spelling of Spanglish. This emphatically leads to the threat of the browning of America, which makes Conservatives go wild.

**VA: If Spanglish is still in formation, without its own syntax, what are your morphological parameters?**

IS: I tackle the issue in a *nota bene* in *Spanglish*. In seeking to reflect the polyphonic and polymorphic nature of the tongue, I used elements from Nuyorrican, Dominicanis, Cubonics, Chicano Spanglish, and other varieties. Mine is a middle-ground.

**VA: The effort is... well, Quixotic. Are you also hoping to update the lexicon?**

IS: Since the book appeared in 2003, I've been accumulating more entries. I have close to 2,000 already. My intention is to one day create an Internet lexicon.

**VA: Ah, that Palm Pilot vademecum you've talked about, where one might envision rapid access to the latest meaning of a word. The Internet is certainly a much more flexible medium than the printed word.**

IS: It is also more democratic. I'd like to invite Spanglish-speakers to offer fresh terms.

**VA: It could be maddening...**

IS: Every entry in *Spanglish* was rigorously checked. At least three occurrences needed to be recorded. And the spelling, when possible, was standardized by means of discussion with colleagues. The same approach would need to be taken in the Internet version.

**VA: You've been primarily concerned with Spanish in the United States. In the article "Giving Spanish Its Due," published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, about the responsibility of Spanish departments to teach undergraduates using an interdisciplinary approach, you wonder: "Is Spanish a foreign language in the United States?"**

IS: It is the most often-taught language on American campuses after English, often superseding in the amount of students the combined enrollment totals for French, Russian, German, Italian, Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. This isn't a quantitative issue but a historical one. Spanish is a fixture in the Southwestern territories of what is the

United States today since the colonial period. It might have been eclipsed in certain periods but it never lost its gravitas. And the demographic explosion of Latinos makes it the nation's "official second language."

**VA: You've also referred to "el español en América" not as a unity but as a plurality.**

IS: The astonishing complexity of the Latino minority can't be ignored. Before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in 1848 at the end of the Mexican-American War, the Spanish spoken by Iberian explorers, missionaries, and *adelantados* metamorphosed into the type used in northern Mexico. But there were self-sufficient exceptions: *el español novomexicano* (or *nuevomexicano*), for instance; the idiosyncratic form used by Californios, some Chileans, others Mexican; etc. At the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, that type was dramatically enriched by exiled communities such as Cubans in Key West and Puerto Rican *tabaqueros* in New York. Over time, Dominican, Colombian, Ecuadorian, and Salvadorian vernaculars, to name just some, were added to the stew. Within each of these national subgroups, there are also lexical variants. The result is a delightfully aromatic *pozole*. What kind of Spanish is used by Don Francisco? Is it the same heard on Spanish-language national radio? Yes, nowhere in the globe (and perhaps at no other time in human history) has the language of Antonio de Nebrija been at a more decisive crossroads.

**VA: Reporters in particular see this crossroad as perilous. Is Spanish in danger in the United States?**

IS: News of its demise go back at least to the Spanish-American War of 1898. For instance, Rubén Darío, the Nicaraguan *modernista*, believed *el inglés* would ultimately take over. Here is his "Los cisnes" of 1905:

¿Seremos entregados a los bárbaros fieros?  
 ¿Tantos millones de hombres hablaremos inglés?  
 ¿Ya no hay nobles hidalgos ni bravos caballeros?  
 ¿Callaremos ahora para llorar después?

Also in 1905, Darío wrote a poem shortly after making a comparison between the Anglo and Hispanic Americas. It is called "To Roosevelt."

*Mas la América nuestra, que tenía poetas  
 desde los viejos tiempos de Netzalhuacóyotl,  
 que ha guardado las huellas de los pies del gran Baco,*

que el alfabeto pánico en un tiempo aprendió;  
 que consultó los astros, que conoció la Atlántida,  
 cuyo nombre nos llega resonando en Platón,  
 que desde los remotos momentos de su vida  
 vive de luz, de fuego, de perfume, de amor,  
 la América del gran Moctezuma, del Inca,  
 la América fragante de Cristóbal Colón,  
 la América católica, la América española,  
 la América en que dijo el noble Guatémoc:  
 “Yo estoy en un lecho de rosas”; esa América  
 Que tiembla de huracanes y que vive de Amor,  
 Hombres de ojos sajones y alma bárbara, vive.  
 Y sueña. Y ama, y vibra; y es la hija del Sol.  
 Ten cuidado. Vive la América española!

