Use of Spanish Code-Switching in *In the Heights*

Monica Privette-Black

This article uses a frequency analysis of Spanish and English, further divided by complete or partial Spanish utterances, spoken by each character throughout the musical In the Heights. *The data concludes that the musical's code-switching is a subconscious result of a bilingual's relationship to their community and how they identify within it. More specifically, there is a correlation between each character's overall percentage of Spanish words spoken and position in a Hispanic neighborhood. The conscious use of code-switching throughout the musical* In the Heights *can be used to understand bilingualism and code-switching for unscripted communication as well.*

Many recent English media productions have blurred the lines between English and Spanish. Specifically, movies, Broadway productions, and TV shows have characters who alternate between English and Spanish, an element known as code-switching, as though the audience can understand both. To the untrained ear, the use of Spanish and English is seemingly random and intermittent. However, those who understand that language is a vital element of one's identity have begun to question what inspires the language of an utterance and whether bilinguals code-switch for specific speech acts.

Of the many bilingual productions, Lin Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights* has caught the world's attention as a synthesis of both English and Spanish language and culture. I hypothesize that code-switching between English and Spanish throughout *In the Heights* has two main purposes: The first, to connect the community by a shared linguistic identity, and the second, to show solidarity for the injustices that Latino and Afro-Latino communities face in the United States. I aim to analyze the frequency of Spanish utterances by character and the semantic purpose of each code-switch. In doing so, I intend to anatomize the Spanish language used and its intentions.

Literature Review

Bilingual Attitude

Language comes with personal meaning, identity, and pride (Crystal, 2002). Within that context, bilingualism is a complicated phenomenon, and each speaker falls differently on a spectrum of usage, fluency, and register specialty. Crystal, an expert in language death, revitalization, and maintenance, has defined bilingualism for heritage speakers, those who have naturally acquired a language strictly in the home setting. One language exists for purposes of identity and the other for intelligibility (Crystal, 2002). Usually heritage bilinguals use their second language (L2) for primarily professional activities, such as work, international travel, and taxes. In contrast, use of the first language (L1) typically revolves around personal identity and social relationships with those in that same language in-group.

On the other hand, recent studies showed that some bilinguals are in the opposite position, specifically that their L1 (first or heritage language) is the lingua franca, and they have learned the

local L2 as a result of community affiliation. In a focus group made up of Spanish L2 speakers in the US, the participants reported that speaking Spanish connected them to their communities. They considered themselves heritage speakers because they learned and maintained their Spanish skills to fit in socially with those they interacted with, even though a few of the subjects were not ethnically Hispanic. When describing one of their relationships with bilingualism and biculturalism, they said, "It isn't really a Spanish culture. It's just *my* culture . . . And you don't really think about your culture when you're in the midst of it" (DeFeo, 2017, p. 10). This study suggests that people's connection to community and therefore their need for functional linguistic abilities within their community is more powerful than ethnic or cultural identity.

These polar viewpoints illustrate that bilingualism and code-switching are used for communicating with one's closest circles, with one's community, and with the world around. Whether that is through a first or a second language, it is clear that bilingualism is a tool for people to connect in powerful and unifying ways.

Code-Switching

Currently, around fifty percent of the general world population and twenty percent of Americans are bilingual. In the United States, Spanish is the most common spoken second language with millions of Spanish-English bilinguals living across the country (Mathews, 2019). Many bilingual people participate in code-switching, which can be described as inserting words of another language into the grammar structure of the first. Code-switching is extremely common among bilinguals. As previously mentioned, many suppose that the alternation between two languages within a conversation has a specific purpose and intent. By studying the intended and unintended motives for code-switching, the US and other world communities can better understand the massive bilingual subculture and gain insight into common uses of one's heritage or cultural language.

Code-switching is complicated to pragmatically analyze in natural speech. It can be a mindless act or a powerful tool for speakers. An important note is that meaningful code-switching is not a result of forgetting nor a lack of linguistic proficiency. The generally accepted stance comes from a study in the late 1990s

that found code-switching to be a random act determined only by the speaker (Auer, 1999). This perspective has been largely unchallenged, and the literature pertaining to it lacks studies about specific speech acts purposely carried out in one language. Some, however, would argue that speakers have motives behind code-switching based on context and speech act—even subconsciously.

