

MAŁGORZATA KOWALCZYK (GDAŃSK)

AY CARAMBA! FUNCTIONS OF SPANISH BORROWINGS IN AMERICAN SLANG

Spanish borrowings constitute a vibrant and expanding part of American slang. This is hardly surprising given the growing social, cultural, and political importance of Latin Americans in the United States, who recently became the largest non-white ethnic group in the country. This influence is visible in the more and more pervasive use of Spanish which, in turn, indirectly affects speech patterns of Americans via borrowings, including those in slang. Interestingly, the use of these borrowings is not limited to the speech of Latin American immigrants or their descendants, but becomes increasingly seen among larger social segments. In this paper I attempt to answer the fundamental question: *What purposes do Spanish borrowings serve in American slang?* In so doing, I present the main sociolinguistic functions of such borrowings functioning in slang, partially following the typology proposed by Widawski (2012) and partially based on my forthcoming book on slang borrowings. All expressions and their contextual examples were drawn from a large database of citations taken from contemporary American sources such as press, television, film, literature, and conversations with native speakers. The material was collected during several research trips to the United States, especially the research at the University of California at Berkeley, financed by Santander Universidades Research Grant.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Slang belongs to colloquial and informal language. It is one of the most visible constituents of the lexicon of American English, and an important element of American popular culture. As observed by Chapman (Kipfer/ Chapman 2007: ix) and Coleman (2012: 12-17), slang has been used to refer to various types of language, often in a discordant way. It is therefore worthwhile to define it precisely. Let us quote here an extensive definition which defines main features of slang, adapted from Widawski and Kowalczyk (2012: 18). Accordingly, slang can be defined as 'a highly informal and unconventional type of vocabulary. It is perceived as deeply expressive, attractively catchy, and deliberately undignified. It consists of standard expressions modified in some way or appended with new meanings, and sometimes of entirely novel expressions. Slang is coined chiefly by members of social, occupational or ethnic groups which are typically separate from mainstream society, yet it is often adopted by larger social segments. It is employed in place of standard expressions to convey some extra information of

a psychological, social or rhetorical nature. It thus provides alternative, highly informal synonyms for referents already named in the language, but sometimes gives names for referents for which there are no standard expressions, or which have yet to be named'. This paper discusses slang expressions understood in the above way.

Borrowings constitute a vibrant and noticeable part of slang. The term *borrowing* (sometimes alternatively labeled *loanword*) can be simply defined as 'taking a word or phrase from one language into another' and also as 'the item so taken' (McArthur 1992: 141). It is one of the most popular terms for such type of vocabulary, yet it is sometimes considered imprecise. As suggested by Crystal (1999: 126), the name implies that the word 'borrowed' from a language will someday be given back, although in reality it never left it. Various typological classifications of borrowings have been proposed; this study includes most of types of borrowings (see classifications by Haugen (1950) or Mańczak-Wohlfeld (1995, 2006)) but the focus is on their functions rather than types. Additionally, borrowing may refer to various levels of language, such as phonological, lexical, syntactical ones, so it is crucial to be precise here and state that this paper is about lexical borrowings, and not any other. Finally, the obvious focus here is on the words and phrases borrowed from Spanish. While there have been numerous studies of Spanish borrowings in English (see, for instance, Gonzales (1996) or Fought (2003)), not much has been written on these borrowings in American slang. The notable exception is a paper by Murray (1996), yet it is largely restricted to the slang of narcotics, and consists chiefly of an alphabetical listing of annotated expressions. Hence the idea to research the subject.

Functions of language have long been of interest to linguists and philosophers, and have prompted various classifications (see, for instance the classical taxonomy of functions by Bühler (1934) or Jakobson (1960)). Leaving more theoretical considerations aside, the main such function is obviously referential (or denotative) one, which is used to name things, people, states, actions or qualities. However, slang — and borrowings used in slang — serve a number of other functions. These are very peculiar and result from sociolinguistic parameters such as social, cultural or ethnic context where borrowings are used; but they also result from the peculiar uses of slang. My own functional classification given here is partially based on the typology proposed by Widawski (2012) and partially based on my forthcoming book on slang borrowings. In the following paragraphs, these functions will be characterized and illustrated with contextual examples from the abovementioned lexical database.

