

How would you feel if your teacher scolded you when you tried to tell her how to pronounce your name? That is the opening anecdote in Gloria Anzaldúa's linguistic analysis of Mexican American speech. Showing that the language of Chicanos and Chicanas differs not only from the speech of Anglos but from the speech of other Hispanic groups, Anzaldúa provides a detailed description of the history and significance of her mother tongue. Language is not simply an instrument for communication, she suggests, it is a sign of identity. "So if you really want to hurt me," Anzaldúa concludes, "talk badly about my language." Formerly a lecturer at the University of California, Santa Cruz, Gloria Anzaldúa is a writer and editor whose books include *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1983), *Haciendo Caras: Making Face/Making Soul* (1990), and *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), from which this selection is taken.

"We're going to have to control your tongue," the dentist says, pulling out all the metal from my mouth. Silver bits plop and tinkle into the basin. My mouth is a mother lode.

The dentist is cleaning out my roots. I get a whiff of the stench when I gasp. "I can't cap that tooth yet, you're still draining," he says.

"We're going to have to do something about your tongue," I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. "I've never seen anything as strong or as stubborn," he says. And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?

Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?

— RAY GWYN SMITH¹

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for "talking back" to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. "If you want to be American, speak 'American.' If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong."

"I want you to speak English. *Pa' hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si todavía hablas inglés con un 'accent,'*"² my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. At Pan American University, I and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents.

Attacks on one's form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. *El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua.*³ Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out.

1. Ray Gwyn Smith, *Moorland Is Cold Country*, unpublished book.

2. *Pa' hallar . . . con un 'accent.'* To find a good job you have to know how to speak English well. What good is all your education if you still speak English with an accent?—EDS.

3. *El Anglo . . . la lengua.* The Anglo with an innocent-looking face made us shut up. Translated literally: "pulled our tongues out."—EDS.

Overcoming the Tradition of Silence

*Ahogadas, escupimos el oscuro.
Peleano con nuestra propia sombra
el silencio nos sepulta.*⁴

En boca cerrada no entran moscas. "Flies don't enter a closed mouth" is a saying I kept hearing when I was child. *Ser habladora* was to be a gossip and a liar, to talk too much. *Muchachitas bien criadas*, well-bred girls don't answer back. *Es una falta de respeto*⁵ to talk back to one's mother or father. I remember one of the sins I'd recite to the priest in the confession box the few times I went to confession: talking back to my mother, *hablar pa' tras, repelar. Hocicona, repelona, chismosa*, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being *mal criada*.⁶ In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women—I've never heard them applied to men.

The first time I heard two women, a Puerto Rican and a Cuban, say the word "*nosotras*,"⁷ I was shocked. I had not known the word existed. Chicanas use *nosotras*⁸ whether we're male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse.

And our tongues have become
dry the wilderness has
dried out our tongues and
we have forgotten speech.

— IRENA KLEPFISZ⁹

Even our own people, other Spanish speakers *nos quieren poner candados en la boca*.¹⁰ They would hold us back with their bag of *reglas de academia*.¹¹

Oyé como ladra: el lenguaje de la frontera¹²

*Quien tiene boca se equivoca.*¹³

— MEXICAN SAYING

4. *Ahogadas, . . . nos sepulta.* Drowned, we spit in the dark. / Fighting with our own shadow / the silence buries us.—EDS.

5. *Es una falta de respeto* It's a lack of respect.—EDS.

6. *mal criada* Ill-bred.—EDS.

7. *nosotras* We, female form.—EDS.

8. *nosotros* We, male form.—EDS.

9. Irena Klepfisz, "Di rayze ahoyim / The Journey Home," in *The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology*, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz, eds. (Montpelier, VT: Sinister Wisdom Books, 1986), 49.

10. *nos quieren . . . en la boca.* They want us to put padlocks on our mouths.—EDS.

11. *reglas de academia* Academic rules.—EDS.

12. *Oyé . . . frontera* Listen how it barks: the language of the borderlands.—EDS.