So, what does a bilingual speaker think when switching between languages? Could there be a political or social agenda behind purposeful switching? A recent study reviewed social media comments made in English and Spanish on posts with related topics to analyze the use of Spanish in the face of immigrant stress and other cases of racial discrimination (Muñoz & Amezcua, 2019). It followed up this analysis with surveying bilinguals living in the US. One survey respondent answered that she felt empowered by speaking Spanish during times of political tension and negative attitudes towards Spanish speakers. Another mentioned that facing discrimination is personally the most important time to speak Spanish and embrace one's culture of heritage. Most importantly, none of the heritage speakers were afraid of speaking Spanish, even when they could have faced personal discrimination. From this study, one can see the relationship that many Spanish heritage speakers have with their language and how Spanish is a force of ethnic strength that they can draw upon in certain circumstances.

Unlike in speech, code-switching in writing is done deliberately and with an artistic purpose. A detailed discourse analysis of scripted productions in English and Spanish claimed that both languages have their own distinct purpose: English is to be used in formal settings and Spanish in informal settings. Additionally, writers choose to incorporate elements of Spanish identity for a specifically referenced country as a way of emphasizing that culture within the scope of American majority culture (Carra, 2019). The use of code-switching can strategically build a community that restricts nonspeakers of the language and creates a safe place for minority groups to be understood and valued.

Broadway

The use of Spanish in an English production is not a feature found only in Miranda's work. This code-switching, which is not considered to be Spanglish but a more elevated method of displaying

biculturalism, is increasingly common in American films, Broadway shows, and TV. It is seen in the musical *West Side Story* and is becoming increasingly more common.

Recently, Rua conducted a qualitative comparison study that also examined the use of Spanish in *In the Heights* compared with the Spanish used in the second edition of *West Side Story*. This study found that *West Side Story* overused Spanish, while *In the Heights* used it in correct proportion to English. The code-switching in *In the Heights* was concise and effective. Spanish in *In the Heights* was used throughout the musical to invite the listener into the speaker's world to refer to deity and to build a closed community for Spanish speakers (Rua, 2020). These specific speech contexts successfully created an on-stage community that allowed only other bilingual speakers in. This study serves as the outline for this article's methodology.

This research project will include specific evidence of the frequency of each code-switching motive, numerical data, and a holistic review of each character by diving deeper into the pragmatics than Rua's study. Although the project has a small sample size, it can potentially imply similar uses for code-switching in English media productions or even natural language. If there is no significant semantic use, this stands to support the thesis that code-switching is completely random. I will also analyze Spanish use by character to investigate overall community relationships. The remainder of this article will include a detailed methodology, results, implications, and a final conclusion.

In the Heights Background

In the Heights is a fictional portrayal of Washington Heights, an actual neighborhood north of Manhattan that had previously been composed of mainly Caribbean Hispanic locals and newcomers. The musical tells the story of the community in Washington Heights and their struggles with gentrification, living with outdated infrastructure, and belonging in American culture. All of the characters have a unique background and difficulties with finding happiness and their place in a close-knit but changing community.

Usnavi, the main character, owns a bodega in town, and Vanessa, Usnavi's love interest, works at the salon. Sonny is Usnavi's cousin and a trendy teen. The Rosarios are a family in town whose oldest daughter, Nina, has just returned from her first year at Stanford, where she faced bigotry and felt like an

outcast as a Latina. Kevin Rosario, the father of the family, owns a dispatch company where Benny, the only non-Hispanic character and Nina's love interest, works. They all attend dinner parties at the home of Abuela Claudia, a Cuban-born immigrant whom the neighborhood has adopted as a grandma. The other characters in the community include Piraguero—a man who sells shaved ice— and the gossiping ladies from the salon, Daniela and Carla.

All of the characters besides Benny speak Spanish and refer to their heritage, country, and culture. All of the characters also speak English fluently, and nearly all have no distinguishable accent. Therefore, the code-switching does not correlate to linguistic comprehension, but a larger rhetoric. Although studies have been done that confirm using one's L1 is often a result of lower cognition due to emotional stimulation, this linguistic examination will challenge that theory and propose instead that there are purposeful pragmatic uses of one's heritage language, realized or not (Williams et al., 2020).