**VA: So, should we worry?**

IS: Like any living organism, languages go through a life cycle: they are born out of necessity, spread as a result of invasion and colonial enterprise, undergo a series of mutations, and die when their speakers no longer have use for them. Spanish in the United States will last as long as it needs to—not a second more. Other immigrant languages have faced a similar destiny.

**VA: Is Spanish an immigrant language?**

IS: Yes and no. In so far as it was brought by newcomers from the Caribbean Basin, Latin America, and Spain, it certainly is. Ironically, to some extent it is also an aboriginal language in that prior to the Declaration of Independence in 1776 it was already in use in what is today the United States, from the Southwest to the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

**VA: In the forward to *Growing Up Latino: Memoirs and Stories*, you talk about the difference between *ser* and *estar*.**

IS: I echo Borges: “*El español es facilísimo*.” But I might add that it suffers from severe limitations, for instance, its reluctance to compound words. The nuances of “to be” in Spanish, on the other hand, are exquisite. Other languages are poorer on this front: Italian makes the same distinction in that it has *essere* and *stare*, but doesn’t exploit the nuances quite as richly as Spanish does; French is limited to *être* (etymologically

related to *estar*), which, interestingly, is conjugated in some grammatical persons like “*ser*” (“*Je suis un bouffon,*” “*nous sommes tant aimés,*” “*ils sont enfin libres.*”); Hebrew disregards the complication; as for Russian, it is even dryer, for it has no auxiliary verbs whatsoever: no “*ser*” and no “*estar.*” Russians say “I professor” or “I doctor,” but Russian does have an infinitive meaning (“to be a professor”) that makes use of the instrumental case for declensions: *profesorom, doktorom*. Mario Benedetti, the ideologically-engaged Uruguayan author, once wrote a poem about the dichotomy and how English-language users are imprisoned in a single form of the verb ‘to be.’ The poem, anti-American in tone, is called “*Ser y estar*”:

*Oh marine  
oh boy  
una de tus dificultades consiste en que no sabes  
distinguir el ser del estar  
para ti todo es to be*

*así que probemos a aclarar las cosas*

*por ejemplo  
una mujer es buena  
cuando entona desafinadamente los salmos  
y cada dos años cambia el refrigerador  
y envía mensualmente su perro al analista  
y sólo enfrenta el sexo los sábados de noche*

*en cambio una mujer está buena  
cuando la miras y pones los perplejos ojos en blanco  
y la imaginas y la imaginas  
y hasta crees que tomando un martini te vendrá el coraje  
pero ni así*

*por ejemplo  
un hombre es listo  
cuando obtiene millones por teléfono  
y evade la conciencia y los impuestos  
y abre una buena póliza de seguros*

*a cobrar cuando llegue a sus setenta  
y sea el momento de viajar en excursión a capri y a paris  
y consiga violar a la gioconda en pleno louvre  
con la vertiginosa polaroid*

*en cambio  
un hombre está listo  
cuando ustedes  
oh marine  
oh boy  
aparecen en el horizonte  
para inyectarle democracia.*

**VA: Do all languages have the same blueprint?**

IS: Think of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Romantic concoction introduced by Polish oculist and linguist Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof: *ĉspran'tō*. Although it was taught throughout the world, Esperanto never quite achieved the international recognition its inventor hoped for it. This is because artificial languages have their own metabolism; they aren't connected to the principal engine behind the communication effort. Let us not forget that language is the pull of a common memory based on tradition, literature, and national pride. Language is love of country. Languages are born out of necessity; they emerge when a group needs to distinguish itself, at the verbal level, from its surroundings. The need isn't enough, actually. The historical circumstances must be ripe. How did Old English evolve? What kind of break did a work like Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* create? Think of the development of Hittite, Phoenician, Babylonian, and Persian.