13. *Quien . . . equivoca.* Whoever has a mouth makes mistakes.—EDS.

"*Pocho*, cultural traitor, you're speaking the oppressor's language by speaking English, you're ruining the Spanish language," I have been accused by various Latinos and Latinas. Chicano Spanish is considered by the purist and by most Latinos deficient, a mutilation of Spanish.

But Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. Change, *evolución*, *enriquecimiento de palabras nuevas por invención o adopción*¹⁴ have created variants of Chicano Spanish, *un nuevo lenguaje*. *Un lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir*.¹⁵ Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language.

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish or standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither *español ni inglés*,¹⁶ but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages.

Chicano Spanish sprang out of the Chicanos' need to identify ourselves as a distinct people. We needed a language with which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language. For some of us, language is a homeland closer than the Southwest—for many Chicanos today live in the Midwest and the East. And because we are a complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages. Some of the languages we speak are:

1. Standard English
2. Working class and slang English
3. Standard Spanish
4. Standard Mexican Spanish
5. North Mexican Spanish dialect
6. Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California have regional variations)
7. Tex-Mex
8. *Pachuco* (called *caló*)

My "home" tongues are the languages I speak with my sister and brothers, with my friends. They are the last five listed, with 6 and 7 being closest to my heart. From school, the media, and job situations, I've picked up standard and working-class English. From Mamagrande Locha and from reading Spanish and Mexican literature, I've picked up

14. *evolución*, . . . *adopción* Evolution, enrichment of new words by invention or adoption.—EDS.

15. *un nuevo . . . vivir*. A new language. A language that matches a way of living.—EDS.

16. *español ni inglés* Spanish nor English.—EDS.

Standard Spanish and Standard Mexican Spanish. From *los recién llegados*,¹⁷ Mexican immigrants, and *braceros*,¹⁸ I learned the North Mexican dialect. With Mexicans I'll try to speak either Standard Mexican Spanish or the North Mexican dialect. From my parents and Chicanos living in the Valley, I picked up Chicano Texas Spanish, and I speak it with my mom, younger brother (who married a Mexican and who rarely mixes Spanish with English), aunts, and older relatives.

With Chicanas from *Nuevo México* or *Arizona* I will speak Chicano Spanish a little, but often they don't understand what I'm saying. With most California Chicanas I speak entirely in English (unless I forget). When I first moved to San Francisco, I'd rattle off something in Spanish, unintentionally embarrassing them. Often it is only with another Chicana *tejana*¹⁹ that I can talk freely.

Words distorted by English are known as anglicisms or *pochismos*. The *pochito* is an anglicized Mexican or American of Mexican origin who speaks Spanish with an accent characteristic of North Americans and who distorts and reconstructs the language according to the influence of English.²⁰ Tex-Mex, or Spanglish, comes most naturally to me. I may switch back and forth from English to Spanish in the same sentence or in the same word. With my sister and my brother Nune and with Chicano *tejano* contemporaries I speak in Tex-Mex.

From kids and people my own age I picked up *Pachuco*. *Pachuco* (the language of the zoot suiters) is a language of rebellion, both against Standard Spanish and Standard English. It is a secret language. Adults of the culture and outsiders cannot understand it. It is made up of slang words from both English and Spanish. *Ruca* means girl or woman, *vato* means guy or dude, *chale* means no, *simón* means yes, *churro* is sure, talk is *periquiar*, *pigioneer* means petting, *que gacho* means how nerdy, *ponte águila* means watch out, death is called *la pelona*. Through lack of practice and not having others who can speak it, I've lost most of the *Pachuco* tongue.

Chicano Spanish

Chicanos, after 250 years of Spanish/Anglo colonization, have developed significant differences in the Spanish we speak. We collapse two adjacent vowels into a single syllable and sometimes shift the stress in certain words such as *maíz* / *maiz*, *cohete* / *cuete*. We leave out certain consonants when they appear between vowels: *lado* / *lao*, *mojado* / *mojao*.