In order to analyze code-switching into Spanish, I used an open-source script from the original Broadway version of *In the Heights*. I created my own data set, divided into two sections: frequency and speech acts. The frequency section includes counts of Spanish words, English words, and total words by each character. This section also houses the analysis of frequency of Spanish, frequency of complete (Spanish only) phrases, and frequency of mixed (English and Spanish in the same sentence) phrases by characters for further exploration. My *speech act* data set is a qualitative conversational analysis. Each Spanish utterance is listed along with the character who spoke it, whether it is complete or mixed, and the context. The list of contexts includes references to (1) religion, (2) national pride, (3) an item's Spanish name, (4) community relationships, (5) gossip, (6) general conversation, (7) language learning, (8) exclusion, and (9) intelligibility. Categories 1–7 describe the specific contexts in which the Spanish was used in conversation; Categories 8–9 describe when Spanish is used to exclude a non-Spanish speaker from the conversation or because English is not understood by the listener. Each category is mutually-exclusive and all are comprehensively exhaustive. I collected this data without peer review or outside opinion.

This methodology followed the framework of Wolfson and Manes (1980), which analyzed compliments and how they are used in social interactions. In the same way, I analyzed code-switching,

which is a strategic speech act that, like a compliment, is packed with nuance and culture, similar to the previously mentioned analysis by Rua (2020).

Results

Figure 1 gives insight into the overall Spanish use as well as different types of Spanish use. Many uses of mixed Spanish phrases are for rhyming and are not as strong as the complete Spanish phrases. Nearly all of the characters use complete and mixed utterances evenly. However, the four characters that use more complete Spanish phrases than the rest are Piraguero, Nina, Carla, and the ensemble.

Piraguero speaks more Spanish than the other characters and is seen as an archetypal character. He is the first on screen and maintains his strong ties to the Spanish language to represent the Washington Heights community and even those community members who have not learned Spanish yet. Nina's use of predominantly complete Spanish utterances is due to her using
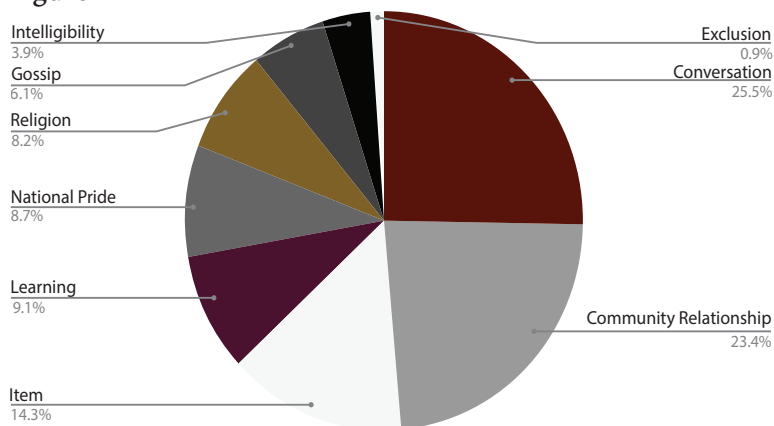
Figure 1

	Percentage of Spanish spoken	Percentage of mixed Spanish/English phrases
Usnavi de la Vega	2.13%	39%
Nina Rosario	4.89%	9%
Kevin Rosario	4.87%	65%
Camila Rosario	4.34%	50%
Benny	1.27%	36%
Vanessa	1.62%	45%
Sonny	0.86%	50%
Abuela Claudia	14%	33%
Daniela	12.82%	36%
Carla	9.1%	29%
Graffiti Pete	0%	0%
Piraguero	44.1%	23%
Ensemble	27.71%	7%

the language mostly for intelligibility or teaching the language, which both only require Spanish. Carla portrays the stereotype of someone who has almost mastered English, but isn't very comfortable with it. She makes vocabulary mistakes in English and uses mostly complete Spanish utterances, which seems to show that she is more comfortable with Spanish. Lastly, the ensemble uses mostly complete phrases as they are drawing on the contexts and connections of their community, which is bound by a common language and culture.

The majority of the characters (61%) use Spanish at least four percent of the time. Usnavi, Benny, Vanessa, Sonny, and Graffiti Pete are exceptions to this majority. This study will further discuss the implications for these anomalies.