**VA: Why did some perish and others survive?**

IS: Languages are "exposed to the elements," so-to-speak. They are at the mercy of historical forces.

**VA: How about the death of a language?**

IS: When there is no longer a necessity for it, a language disappears. That is the pattern of Hittite, Babylonian, and Phoenician. They also fossilize, like Aramaic and Latin. And at times they also die abrupt deaths. Yiddish, for instance, almost vanished in 1945 in Auschwitz and other concentration camps under Adolf Hitler's machinery.

Another example of a language that faced death by edict is Spañolit, *aka* Ladino, when in 1492 the Jews who spoke it were expelled from Spain by Isabella. Yiddish has managed to stay alive (albeit barely) thanks to the diligent work of people like Aaron Lansky, founder of the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, and Spañolit is hanging on fragile spiderwebs thanks to Dr. Emese bain-Medgyesi, director of the *Europees Bureau voor Taalminderheden* (European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages) in Brussels, to Haïm Vidal Sephiha, founder of the *Vidas Largas Association* in Paris, and Aaron Koen, director of *La Autoridad Nasionala del Ladino* in Israel. But when language death is concerned, we must not forget the attempts of the Generalísimo Francisco Franco to eradicate Gallego, Aragonés, Euzkera, Catalán, Valenciano, Mallorquín... Tyranny, famine, expulsion, and massacres have a terrible effect on language. When reading about the bloodbath in Rwanda and Burundi, for instance, I cannot help but wonder if the Hutu and Tutsi tongues, with their common base in the Bantu branch of the Niger-Congo family, are likely to survive.

**VA: And Spanish?**

IS: The fall of the last Moorish stronghold, Boabdil's Granada, and the consolidation of the Spanish Empire at the hands of the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, brought forth a unified national spirit. It coalesced under a single banner: one state, one religion, one language. It also recognized Spanish as the *de facto* official language. From his *cátedra* at the University of Salamanca, Antonio de Nebrija, who once was Bishop of Ávila, is the spokesperson for the cause. "Language," he said in his prologue to the *Gramática castellana*, published in the *annus mirabilis* of Spanish history, "has always been the perfect instrument of empire." He added: "After Your Highness takes under her yoke many barbarian towns and nations with strange tongues, and with the conquering of them, they will need to receive the laws that the conqueror puts on the conquered and with those, our language." At the time Sebastián de Covarrubias's *Tesoro de la lengua española o castellana* is released, under the aegis of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, in 1611—in between part I and II of *Don Quixote*—he is ambivalent, even in the title, between the terms I mentioned before: "*castellano*" and "*español*." Which one to use? The ambivalence remains palpable today.

**VA: You've mentioned Nebrija and Bello. *ABC* in Madrid once described you as "our modern Nebrija."**

IS: As a Renaissance man, Antonio Martínez de Cala y Jarava, born in Lebrija (Seville) and known to the world as Antonio de Nebrija, was a true humanist. He

believed in language as a springboard (the “*scienza nuova*” is the denotation given by Gianbattista Vico) for the birth of a new man and a way to understand the universe as a whole. I would have loved to meet him. He was versed in Greek and Latin, the languages of erudition of his day and age. In addition to grammar, he was also committed to the study of theology, rhetoric, jurisprudence, history, medicine, and cosmogony. He believed Spanish to be “*obra de la providencia.*”

**VA: How about Andrés Bello?**

IS: The Venezuelan Bello was a polymath of the first order. His mind moved in several directions at once: linguistics, poetry, jurisprudence, history... He founded the Universidad de Chile and was its chancellor from 1843 to 1865. His reflections on Spanish are incisive. He published lucid studies in lexicography and proposed a series of emendations to Spanish-American orthography, most of which were rejected. His overall quest was to preserve the language as “*medio providencial de comunicación*” of the people in the Americas so that “*la confusión de idiomas, dialectos y jergonzas, el caos babilónico de la Edad Media*” could be avoided. To achieve his objective, he wrote the *Gramática de la lengua castellana destinada al uso de los americanos*. Pedro Henríquez Ureña thought highly of it. Almost four hundred years after Nebrija, he still understood Spanish to come from above, a gift from the Almighty.