17. *los recién llegados* The recently arrived.—EDS.

18. *braceros* Laborers.—EDS.

19. *tejana* Female Texan.—EDS.

20. R. C. Ortega, *Dialectología Del Barrio*, trans. Hortencia S. Alwan (Los Angeles, CA: R. C. Ortega Publisher & Bookseller, 1977), 132.

Chicanos from South Texas pronounce *f* as *j* as in *jue* (*fue*). Chicanos use "archaisms," words that are no longer in the Spanish language, words that have been evolved out. We say *semos*, *truje*, *haiga*, *ansina*, and *naiden*. We retain the "archaic" *j*, as in *jalar*, that derives from an earlier *h* (the French *halar* or the Germanic *halon* which was lost to standard Spanish in the sixteenth century), but which is still found in several regional dialects such as the one spoken in South Texas. (Due to geography, Chicanos from the Valley of South Texas were cut off linguistically from other Spanish speakers. We tend to use words that the Spaniards brought over from Medieval Spain. The majority of the Spanish colonizers in Mexico and the Southwest came from Extremadura—Hernán Cortés was one of them—and Andalucía. Andalusians pronounce *ll* like a *y*, and their *d*'s tend to be absorbed by adjacent vowels: *tirado* becomes *tirao*. They brought *el lenguaje popular, dialectos y regionalismos*.²¹)

Chicanos and other Spanish speakers also shift *ll* to *y* and *z* to *s*.²² We leave out initial syllables, saying *tar* for *estar*, *toy* for *estoy*, *hora* for *ahora* (*cubanos* and *puertorriqueños* also leave out initial letters of some words). We also leave out the final syllable such as *pa* for *para*. The intervocalic *y*, the *ll* as in *tortilla*, *ella*, *botella*, gets replaced by *tortia* or *tortiya*, *ea*, *botea*. We add an additional syllable at the beginning of certain words: *atocar* for *tocar*, *agastar* for *gastar*. Sometimes we'll say *lavaste las vacijas*, other times *lavates* (substituting the *ates* verb endings for the *aste*).

We use anglicisms, words borrowed from English: *bola* from ball, *carpeta* from carpet, *máquina de lavar* (instead of *lavadora*) from washing machine. Tex-Mex argot, created by adding a Spanish sound at the beginning or end of an English word such as *cookiari* for cook, *watchari* for watch, *parkiari* for park, and *rapiari* for rape, is the result of the pressures on Spanish speakers to adapt to English.

We don't use the word *vosotros* / *as* or its accompanying verb form. We don't say *claro* (to mean yes), *imaginate*, or *me emociona*, unless we picked up Spanish from Latinas, out of a book, or in a classroom. Other Spanish-speaking groups are going through the same, or similar, development in their Spanish.

Linguistic Terrorism

Deslenguadas. Somos los del español deficiente.²³ We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic *mestisaje*,²⁴ the

21. Eduardo Hernández-Chávez, Andrew D. Cohen, and Anthony F. Beltramo, *El Lenguaje de los Chicanos: Regional and Social Characteristics of Language Used by Mexican Americans* (Arlington, VA: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1975), 39.

22. Hernández-Chávez, xvii.

23. *Deslenguadas . . . deficiente*. Foul-mouthed. We are the ones with deficient Spanish.—EDS.

24. *mestisaje* Mongrels.—EDS.

subject of your *burla*.²⁵ Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally, and linguistically *somos huérfanos*²⁶—we speak an orphan tongue.

Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other.

Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation. For the longest time I couldn't figure it out. Then it dawned on me. To be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we'll see there. *Pena*. Shame. Low estimation of self. In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives.

Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure. Their language was not outlawed in their countries. They had a whole lifetime of being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was a first language, taught in school, heard on radio and TV, and read in the newspaper.

