

COLUMN ONE

BIDING THEIR TONGUES



Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times

BILINGUAL: Cuban-born Maria Carreira is a professor at Cal State Long Beach. She has a finely honed sense of Spanish-English etiquette that leads her to use Spanish sparingly in public, unless she is approached in that language.

'HELLO' OR 'HOLA'? FOR SPEAKERS OF BOTH ENGLISH AND SPANISH, QUICKLY DECIDING WHICH LANGUAGE TO USE CAN BE TRICKY. THERE ARE PLENTY OF CUES.

By Stuart Silverstein, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
November 12, 2007

Cuban-born Maria Carreira, the coauthor of two college Spanish textbooks, can glide easily between her native tongue and English. But in her daily life in Southern California, picking which language to speak can be very *complicado*.

Such as the time when she was at a taco stand where everyone seemed to be ordering and chatting in Spanish. Carreira started placing her order *en español*, but she quickly switched to English after she got a look at the young employee behind the counter.

"He had the bluest eyes," Carreira said.

Carreira, a linguist who teaches at Cal State Long Beach and an expert in the use of Spanish in the United States, acknowledges that she blundered at the taco joint. Though the counterman responded in English, it dawned on her that he had been capably handling orders in Spanish.

Yet her flub reflects a tricky language-etiquette question confronted daily by the nation's growing ranks of English-Spanish bilinguals: When to use *inglés* and when to speak Spanish?

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

Not everyone is charmed by the budding bilingualism. Some Americans resent the widespread use of Spanish, particularly at government agencies and public schools. “Our government has gone way too far in encouraging people not to learn English,” said Jim Boulet Jr., executive director of Springfield, Va.–based English First, an advocacy group that is working to make English the nation’s official language.

Boulet and other critics also complain that Spanish sometimes is used to exclude, or gossip about, people who speak only English.

Still, among the estimated 18 million Americans proficient in both languages, according to the U.S. Census in September, the issue isn’t whether to speak English or Spanish, but when. There’s the delicate matter of courtesy—and avoiding bruised feelings. Occasionally, Carreira said, “it’s a land mine.”

For example, switching to Spanish might seem rude if it suggests the other speaker is inept in English. Yet among Latinos proud of their ethnic heritage, completely avoiding Spanish can come across as standoffish.

Experts such as Carreira say the language decision among bilinguals is often made in a split second, based on cues such as age, clothing and apparent social status—along with skin, eye and hair color. Location also can be important: Is the venue East Los Angeles or West L.A.?

Names can be giveaways—or traps. When UCLA student Maricruz Ceceña introduced herself with a friendly *hola* to one of her freshman–year dormitory roommates, Laura Sanchez, and then tried to strike up a phone conversation in Spanish, all she got was an earful of English.

Ceceña, a child of Mexican immigrants who grew up speaking Spanish in Lynwood, had assumed too much.

Sanchez can get by fairly well in Spanish but is much more comfortable in English, which was the primary language in her upper–middle–class Mexican American home in Oakland. She said she sometimes is intimidated by friends and acquaintances who speak Spanish much better than she does.

“You don’t want them to see that you don’t speak as well,” Sanchez said, calling the quality of her Spanish a “very personal” issue.

Despite the initial awkward moments, three years later Sanchez and Ceceña remain friends. But they do that, in part, by keeping their conversations in English.

As with all etiquette, making the other person comfortable is key.

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

K.C. McAlpin recalls making small talk recently with a night-crew janitor from Central America who was working at his office.

The conversation started in English, but McAlpin, who grew up in Texas and worked in Latin America in the 1970s, decided to help the janitor when “she got hung up on some word.” The conversation then resumed in Spanish.

The location for their chat? The Arlington, Va., headquarters of ProEnglish, another group that promotes making English the nation’s official language. McAlpin is the group’s executive director.

In other situations, an emotion or habit dictates which language is used. For instance, Helen Gilstrap, a public relations manager for the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, conducts business in both languages. But when she prays, it’s only in Spanish.

“I learned about God, and was introduced to religion, in Spanish,” said Gilstrap, whose parents came from Mexico. She added, with a laugh, that by praying in Spanish, “I just feel that I’d be heard better.”

Then there’s “code switching”—flipping back and forth between languages. At the Castaic home of Nelva and Alvaro Jimenez, it’s always been unpredictable which language will flow, even when it comes to talking to their dogs.

With their beloved Honey, a Rhodesian ridgeback who died in September, the couple gave commands in Spanish. But with their other dogs, Harley and Sky, it’s “come here,” not “*ven acá*.”