**VA: In a much-quoted essay, “Translation and Identity,” you discuss the indigenous languages in the Americas. What kind of verbal landscape was there prior to 1492?**

IS: Spain was in the midst of its misnomered Golden Age, *el siglo de oro*, when Christopher Columbus arrived in San Salvador. The admiral sent a couple of his captains, Rodrigo de Escobedo and Rodrigo Sánchez de Segovia, with instructions to keep an eye out as they and others took possession of the island. About the indigenous peoples, the Genoese admiral wrote in his diary: “They must be good servants, and intelligent, for I can see that they quickly repeat everything said to them. I believe they would readily become Christians; it appeared to me that they have no religion.” Indeed, the Spanish language arrived *con fuerza* with the *conquistadores*. Like Hernán Cortés, the type of unsophisticated adventurer-cum-knight interested in making the voyage was from Extremadura. But let me answer your question from the subaltern’s perspective. In the Americas, around two hundred distinguishable codes of communication were in use, from from Aymara to Zapotec. In Mexico alone the linguistic variety was simply breathtaking. A list of aboriginal tongues includes Yumano, Chinanteco from Quiotepec, Chinanteco from Palantla, Chinanteco from

Lataní, Matlazincano, Zapoteco from Ixtlán, Mixteco, Amuzgo, Popoloca, Tepehua, Chol, Chontal from Tabasco, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, Jacalteco, Kanjoba, Pima, Papago, Yaqui, Cora, Huichol, Náhuatl, Purépecha, and Kikapu, to mention a few. The Iberian newcomers weren't interested in linguistic lushness, though. Their mission was to conquer and colonize. To accomplish their task, they brandished the sword and the cross. At first sight, the former might appear more powerful; in the long run, the latter probably had a longer-lasting impact.

**VA: Through *catequismo*?**

IS: *Catequismo* is a euphemism for spiritual and intellectual subjugation. It is the rationale behind the enterprise of *mestizaje*, i.e., the transculturation that resulted from the superimposition of Catholicism over the idolatrous religions of the pre-Columbian world. In retrospect, it can be argued that syncretism as a strategy is at the heart of the Hispanic-American experience. It is also what characterizes the vicissitudes of Spanish in the United States. The capacity to absorb from the environment, to recycle that absorption while mixing it with our ancestral views is a signature of our culture. Some describe this as the sign of colonialism. But colonialism isn't altogether negative; it offers resources to cope with hybrid times like ours.

**VA: On the other hand, endorsing the native (though not always the nativist) viewpoint has been fashionable in Latin America.**

IS: Think of Augusto Roa Bastos, José María Arguedas, Humberto Ak'abal, María Sabina, Rigoberta Menchú... And prior to them, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *la Décima Musa*, who spoke of the magic and wisdom of the native peoples of Mexico.

*¿Qué mágicas infusiones  
de los indios herbolarios  
de mi patria, entre mis letras  
el hechizo derramaron?*

In Sor Juana's century, just as in ours, the Indian population has traditionally remained *ninguneada*. The English equivalent is "ignored" but "*ningunear*," an enchanting *mexicanismo*, is more idiosyncratic. Among the scholars of Indian literature is one I admire profusely and whose reputation in the United States is null: Fr. Ángel María Garibay. A priest and a *rara avis* in Mexican scholarship, Garibay is unjustly unknown in the United States, especially among Latinos. Dead in 1967 at the age of seventy-five, his erudition was of the highest order. Although he was a Hebraist and a

translator of Greek and Latin classics, his major contribution is to be found in his interest in pre-Columbian languages and literatures. He specialized in Náhuatl and focused on the oeuvre of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, the primary source of Aztec civilization. The contemporary thinker that most resembles him is his student, the remarkable Miguel León Portilla, author of the popular *The Vision of the Vanquished*. Garibay was brave, a quality frequently missing in intellectuals. For instance, he left us renditions of pre-Columbian erotica, such as this:

*Yo te vine a dar placer, florida vulva mía  
paladarcito inferior mío.  
Tengo gran deseo del Rey Axayacatito.  
Mira por favor mis cantaritos floridos,  
Mira por favor mis cantaritos floridos:  
¡son mis pechos!*

**VA: Why is “Spanish Golden Age” a misnomer?**

IS: Have you ever read José Vasconcelos’s *Breve historia de México*? It is built on a triptych of fallacies: it isn’t brief, nor is it a history; and it’s not about Mexico, really. The same ought to be said about *el siglo de oro español*: it lasted longer than a century; gold was an excuse for merciless abuses of power; and it wasn’t only about Spain and its citizens, but about a vast continent across the Atlantic sacked by the voraciousness of the Iberian enterprise. A golden age for whom? Not for the dwellers in the colonies, Jews and Muslims, women, children, the ill and unschooled. The year 1492 brought an end to *La Reconquista*. It also invited Spain to use language as an instrument of colonization. It isn’t unlike the use by the United States today of the media to accomplish the task. Rock, blues, jazz, Hollywood movies, fashion, fast food are all badges of empire. Likewise, Spanish was the conduit that allowed the Iberian Peninsula to force itself on the native population.

**VA: In the essay you discuss translation as a *modus vivendi* in Spain and the Americas in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.**

IS: Prior to the Expulsion Edict of 1492, urban centers like Toledo were emblems of cohabitation, *La Convivencia*. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Toledo was home to the *Escuela de Traductores* (established by King Alfonso the Wise), to which Judá ben Moses Hacoen, a doctor in charge of revising the *Tablas Alfonsinas* as well as translating *El libro conplido en los iudizios de las estrellas*, was affiliated. The *Escuela* also counted among its affiliates Ali Aben Rabel, also known as ‘don Abraham,’ a personal

physician to King Alfonso X, who translated Ibn Heithan; Isak ibn Sid, who compiled *Los libros del saber de astronomía del Rey Alonso* in Spanish; and Judá Mosca, who translated *Lapidario* by Aegidius de Thebaldis. In Granada today a statue in honor to Yehuda ibn Tibón, perhaps the most distinguished translator of the *Escuela*, stands proud. Spain has always been a cradle of languages and dialects. In addition, by the 15<sup>th</sup> century the educated crust of society was also fluent in Greek and Latin, and some had access to Aramaic and Hebrew. Overall, the period is known for its baroque inclinations. Borges described its style as verging on caricature. It certainly is one that emphasizes *las apariencias*, i.e., not reality but the expression of reality. The Spanish saying “*las apariencias engañan*” dates back to it. Think of Nebrija’s *Gramática* along with the *Comentarios reales* by the Inca Garcilaso, the *comedias* by Lope de Vega and *Las soledades* by Luis de Góngora. And, of course, Baltazar Gracián’s *Criticón*. Language was perceived as a veil. Translations, on the other hand, were tributes to the masters: Francisco de Quevedo pays homage to Torcuato Tasso by rewriting him. And Cervantes imagined his novel *Don Quixote* to be a loose translation from an Arabic manuscript by one Cide Hamete Benengeli.

**VA: Earlier in the conversation you mentioned the Bible. You’ve analyzed the various Spanish translations of the Bible used in the New World, from colonial times to the present.**

IS: The topic is perfect to understand the intricate relationship between translation and empire. An edict from the Holy Office of the Inquisition issued in Toledo in 1551 forbade the translation of the Bible into Spanish and other vernaculars. But demography sooner or later sets the pattern of culture. The first translation was actually commissioned by Alfonso X in 1260; it is known as the *Biblia Alfonsina* or *Española*. It is a paraphrase of the Vulgata. There are also the *Biblia de Alba*, preserved in the Biblioteca del Duque de Alba. And the *Biblia* of Alfonso V, translated from the Hebrew and Latin. The famous *Biblia* of Ferrara, Italy, appeared in 1553 translated from the Hebrew by two Portuguese Jews: Duarte Pinel (*aka* Abraham Usque) and Gerónimo de Vargas (Yom Tov Atias). In the latter, the syntax is strange; still, it is the principal source of dissemination of the Christian faith in the New World. There is also the so-called *Biblia del Oso* of 1569 and the rendition by Cipriano de Valera (1602). In other words, in spite of the edict, Spanish versions were made available. Furthermore, the history of those versions is an exercise in selective misreading: sexual scenes disappear, pagan references are attenuated, and the Jewishness of the text is made to justify the advent of Jesus Christ. Take the example of the *Biblia de Alba*.