Last but not least, let us briefly describe the methodological fundamentals of the project. Stemming from the philosophy of sociolinguistics and descriptive linguistics, they are based on the analysis of authentic lexical material from a large database of contextual examples. The idea was to get as much exposure to Spanish borrowings in American slang as possible, and to record their us-

age in natural contexts from various contemporary sources. To that end, citations have been collected from diverse contemporary sources including film, television, magazines, literature, Internet, and utterances by native speakers. The material was collected through extensive fieldwork in the United States in recent years, and research at academic institutions such as the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Arizona, and the University of New Mexico. The methods used in data collection and database creation were diverse, but chiefly traditional: data was recorded in the form of written notes or dictaphone recordings, which were systematically entered into the database. The Internet was used extensively, and a sizable portion of citations was taken directly from online sources. The result of the project was a database of several thousand citations which was the basis for the abovementioned book (in preparation).

ENRICHING FUNCTION

Spanish borrowings in American slang have an important function enriching the English language. No two cultures are the same, and so there are and will always be expressions in one culture which do not have counterparts in another. Enriching function usually refers to a situation when the standard lexicon turns out to be insufficient to name or express certain concepts taken from other languages (Widawski 2013: 69). In our case, this happens when there is a lack of equivalents from Latin American culture in the English language. Consider the following citational corroboration found in our database:

*I looked inside and there it was. His stuff. A small plastic bag of what I came to know as **Acapulco gold** [= marijuana of high quality having leaves with a golden hue, grown near Acapulco, Mexico] — Hartford Courant, 2014*

*He also designed the **Baja Bug** [= a Volkswagen Beetle especially modified for surfer and beach use] that was cheap and sturdy enough to open up off-roading to the masses — Los Angeles Times, 2014*

*When I first started shooting heroin they were cutting it with **bonita** [= milk sugar used to dilute heroin], and coke with epsom salts — David T. Courtwright, 2013*

*She got hooked up on **Colombian gold** [= marijuana of high quality having leaves with a golden hue, grown in Colombia] — University of California Berkeley Student, 2013*

*The police found many more **indocumentados** [= immigrants from Latin America without legalized stay and without the necessary documents] — Twitter, 2010*

- I was born a Jew, actually a Cuban Jew which makes me a **Juban** [= Jewish Cuban] — Blogspot, 2013*
- Just you and me, Jack. **Mano a mano** [= one-on-one confrontation, especially a hand-to-hand fight or duel] — Meet the Fockers, film, 2004*
- The next morning we'll all wake up in El Chuco, Texas, like a bunch of **mojados** [= illegal immigrants to the US from Mexico, especially those who swim across the Rio Grande River] — Milagro Beanfield War, film, 1988*
- 'He is also from Mexico, right?' 'No, he's a **pocho** [= a Mexican-American who has assimilated]!' — El Norte, film, 1983*
- He was disgusted when he saw her **zorro belly** [=an abdomen with post-operation scars] — University of California Berkeley Student, 2013*

DIVERSIFYING FUNCTION

Spanish borrowings in American slang can also be used in diversifying function. Languages often borrow foreign expressions which are synonymous with native expressions, because such borrowed expressions are perceived to have attractive novel qualities of exotic freshness, 'out of love of a new term' (Gramley/Pätzold 2004: 33). This is done to escape the dull familiarity of the existing standard expressions, and to introduce an element of diversification. Spanish borrowings in American slang do just that: they constitute an influx of new synonyms which are valued for their exotic novelty. In slang such expressions are even more important because of the so-called overlexicalization of slang, that is, the high productivity of synonyms for certain concepts, often conditioned by the need to be original or secretive. See the following examples:

- The **azuls** [=police officers] were beating on them. The reason for such aggressiveness is not entirely clear — Tropical Fish, 2006*
- Hey there, **blanca** [= white woman, especially as form of address]! Show me where it is — Soul Plane, film, 2004*
- Are you afraid that something is going to swim up and bite your **culo** [= buttocks]? — Shark Attack 3, film, 2002*
- The junkie robbed the place because he needed money for **dama blanca** [= cocaine] — University of Arizona Student, 2013*
- Those fellas messed with the wrong **hombre** [= man, especially as form of address] — Bulletproof, film, 1996*
- We can call this one **Juan Doe** [=an unidentified Latin American male] — Up Close and Persona, film, 1996*
- My father was born and raised in **Loisaida** [= the Lower East Side of New York's Manhattan] — Facebook, 2012*

*They were selling them dimebags of **orégano** [= marijuana], nunchakus and firecrackers from Chinatown — Rounders, film, 1998*

*What? You have never been to **PR** [= Puerto Rico] in your life? — 25th Hour, film, 2002*

*They were smoking **yerba** [= marijuana] and having a good time — University of Arizona Student, 2013*

