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Language, Race, and White Public Space

Author(s): Jane H. Hill

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JANE H. HILL

Department of Anthropology

University of Arizona

Tucson, AZ 85721

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## Language, Race, and White Public Space

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White public space is constructed through (1) intense monitoring of the speech of racialized populations such as Chicanos and Latinos and African Americans for signs of linguistic disorder and (2) the invisibility of almost identical signs in the speech of Whites, where language mixing, required for the expression of a highly valued type of colloquial persona, takes several forms. One such form, Mock Spanish, exhibits a complex semiotics. By direct indexicality, Mock Spanish presents speakers as possessing desirable personal qualities. By indirect indexicality, it reproduces highly negative racializing stereotypes of Chicanos and Latinos. In addition, it indirectly indexes “whiteness” as an unmarked normative order. Mock Spanish is compared to White “crossover” uses of African American English. Finally, the question of the potential for such usages to be reshaped to subvert the order of racial practices in discourse is briefly explored. [*discourse, racism, whiteness, indexicality, Spanish*]

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### The Study of Racism in Anthropology

Anthropologists share a contradictory heritage: Our intellectual ancestors include both founders of scientific racism and important pioneers of the antiracist movement. After many years in which anthropologists have given far less attention to racism as an object of cultural analysis than have many of our sister disciplines, we are now returning to work that honors and advances our antiracist heritage.

Racism should be as central a question for research in cultural anthropology as “race” has been in biological anthropology. We have always been interested in forms of widely shared apparent irrationality, from divination to the formation of unilineal kin groups to the hyperconsumption of (or abstention from) the flesh of cattle, and racism is precisely this kind of phenomenon. Why, if nearly all scientists concur that human “races” are imaginary, do so many highly educated, cosmopolitan, economically secure people continue to think and act as racists? We know that “apparent irrationalities” seldom turn out to be the result of ignorance or confusion. Instead, they appear locally as quite rational, being rooted in history and tradition, functioning as important organizing principles in relatively enduring political ecologies, and lending coherence and meaning to complex and ambiguous human experiences. Racism is no different: As Smedley (1993:25) has argued, “race . . . [is] a worldview, . . . a cosmological ordering system structured out of the political, economic, and social realities of peoples who had emerged as expansionist, conquering, dominating nations on a worldwide quest for wealth and power.” Racism challenges the most

advanced anthropological thinking, because racial formation processes (Omi and Winant 1994) are contested and contradictory, yet global in their scope. At the local level racial practices (Winant 1994) can be very complex. Yet emerging global “racialscales” (Harrison 1995:49, borrowing from Appadurai 1990) encompass even the most remote populations, as when the Taiap of the backwaters of the Lower Sepik River feel themselves to be “Black” as against “White” (Kulick 1993).

### From “All Languages Are Equal” to the Study of Racializing Discourses

Like other anthropologists (and other linguists), linguistic anthropologists have made “education,” with its implicit assumption of a confrontation with “ignorance,” their central antiracist strategy. Attempts to inoculate students against beliefs in “primitive languages,” “linguistic deprivation,” or the idea that bilingualism (in certain languages) is inevitably seditious can be found in every introductory textbook in linguistics, and major scholars in the field have tried to spread the message not only as classroom educators, but as public intellectuals in a wide range of functions. And what have we to show for these efforts? “Official English” legislation on the books in many states, and, in the winter of 1996–97, a nationwide “moral panic” (Hall et al. 1978)<sup>1</sup> about whether “Ebonics” might be discussed in the classrooms of Oakland, California. In the case of the Ebonics panic, the nearly universal reaction among linguists<sup>2</sup> and linguistic anthropologists was “We must redouble our efforts at education! How can we make classroom and textbook units on the equality of all languages,

let alone all varieties of English, more effective? How can we place opinion pieces to fight this nonsense?" The problem here, of course, is that such interventions not only neglect the underlying cultural logic of the stigmatization of African American English, but also neglect the much deeper problem pointed out by James Baldwin: "It is not the Black child's language which is despised: It is his experience" (Baldwin 1979, cited in Lippi-Green 1997)—and Baldwin might have added, had he not been writing in the *New York Times*, "and his body."