Don Luis de Guzmán, Grand Master of the Order of Calatrava, commissioned it. He sought ‘*una biblia en rromañçe, glosada e ystoriada*,’ a Bible to be translated into *romance*. Its purpose, Guzmán claimed, would be to make available the Holy Scripture in the language of the uncultured masses. The edition was to have explanations, annotations, commentary, and illustrations. Who did de Guzmán commission it to? A rabbi by the name of Moses Arragel. In a long and tortured letter, he rabbi adamantly refused the commission, raising all sorts of objections. It was precisely the letter, fifteen chapters-worth of explanation, that convinced de Guzmán that Arragel was the right man for the job. Skeptics argue that the rabbi’s complaint was in fact an astute demonstration of his competence. In any case, Arragel refused the offer once, then agreed to the task. His translation was done in 1433 from the original Hebrew and Aramaic. It was funded by Pope John II. In his introduction (drafted after he completed the job), Arragel claims he is not about to criticize Christian beliefs, nor praise Jewish ones. Yet he makes a record of the egregious incisions done to the text in the past. For instance, he writes: “Since I have done no more than relate or record [*memorar*], everyone is left free to believe, dispute [*disputar*] and defend their law as much as they can.” But the rabbi did not shy away from pointing out ‘mistakes’ in his commentaries, such as the one proffered after the translation of *Exodus* 1:5: “*Seventy souls*. In Hebrew there are no more [than this]; but in the translation of St. Jerome there are ‘seventy-five’; and it is the same in the *Actus Apostolorum*, chapter seven; and Nicolau de Lira says that the law mentions the number twice, once saying seventy, and the next seventy five; but in the Hebrew there are only seventy in both instances.” The reprints of the *Biblia de Alba* often left out Arragel’s commentary. His own identity as a Jew was eclipsed. This sequence of abuses is proof that translation and manipulation have gone hand in hand.

**VA: Let’s explore more the crossroad of language and colonialism.**

IS: As empires sally forth, their languages undergo contamination. To be exposed to other cultures is to lend and borrow. Imperial languages become mechanisms of control. But they are also transformed from the inside. Again, let’s focus on Spanish. Its adventures on this side of the Atlantic Ocean might be seen as an attempt to breach the national borders, to explore other landscapes. But those explorations result in a weakening of the central linguistic core. To put it in other words, they expose the language to different influences. And those influences eventually shape its course. The Spanish of the Americas has indeed acquired its own characters, each modeled after a different natural and human climate. The variety of the River Plate is unique, as is

the one from Lima. Then there are the vernaculars Lunfardo and Cocoliche from Argentina (mainly from Buenos Aires) that incorporate Italian words; and there are creoles like Opita, Valluno and Rolo from Colombia. These are comparable to Cockney, Joual, Gaunersprach, Giria, Bargoens, Balibalán, Germanía, Hiant-Chang, and Gergo, among others.

**VA: Is Lunfardo like Spanglish?**

IS: To some extent. Borges was quite interested in Lunfardo. In fact, everything about the Argentine language fascinated him. Along with José Edmundo Clemente, he published a slim volume in 1968, *El lenguaje de Buenos Aires*, which includes his essays “*El idioma de los argentinos*,” “*Las alarmas del doctor Américo Castro*,” and a curious meditation, “*Las inscripciones en los carros*,” on the aphorisms found painted on Argentine automobiles. About Lunfardo Borges said: “... *es jerigonza ocultadiza de los ladrones. El lunfardo es un vocabulario gremial como tantos otros; es la tecnología de la furca y de la ganzúa.*” In other words, the language of crime and prostitution. The author of “The Aleph” argued that authentic Argentine poetry was to be found in the lyrics of tangos and milongas. But Lunfardo is the language of cant born in Argentina in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is defined by class. Spanglish is more multitudinous. It goes beyond a particular social group. It isn’t a mere vocabulary of displeasure and aggression.