CULTURAL FUNCTION

Spanish borrowings in American slang can also be discussed in terms of cultural function. Language is often one of the most visible and outward exponents of cultural identity, and it is used to signal one's allegiance and sentiment. Spanish borrowings in American slang serve as an excellent means expressing cultural identity of Latin American immigrants in the U.S. and their descendants. Significantly, when used in this function, such borrowings are often so culture-specific that they may be incomprehensible to those unfamiliar with Latin American culture. Consider the following citational evidence:

*I showed his picture to the **alambristas** [= Mexicans illegally present in the US] there, but no one had seen him — San Diego Reader, 2001*

*Right here, we're starting a new culture, because we are sharing our traditions with the **Anglos** [= white people] — Chicago Tribune, 2013*

*The cost of a gallon of milk was 79 cents more in a **bodega** [= grocery store, especially Puerto Rican in New York City] than in a supermarket — New York Times, 2006*

*They are making a lot of noise about hanging a **Colombian necktie** [= form of execution in which the victim's throat is slit and the tongue pulled down through the gaping wound] on the rat — Salton Sea, film, 2002*

*The **Eme** [= the Mexican mafia] is here because before there was nothing — American Me, film, 1992*

*The place was full of **Españols** [= speakers of Spanish], probably Mexicans — University of Arizona Student, 2013*

*Hey **papí** [= Latin American male, especially older], how's the baby? — New York Times, 2004*

*He is just some **Tejano** [= Texan of Mexican origin or descent] with a lot of questions I don't have to answer — Lone Star, film, 1996*

*He sent me an item of memorabilia. It's a **Tijuana Bible** [= pornographic magazine] — Watchmen, film, 2009*

*They used to call him **Tío taco** [= Mexican-American who emulates behavior or values of the non-Hispanic majority], a sellout — Twitter, 2010*

The cultural function may also refer to the transition of borrowings from one culture to another, in our case, from Latin American culture to the ‘white’ American culture. Many of the Spanish borrowings functioning in American slang have become strongly or totally assimilated. Smitherman (2000: 28-33) calls such expressions *cross-over terms* because they transferred or ‘crossed over’ from one culture to another. Such cross-over terms are commonly used or understood by the majority of Americans regardless of their ethnic origin. They often use these expressions because of their expressiveness, vividness or wit. Consider the following examples:

- We have invited many North Korean defectors over the years, but he is the **big enchilada** [= important person, especially a boss or chief] we have always wanted* – *Los Angeles Times*, 2003
- I think it takes a lot of **cojones** [= courage or audacity] to do what you two have done today* – *Fun with Dick and Jane*, film, 2005
- You got enough money to pay for all this? You know, money? Cash? Dollars? **Dinero** [= money]?* – *Universal Soldier*, film, 1992
- Are you **loco** [= crazy or insane]? You’ll get us both killed* – *Licence to Kill*, film, 1989
- You’re an abusive man, full of **machismo** [= blatant male aggression or virility]* – *Viva Cuba*, film, 2005
- Listen, man, we’re talking **mondo** [= a sizable amount of] bucks!* – *Big Fat Liar*, film, 2002
- Your complete honesty will be **mucho** [= extremely] appreciated* – *Hard Candy*, film, 2005
- Tell him I was **numero uno** [= the very best person or thing] in sales last year* – *Chosen One*, film, 2010
- I suggest you get your scrawny asses in here, **pronto** [= immediately]* – *Brokeback Mountain*, film, 2005
- That’s right. That’s you I’m talking about, you little **puta** [= sexually promiscuous woman]* – *Savage Grace*, film, 2007

SOCIAL FUNCTION

Spanish borrowings in American slang are often used in the social function. One of the main uses of slang is to signal social status, own of someone else’s. Crystal (2005: 466) calls it ‘the expression of identity’ which signals the sense of belonging to a particular social group, while Adams (2009: 6) observes that it ‘is used to fit in and stand out.’ Spanish borrowings are also used to do that: they serve to label and classify particular social groups, and to identify their members.

Interestingly, they often do it better than standard English or general American slang. See the following examples:

The **braceros** [= Mexican laborers working in the US] were deducted ten percent from their wages and held in savings accounts — *El Paso Times*, 2014

Burros [= Mexican smugglers of contraband, especially narcotics] smuggled booze during Prohibition and dope in recent times — *My San Antonio*, 2011

These instructions were probably translated by some **gringo** [= white person from an English-speaking country] — *Space Cowboys*, film, 2000

You're the **machos** [= aggressively masculine males], you're the men! You carry one! — *Models*, film, 1999

You can promise me that you are not **maricón** [= gay man]? — *Eastern Promises*, film, 2007

I want to play with the **pachucos** [= Mexican-American gang members] and get rich — *Stick*, film, 1985