Similar to the findings from a previous analysis of *In the Heights*, I found that Spanish is most commonly used when in contexts of general everyday conversation—in terms of the community or relationships within it—and when an item's name is given in Spanish (see Figure 2). Some may even consider using an item's name in Spanish an extension of the community relationship category (Rua, 2020). It is important to note that the Spanish in a learning context comes specifically from the relationship between Nina and Benny, and the context of national pride is almost exclusively from one musical number about pride and dancing. Additionally, these contexts often emerge from the

Figure 2

Context	Percentage
Exclusion	0.9%
Conversation	25.5%
Community Relationship	23.4%
Item	14.3%
Learning	9.1%
National Pride	8.7%
Religion	8.2%
Gossip	6.1%
Intelligibility	3.9%

Note: This does not include repeated phrases but classifies them as one instance of specific context.

usage of Spanish by single characters, such as a religious context for Abuela Claudia and gossip for Daniela and Carla.

Overall, my results were more meaningful in terms of Spanish frequency by character than in terms of semantic context. I had hypothesized for Spanish to be used more in contexts of solidarity, but the semantic analysis was too objective to determine whether or not a reference to the community relationship was responding to injustices and gentrification or not.

Discussion

Although the *In the Heights* script takes artistic liberties, it is still a legitimate representation of the Hispanic, namely Dominican and Puerto Rican, community of Washington Heights. Likewise, although the characters are fictional, their experiences and the overall narrative of the story give a true representation of the community.

A previous analysis of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* used data based on each character's usage of unique linguistic features (e.g. —ly) to compare their relationship with the in-group (Mandala, 2007). This analysis mirrors the implications of the *In the Heights* characters' Spanish usage. Similar to Mandala's study, I examined the relationship between a personal sense of belonging to the Washington Heights bilingual community and use of Spanish. As shown in Figure 1, the Spanish spoken by Nina, Benny, Sonny, Usnavi, and Graffiti Pete is unlike the Spanish spoken by the other characters. Likewise, the correlation between their relationship with the community and their Spanish usage is strong because these characters do not feel they belong in their neighborhood.

Nina is seen as the one who "made it out" of the community and succeeded in going to university. This character sings about the pressure she has felt her entire life to achieve more than what the Heights is able to offer her, which is seen as she tries to rise to a higher social class and get an Ivy League education. Ultimately, her sparse Spanish usage most likely comes from her feelings of dissatisfaction with and distance from her community.

Benny is the only non-Hispanic main character. As a result, he experiences moments of exclusion the community because he doesn't speak their language. Unlike the Spanish-speaking characters, he can't understand what the others mean when

they code-switch. However, he does spend time trying to learn and practice Spanish, which comprises his small percentage of Spanish usage.

Sonny is afraid of his future and limitations as an undocumented youth. He uses more English slang and Black English than Spanish throughout the musical, which can be attributed to his attempt to blend in with the larger monolingual English community and other teenagers his age. Usnavi also is conflicted with his community identity. He wants to return to the Dominican Republic but also feels like he has a home and a family in Washington Heights. He is a bilingual individual who uses English more than Spanish perhaps to show his proud status as an American or in accordance with feeling guilty for wanting to leave his community. As for Graffiti Pete, the script lacks personal information about him and his motives for not using Spanish, although he understands and responds to it in a few contexts.

The context of the Spanish name for an item, the third most common context in the study, is also known as CSI (Culture-Specific Items in Translation). In the musical, this concept focuses on educating the audience about culture or language by allowing them to experience it (Rua, 2020). In general, Spanish in *In the Heights* is used in a variety of speech acts and contexts but most importantly as a means to communicate and construct a strong speech community. It connects people, binds a character to an in-group, and unifies everyone in the neighborhood. On the other hand, it also shuts out those that cannot speak it or those who are trying to separate themselves from the Washington Heights community.

There were several struggles and limitations to this study. *In the Heights* is not based on natural speech and has elements of artistic liberty instead of purposeful code-switching. It also not only has code-switching but Spanglish, which made documenting the Spanish instances more complicated. For example, the phrase *muñeca's* was used, which is a combination of English possessive morphology and *muñeca*, the Spanish word for doll. There were other similar instances throughout the musical. Counting words like *abuela* (a title) and *bodega* (the generic word from Spanish origin used for small shops in New York) resulted in subjective conclusions and data collection. Even more difficult, however, was conducting qualitative analysis based on the pragmatic use of Spanish. It also resulted in my best judgment based on

the characters, setting, and greater background. This is not a peer-reviewed article and all research was completed by a single researcher.

This study gained insights into Spanish usage by analyzing the character in relation to the community as a whole. People are more likely to speak a language they share with a community that they are proud and comfortable being a member of. However, deeper and more specific analysis can be done with this data set to produce more insights on the topic of speech acts or semantic purposes behind code-switching. Similar studies should also be done with naturalistic speech settings to better understand a heritage language as a tool for ethnic power, heritage, and unity.