Alvaro Jimenez insists that the two seem confused when he tries Spanish with them. “They get that look in their faces like, ‘You must be angry,’ ” he said.

In conversations between husband and wife, both of whom spent their early childhoods in Cuba, “it might start in one [language], end up in the other one,” said Alvaro Jimenez.

Added Nelva Jimenez: “It just comes out. You don’t think about it.”

And some things simply don’t translate.

Alvaro Jimenez pointed out that singer Celia Cruz, the Cuban-born “Queen of Salsa” who died in 2003, would sometimes refer to herself as *La Negra*. “I mean, try to say that in English—‘The Black Woman’—in a song,” he said. English-speaking listeners, he maintained, would wonder, “‘What the hell is she trying to say?’ But in Spanish, she just flows.”

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

Although Carreira regrets the incident with the blue-eyed counterman, she has a finely honed sense of Spanish–English etiquette that leads her to use Spanish sparingly in public, unless she is approached in Spanish.

Say Carreira needs directions and bumps into somebody who appears Latino. She'll ask in English and stick with the language even if the other person speaks with a heavy accent. Switching quickly to Spanish, Carreira reasons, would be “sort of saying, ‘Huh, I get it. You can't speak English.’”

But by refusing to speak Spanish, “you also risk coming across as aloof or superior, more Americanized, or not one of them,” she said.

The solution? Carreira will continue an exchange in English to avoid insult, but will toss in a well–pronounced *gracias* or *por favor* as “a way of being gracious and showing solidarity.”

Among Latinos, trying a little Spanish also can defuse hostility. Ana Celia Zentella, a UC San Diego ethnic studies professor and author of the 1997 book “Growing Up Bilingual,” said she has found in her research that older U.S. Latinos often “think they're being lied to” when they encounter young Latinos who say they don't know the language.

English–speakers struggling to use a few words of Spanish can, in some circumstances, come across very well. “There are people who are very touched when there is a genuine approach to them by people who are trying to speak Spanish to communicate and to connect with them,” Zentella said. But all too often, she said, English–speakers offend with fractured “mock Spanish” that she considers racist—including “no problemo” and “comprende?”

Being too eager with Spanish brings another kind of hazard.

Brian Ghiglia, a mediator based in the San Fernando Valley, has become a competent Spanish–speaker by studying on and off since high school. “I speak Spanish when I can because I love to do it and I love to practice,” he said.

When he was in his 20s and in a celebratory mood after a UCLA football game, Ghiglia—who's now 57—stopped at a gas station and started speaking Spanish “a mile a minute” to a man he assumed was Latino.

“He just sort of looked at me like I was a little crazy, because he didn't speak a word of Spanish and very little English,” Ghiglia said.

In the increasingly diverse mix that is Southern California, appearances can deceive. Dalton Waters, a security guard who grew up in Nicaragua speaking both languages, is accustomed to startling people with his Spanish. In his case, it's because he's black.

FROM THE DESK OF DAVID L. SCHUTZER

That may not be unusual in Miami or New York, where black Spanish-speakers with roots in Cuba, Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic are common, but it still surprises in L.A.

When someone struggles to ask Waters a question in English and he replies in Spanish, “a lot of times, they jump back,” he said with a husky laugh.

One recent afternoon, an SUV pulled up while Waters was at his job guarding an MTA parking lot near Universal Studios. The window rolled down, and a middle-aged woman in the back seat asked, in accented English, how to get to the tourist attraction.

Waters began answering in English, but, after sensing that no one in the SUV understood him well, he switched languages. The driver’s and passengers’ eyes widened, and they broke into smiles—even though a moment later Waters informed them that they weren’t supposed to park at his lot.

“*Este es para el Metro*” (“This is for the Metro”), he said, explaining where they could park. Waters then used that other Southern California idiom—Spanglish—to say where they could wait for “el shuttle.”

stuart.silverstein@latimes.com

CONVERSATION PEACE: GUIDELINES FOR BILINGUAL ENGLISH–SPANISH SPEAKERS

Do:

FOLLOW THE LEADER. If someone opens a conversation in English or Spanish, answer in kind.

ASK PERMISSION. If you want to switch languages with strangers, ask what language they would prefer.

GIVE A CLUE. Some bilingual people will toss some Spanish into an English conversation to subtly signal that the speakers can switch languages if it feels comfortable.

DON'T:

ASSUME. Skin, eye or hair color doesn't always indicate linguistic ability. Neither do surnames.

COMPLIMENT GRATUITOUSLY. Telling a native English speaker that “your English is excellent” is a sure way to show you’re making faulty assumptions about his background or speaking skills.

Source: Times reporting