**VA: You’ve accused the *Real Academia Española (RAE)* of maintaining a tight fist on the speakers of Spanish. You’ve also criticized the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española (DRAE)* as an instrument of repression.**

IS: The *RAE* is stuck in the past. Gabriel García Márquez, also one of its critics, once lost count of the time it takes for a word coined in Quito, Ecuador, to make it to the *DRAE*. Its members believe their 18<sup>th</sup>-century institution is responsible for safeguarding the Spanish language. Safeguarding it from what? Their motto is “*Limpia, fija y da esplendor*,” which—and I’m not the first to suggest it—sounds like a detergent commercial. There are approximately forty million people in Spain. The total number of Spanish-language speakers in the world is estimated at four hundred million. In Mexico alone there are over one hundred million. And the number of Latinos in the United States is over forty million. Why should Spain remain the central command? Shouldn’t a less centralized, more democratic approach to Cervantes’s language be devised? The affiliates of the *RAE* never act as independent units. They are extremities of the one in Madrid.

**VA: An empire always refuses to look at its colonies as equals.**

IS: Instead, it sees its own efforts at educating the colonials—*los bárbaros*—as philanthropic. Lately I've been reading about the paternalistic attitude of the British toward India. For instance, in 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay—later known as Lord Macaulay—addressed the question of what type of culture should the population of India be exposed to under British rule. Should the natives learn science in English? Today his response sounds like an endorsement of Conservatism. It reminds me of Saul Bellow's statement, in an Op-Ed piece published in *The New York Times* in 1988, at the height of the culture wars, in which he asked: "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans?" Similarly, Lord Macaulay argued: "All parties seem to be agreed on one point, that the dialects commonly spoken among the natives of this part of India, contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are, moreover, so poor and rude that, until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them. It seems to be admitted on all sides, that the intellectual improvement of those classes of the people who have the means of pursuing higher studies can at present be effected only by means of some language not vernacular amongst them. What then shall that language be? One-half of the Committee maintains that it should be the English. The other half strongly recommends the Arabic and Sanskrit. The whole question seems to me to be, which language is the best worth knowing?"

**VA: I assume Lord Macaulay chose English.**

IS: He was an honest man. "I have no knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic," he said. Lord Macaulay then goes on to justify the superiority of European civilization. "I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value," he added. "I have read translations of the most celebrated Arabic and Sanskrit works. I have conversed both here and at home with men distinguished by their proficiency in the Eastern tongues. I am quite ready to take the Oriental learning at the valuation of the Orientalists themselves. I have never found one among them who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia. The intrinsic superiority of the Western literature is, indeed, fully admitted by those members of the Committee who support the Oriental plan of education." Finally, Lord Macaulay stated: "It will hardly be disputed, I suppose, that the department of literature in which the Eastern writers stand highest is poetry. And I certainly never met with any Orientalist who ventured to maintain that the Arabic

and Sanskrit poetry could be compared to that of the great European nations. But when we pass from works of imagination to works in which facts are recorded, and general principles investigated, the superiority of the Europeans becomes absolutely immeasurable. It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say, that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgements used at preparatory schools in England. In every branch of physical or moral philosophy, the relative position of the two nations is nearly the same.”

**VA: I like his use of the word “relative.”**

IS: Lord Macaulay could be described as a relativist, even though his ideas are absolutist.

**VA: In sum, you don't see empire as evil, do you?**

IS: Empire is a synonym of progress. To be against it is to fall into an idealistic trap. There have always been, and will always be, colonizers and colonized. In linguistic terms, they push language to change. English is often described as the *lingua franca* of today. Yet as it reaches beyond its boundaries, it is undergoing dramatic transformations, giving room to spin-offs like Spanglish. It isn't improbable that one day these spin-offs will become imperial themselves. It is part of the same cycle.

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