References

Auer, P. (1999). From codeswitching via language mixing to fused lects: Toward a dynamic typology of bilingual speech. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, *3*(4), 309–332. https://doi.org/10.1177/13670069990030040101

Crystal, D. (2002). "Why should we care?" In *Language Death*, (pp. 27–67). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781139871549.003

DeFeo, D. J. (2017). Profiles of an acquisition generation: Nontraditional heritage speakers of Spanish. *International Multilingual Research Journal*, *12*(1), 3–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2017.1349526

Dicker, S. (2006) Dominican Americans in Washington Heights, New York: Language and culture in a transnational community. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *9*(6), 713–727. https://doi.org/10.2167/beb350.0

Jiménez Carra, N. (2019). The presence of Spanish in American movies and television shows: Dubbing and subtitling strategies. *Vigo International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *6*(9), 51–71.

Mandala, S. (2007). Solidarity and the Scoobies: An analysis of the -y suffix in the television series Buffy the vampire slayer. *Language and Literature: International Journal of Stylistics*, *16*(1), 53–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963947007072845

Mathews, J. (2019, April 25). Half of the world is bilingual. What's our problem? *The Washington Post*. Retrieved April 10, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/half-the-world-is-bilingual-whats-our-p roblem/2019/04/24/1c2b0cc2-6625-11e9-a1b6-b29b90efa879_story.html

Rua, C. (2020). El poder y educación: Bilingualism and translation in the American musical. *Delos*, *35*(1), 45–61. https://dx.doi.org/10.5744/delos.2020.1005

Sánchez-Muñoz, A., & Amezcua, A. (2019). Spanish as a tool of Latinx resistance against repression in a hostile political climate. *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures*, *3*(2), 59–76. https://doi.org/10.2979/chiricu.3.2.05

Williams, A., Srinivasan, M., Liu, C., Lee, P., & Zhou, Q. (2020). Why do bilinguals code-switch when emotional? Insights from immigrant parent-child interactions. *Emotion*, *20*(5), 830–841. https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000568

Wolfson, N., & Mannes, J. (1980). The compliments as a social strategy. *Papers in Linguistic: International Journal of Human Communication*, *13*(3), 391–410. https://doi.org/10.1080/08351818009370503

Appendix

	Spanish Words	English Words
Usnavi de la Visa	69	3164
Nina Rosario	92	1789
Kevin Rosario	49	404
Camila Rosario	35	771
Benny	23	1789
Vanessa	20	1215
Sonny	7	804
Abuela Claudia	119	731
Daniela	110	748
Carla	33	331
Graffiti Pete	0	178
Piraguero	153	194
Ensemble	233	608

	Total Words	Frequency of Spanish words
Usnavi de la Visa	2322	0.02134240643
Nina Rosario	1881	0.04891015417
Kevin Rosario	1006	0.04870775348
Camila Rosario	806	0.04342431762
Benny	1812	0.01269315673
Vanessa	1236	0.01618122977
Sonny	811	0.008631319359
Abuela Claudia	850	0.14
Daniela	858	0.1282051282
Carla	364	0.09065934066
Graffiti Pete	178	0
Piraguero	347	0.4409221902
Ensemble	841	0.2770511296

	Percentage of Spanish spoken	Total phrases in Spanish
Usnavi de la Visa	2.13%	28
Nina Rosario	4.89%	35
Kevin Rosario	4.87%	23
Camila Rosario	4.34%	18
Benny	1.27%	11
Vanessa	1.62%	11
Sonny	0.86%	4
Abuela Claudia	14%	42
Daniela	12.82%	33
Carla	9.1%	17
Graffiti Pete	0%	0
Piraguero	44.1%	52
Ensemble	27.71%	88

	Percentage of complete Spanish phrases	Percentage of mixed Spanish phrases
Usnavi de la Visa	61%	39%
Nina Rosario	91%	9%
Kevin Rosario	35%	65%
Camila Rosario	50%	50%
Benny	64%	36%
Vanessa	55%	45%
Sonny	50%	50%
Abuela Claudia	67%	33%
Daniela	64%	36%
Carla	71%	29%
Graffiti Pete	0%	0%
Piraguero	77%	23%
Ensemble	93%	7%