Look, it's a new ghost writer he needs, not another goddamn **politico** [= politician, especially unscrupulous] — *Ghost Writer*, film, 2010

Suck on this, **puto** [= gay man, especially the one who works as a male prostitute]! — *La Mission*, film, 2009

His sister fell in love with some **spookerican** [= person of Afro-American and Puerto Rican descent] — *University of California Student*, 2013

He's a **tío taco** [= Mexican-American who emulates behavior or values of the non-Hispanic majority]. There, I've said it — *Democratic Underground*, 2005

EXPRESSIVE FUNCTION

Spanish borrowings in American slang are also used in expressive function. As observed by Widawski and Kowalczyk (2012: 32), slang is an excellent means to express emotions, and the same goes for borrowings. They are an excellent means of verbalizing various emotional states and reactions, such as surprise, irritation or worry. Typically, they assume the form of either epithets or exclamations. Here is a selection of negatively charged emotive expressions of this kind:

To the **bato loco** [= crazy person, especially of Latin American descent] in the barrio this frustration is a luxury which he cannot afford — *Los Angeles Times*, 2014

Ron, your long dissertation about what liberals believe is total **caca** [= nonsense] — *Tulsa World*, 2013

- Caramba** [= I am irritated or angered]! I missed it again! — *Adventures of Tintin*, film, 1991
- ‘**Coño** [= I am irritated or angered]! You said ten! ‘Oh, I’m sorry’ — *Grindhouse*, film, 2007
- ‘Shorties, are you coming?’ ‘**No way, Jose** [= absolutely not]! — *Spring Breakdown*, film, 2009
- You called me ‘**pendejo**’ [= stupid or obnoxious person], you fuck! — *Running Scared*, film, 2006
- These **pinche** [= despicable] cops across the street hassled me, man! — *Walkout*, film, 2006
- Just look at this! **Puta madre** [= I am irritated or angered]! What the fuck is this? — Facebook, 2013
- That **son of puta** [= despicable person]! He did that on purpose! — *Scanner Darkly*, film, 2006
- Hey, **to the carajo with** [= I do not care about] the sex! — *Conversations with Other Women*, film, 2005

But Spanish borrowings in slang can also be used to express positive emotions. Consider the following citational evidence:

- Maybe she’s fine, like — **ay carajo** [= I am surprised and excited] — like your sister! — *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, film, 1990
- I’ll always love you for it, **carnal** [= close male friend, especially from the neighborhood] — *Bound By Honor*, film, 1993
- I’m married to a French **chiquita** [= young woman, especially if attractive]! — ‘Round Midnight, film, 1986
- Just look at this! **Hot chihuahua** [= I am surprised and excited]! — *Blue Thunder*, film, 1983
- You were such a **hot tamale** [= a sexually attractive woman of Hispanic origin], I couldn’t control myself — *Choke*, film, 2008
- I gotta spend a little quality time with the **mamacita** [= a woman, especially a young and attractive one] — *Ant Bully*, film, 2006
- Take some advice, **paisano** [= fellow Mexican], learn how to mambo — *Married to the Mob*, film, 1988
- ‘Would you like to join us?’ ‘Yeah, I’d love to!’ ‘**Perfecto** [= excellent]!’ — *Gray Matters*, film, 2006
- That seems very **savvy** [= intelligent] for a man who’s been found mentally incompetent to stand trial — *Fifteen Minutes*, film, 2001
- Come on, we’re **simpatico** [= nice or sympathetic]. Look at us. We shop at the same store — *Beetle Juice*, film, 1988

Additionally, when used in this function, Spanish borrowings in slang are an effective means of expressing humor, itself an important element of slang. In so doing, they often mask the awkwardness connected with taboo topics such as human body and its physiology, sex and sexuality, illness or death, which in themselves constitute main lexical fields of slang. In other words, they serve ‘as protective language that disguises unpleasant reality’ (Algeo/Pyles 2005: 221). They also allow to escape from the clichéd and worn-out standard expressions, and introduce a positive atmosphere in otherwise bland reality. See the following examples:

*He was rough with her in the bed, and punished her with his **bicho** [= penis] – Elmore Leonard, 1985*

*‘I want you.’ ‘Ooh, **chihuahua** [= I am surprised and excited]! Nice opening line, I like it’ – *Laws of Attraction*, film, 2004*

*This dude looks like an **el sleazo** [= sleazy or obnoxious person] to me – University of Arizona Student, 2013*

*She passed me her **el stinko** [= cheap and strong cigar], but I said I’m not gonna smoke it – Twitter, 2012*