Antiracist education in linguistics and linguistic anthropology has centered on demonstrations of the equality and adequacy of racialized forms of language, ranging from Boas's ([1889]1982) demolition of the concept of "alternating sounds" and "primitive languages" to Labov's (1972) canonical essay on "The logic of non-standard English."<sup>3</sup> But until very recently, there has been little research on the "culture of language" of the dominant, "race-making" (Williams 1989) populations. New studies are beginning to appear, such as Fabian (1986), Silverstein (1987), Woolard (1989), and Lippi-Green (1997). Urciuoli's (1996) ethnography of speaking of Spanish and English among Puerto Ricans in New York City is perhaps the first monograph on the talk of a racialized population that foregrounds, and contributes to, contemporary theories of racial formation processes through her analysis of cultural phenomena such as "accent" and "good English."

A central theoretical commitment for many linguistic anthropologists, that "culture is localized in concrete, publicly accessible signs, the most important of which are actually occurring instances of discourse" (Urban 1991:1), prepares us to contribute in new ways to the untangling of the complexity of racism. Furthermore, such study is an obvious extension of an active line of research on linguistic ideologies (Woolard and Schieffelin 1994). We can explore questions like: What kinds of signs are made "concrete and publicly accessible" by racializing discourses? What kinds of discourses count, or do not count, as "racist," and by what (and whose) cultural logic? What are the different kinds of racializing discourses, and how are these distributed in speech communities? What discourse processes socialize children as racial subjects?<sup>4</sup> What are the discourses of resistance, and what do they reveal about the forms of racism? What discourse processes relate the racialization of bodies to the racialization of kinds of speech? And all of these questions must, of course, be qualified by the question, in what kinds of contexts?

### **"Spanish Accents" and "Mock Spanish": Linguistic Order and Disorder in White Public Space**

To illustrate a linguistic-anthropological approach to these issues, I build on an analysis by Urciuoli (1996), re-centering it from her research on bilingual Puerto Ricans

in New York City to a national community of Whites.<sup>5</sup> I have been looking at uses of Spanish by Whites, both through on-the-spot observation of informal talk and through following as wide a range as possible of media and sites of mass reproduction such as advertising fliers, gift coffee cups, souvenir placemats, and greeting cards, for several years. First, I review Urciuoli's analysis of the racialization of Puerto Ricans through attention to their linguistic "disorder."

### **Puerto Rican Linguistic Marginalization: Disorderly Order**

Urciuoli argues that her consultants experience language as differentiated into two spheres. In an "inner sphere" of talk among intimates in the household and neighborhood, the boundaries between "Spanish" and "English" are blurred and ambiguous both formally and functionally. Here, speakers exploit linguistic resources with diverse histories with great skill and fluency, achieving extremely subtle interactional effects. But in an "outer sphere" of talk (and engagement with text) with strangers and, especially, with gatekeepers like court officers, social workers, and schoolteachers, the difference between Spanish and English is "sharply objectified" (Urciuoli 1996:2). Boundaries and order are everything. The pressure from interlocutors to keep the two languages "in order" is so severe that people who function as fluent bilinguals in the inner sphere become so anxious about their competence that sometimes they cannot speak at all. Among the most poignant of the intricate ambiguities of this duality are that worries about being "disorderly" are never completely absent from the intimacies of the inner sphere, and people who successfully negotiate outer-sphere order are vulnerable to the accusation that they are "acting White," betraying their friends and relatives.