If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me. Often with *mexicanas y latinas* we'll speak English as a neutral language. Even among Chicanas we tend to speak English at parties or conferences. Yet, at the same time, we're afraid the other will think we're *agringadas* because we don't speak Chicano Spanish. We oppress each other trying to out-Chicano each other, vying to be the "real" Chicanas, to speak like Chicanos. There is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience. A monolingual Chicana whose first language is English or Spanish is just as much a Chicana as one who speaks several variants of Spanish. A Chicana from Michigan or Chicago or Detroit is just as much a Chicana as one from the Southwest. Chicano Spanish is as diverse linguistically as it is regionally.

By the end of this century, Spanish speakers will comprise the biggest minority group in the United States, a country where students in high schools and colleges are encouraged to take French classes because French is considered more "cultured." But for a language to remain alive it must be used.²⁷ By the end of this century English, and not Spanish, will be the mother tongue of most Chicanos and Latinas.

25. *burla* Ridicule.—EDS.

26. *somos huérfanos* We are orphans.—EDS.

27. Irena Klepfisz, "Secular Jewish Identity: Yidishkayt in America," in *The Tribe of Dina*, Kaye/Kantrowitz and Klepfisz, eds., 43.

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.

My fingers
move sly against your palm
Like women everywhere, we speak in code. . . .
—MELANIE KAYE/KANTROWITZ²⁸

Reading the Text

1. Why does Anzaldúa blend Spanish and English in her selection?
2. How does Anzaldúa's language contribute to her sense of identity?
3. What are the essential features of Chicano Spanish, according to Anzaldúa?
4. What does Anzaldúa mean by "Linguistic Terrorism" (para. 19)?

Reading the Signs

1. Anzaldúa sees her language in political terms. Write a personal essay in which you explore the significance of your native language to you. If, like Anzaldúa, you too see your language politically, describe an incident that motivated you to feel this way. If you don't view language as she does, consider why your experiences have led you to an alternative view of language.
2. Writing as if you were Gloria Anzaldúa, compose a hypothetical letter to the U.S. English organization, a group that wishes to make English America's official language.
3. In class, discuss the effect of Anzaldúa's blending of English and Spanish and of imagistic and analytic language. How does such blending con-

28. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, "Sign," in *We Speak in Code: Poems and Other Writings* (Pittsburgh, PA: Motherroot Publications, Inc., 1980), 85.

tribute to the points she makes? Would the essay have a different impact if it were written all in English?

4. How might Anzaldúa respond to the cross-cultural struggles that Nell Bernstein describes ("Goin' Gangsta, Choosin' Cholita," p. 562)? Adopting Anzaldúa's perspective, write an essay that analyzes the act of claiming.
5. How do you think Melissa Algranati ("Being an Other," p. 570) might respond to Anzaldúa's selection? Write a dialogue between Algranati and Anzaldúa, and then share your dialogue with your class.

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FAN SHEN

The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition

Writing conventions involve more cultural presuppositions and mythologies than we ordinarily recognize. Take the current practice of using the first-person singular pronoun "I" when writing an essay. Such a convention presumes an individualistic worldview, which can appear very strange to someone coming from a communal culture, as Fan Shen relates in this analysis of the relation between culture and composition. Hailing from the People's Republic of China, where the group comes before the individual in social consciousness, Shen describes what it was like to move to the United States and have to learn a whole new worldview to master the writing conventions that he himself now teaches as a professor of English at Rochester Community and Technical College. A writer as well as a teacher, Fan Shen has translated three books from English into Chinese and has written numerous articles for both English and Chinese publications.

One day in June 1975, when I walked into the aircraft factory where I was working as an electrician, I saw many large-letter posters on the walls and many people parading around the workshops shouting slogans like "Down with the word 'I'!" and "Trust in masses and the Party!" I then remembered that a new political campaign called "Against Individualism" was scheduled to begin that day. Ten years later, I got back my first English composition paper at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The professor's first comments were: "Why did you always use 'we' instead of 'I'?" and "Your paper would be stronger if you eliminated some sentences in the passive voice." The clashes between my Chinese background and the requirements of English composition had begun. At the