*His wife screwed him over and the poor schmuck got **el zilcho** [= nothing] – University of Arizona Student, 2013*

*Who is that **taco belle** [= Latin American woman, especially if attractive] over there? – University of California Berkeley Student, 2013*

*The guy drank too much tequila and **tossed his tacos** [= vomited] – University of Arizona Student, 2013*

*Everyone ended up with **touristas** [= diarrhea, especially as contracted in a foreign country] – Twitter, 2010*

*I think this guy is **two tacos short of a combination plate** [= not very intelligent] – Facebook, 2010*

POETIC FUNCTION

Spanish borrowings in American slang are also used in poetic function. They are often a result of wordplay or language manipulation, seen in sometimes humorous blending of Spanish and English expressions or their parts. As observed by Adams (2009: 6), ‘slang is used to assert our everyday poetic prowess.’ Indeed, such experimentation brings slang borrowings closer to poetry, and testifies to the great linguistic creativity. Let us have a look at the following citational corroboration:

*Well, I gotta go get some sleep, so **adios amoebas** [= goodbye]! – *Daily Strength Magazine*, 2007*

- He was drinking **Adios Motherfuckers** [= strong, multi-liquor cocktails including vodka, rum, tequila, gin, blue Curaçao, sour mix and 7-Up or ginger ale] like crazy when he was there – Facebook, 2013*
- The company says it is a **Baja Bug** [= Volkswagen Beetle especially modified for surfer and beach use] for the 21st century – New York Times, 2014*
- My old man was born and raised in the good old **Burrito City** [= El Paso, Texas] – Blogspot, 2010*
- I don't want them. They're too **el cheapo** [= cheap or inferior] to me – University of Arizona Student, 2013*
- He aid he regretted that and that it was an **el mistakeo** [= mistake] – University of California Berkeley Student, 2013*
- I'm sorry but it's getting late and I must really go. **Hasta la pasta** [= goodbye], amigos! – Facebook, 2010*
- It really was **mondo bizarro** [= very bizarre or strange] – Buffy the Vampire Slayer, WB-TV series, 1992*
- It feels good to be a **Nuyorican** [= Puerto Rican, especially the one living in New York City] holding up a trombone instead of a tray – El Cantante, film, 2006*
- This thing is called **Tijuana credit card** [= a hose used to steal gasoline directly from other people's gas tanks] – Blogger, 2005*

PHATIC FUNCTION

Last but not least, let us mention the so-called phatic function or 'phatic communion' (Crystal 1999: 257). Spanish borrowings in American slang are often used not so much to communicate any specific message but to signal the mere communication or communicative attempt instead. Put differently, when used in this function, they do not contribute much in the form of concrete information *per se*, but their use serves the purpose of facilitating social interaction. Most commonly, they are used to start, maintain or end conversation. See the following examples:

- It's another inch, and I would be '**adios muchachos**' [= goodbye]! – Borderland, film, 2007*
- You let me in right now, or I call the INS, **comprende** [= do you understand]? – Die Hard, film, 1988*
- Who are you trying to get crazy with, **ese** [= man, especially as term of address]? – Zoolander, film, 2001*
- I'll call you when I get back. **Hasta la vista** [= goodbye], baby! – American Psycho, film, 2000*

- 'Hola [= hello]!'** 'Hey, looks like somebody got some new clothes!' — *Jackie Brown*, film, 1997
- It looks like you got the wrong apartment, **mano** [= man, especially as term of address] — *Fresh*, film, 1994
- Alicia, **mi amor** [= my dear], can I interest you in an 18-inch Zookeeper's special? — *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, film, 2009
- 'Orale [= hello], carnalito! Orale!'** 'Hey, what's up, ese?' — *Bound by Honor*, film, 1993
- Look, Dammy, **que pasa** [= what is going on]? What's up? — *Breakfast with Scott*, film, 2007
- Vamoose** [= let us go!] Come on, let's go! — *Barbershop 2: Back in Business*, film, 2004

CONCLUSIONS

Spanish borrowings constitute a vibrant and expanding part of American slang. This is hardly surprising given the growing social, cultural, and political importance of Latin Americans in the United States, which recently became the largest non-white ethnic group in the country. Spanish borrowings in American slang function in a number of ways. Based on a sizable database of real-life contextual examples from contemporary American sources, this paper presents the main sociolinguistic functions of such borrowings: enriching, diversifying, cultural, social, expressive, poetic, and phatic ones. They demonstrate enormous functionality and pragmatic importance of these borrowings. While these functions feature in standard language as well, they are perhaps more frequent and certainly much more visible in slang borrowings, specially in Spanish borrowings used in American slang.

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