Urciuoli observes that a (carefully managed) Spanish is licensed in the outer sphere in such contexts as "folk-life festivals," as part of processes of "ethnification" that work to make difference "cultural, neat, and safe" (Urciuoli 1996:9).<sup>6</sup> But Whites hear other public Spanish as impolite and even dangerous. Urciuoli (1996:35) reports that "nearly every Spanish-speaking bilingual I know . . . has experienced complaints about using Spanish in a public place." Even people who always speak English "in public" worry about their "accents." While "accent" is a cultural dimension of speech and therefore lives largely in the realm of the imaginary, this construct is to some degree anchored in a core of objective phonetic practices that are difficult to monitor, especially when people are nervous and frightened. Furthermore, it is well-known that Whites will hear "accent" even when, objectively, none is present, if they can detect any other signs of a racialized identity.<sup>7</sup> Speakers are anxious about far more than "accent," however: they worry about cursing, using vocabulary items that

might seem uncultivated, and even about using too many tokens of “you know.” Mediated by cultural notions of “correctness” and “good English,” failures of linguistic order, real and imagined, become in the outer sphere signs of race: “difference as inherent, disorderly, and dangerous” (Urciuoli 1996:9).

The main point for my argument is that Puerto Ricans experience the “outer sphere” as an important site of their racialization, since they are always found wanting by this sphere’s standards of linguistic orderliness. My research suggests that precisely the opposite is true for Whites. Whites permit themselves a considerable amount of disorder precisely at the language boundary that is a site of discipline for Puerto Ricans (and other members of historically Spanish-speaking populations in the United States)—that is, the boundary between Spanish and English in public discourse. I believe that this contrast, in which White uses of Spanish create a desirable “colloquial” presence for Whites, but uses of Spanish by Puerto Ricans (and members of other historically Spanish-speaking groups in the United States) are “disorderly and dangerous,” is one of the ways in which this arena of usage is constituted as a part of what Page and Thomas (1994) have called “White public space”: a morally significant set of contexts that are the most important sites of the practices of a racializing hegemony, in which Whites are invisibly normal, and in which racialized populations are visibly marginal and the objects of monitoring ranging from individual judgment to Official English legislation.

### White Linguistic Normalcy: Orderly Disorder

While Puerto Ricans are extremely self-conscious about their “Spanish” accents in English, heavy English “accents” in Spanish are perfectly acceptable for Whites, even when Spanish speakers experience them as “like a fingernail on the blackboard.” Lippi-Green (1997) points out the recent emergence of an industry of accent therapists, who offer their services to clients ranging from White southerners to Japanese executives working at American plant sites. But the most absurd accents are tolerated in Spanish, even in Spanish classes at the graduate level. I have played to a number of audiences a tape of a *Saturday Night Live* skit from several years ago, in which the actors, playing television news writers at a story conference, use absurdly exaggerated “Spanish” accents in names for Mexican food, places, sports teams, and the like. The Latino actor Jimmy Smits appears and urges them to use “normal anglicizations” (Hill 1993a). Academic audiences find the skit hilarious, and one of its points (it permits multiple interpretations) seems to be that it is somehow inappropriate for Whites to try to sound “Spanish.”

While Puerto Ricans agonize over whether or not their English is cultivated enough, the public written use of

Spanish by Whites is often grossly nonstandard and ungrammatical. Hill (1993a) includes examples ranging from street names, to advertising, to public-health messages. *Wash Your Hands/Lava sus manos*, originally reported by Peñalosa (1980) in San Bernardino County, California, can be found in restrooms all over the southwestern United States. Peñalosa observed that this example is especially remarkable since it has as many grammatical errors as it has words.<sup>8</sup> An excellent case was the reprinting by the *Arizona Daily Star* (August 10, 1997) of an essay by the Colombian Nobelist Gabriel García Márquez that originally appeared in the *New York Times* (August 3, 1997). All of the diacritics on the Spanish words—and the problem of accent marks had been one of García Márquez’s main points—were missing in the *Star* version. Tucson is the home of a major university and has a large Spanish-speaking population, and the audience for the piece (which appeared on the op-ed page of the Sunday edition) no doubt included many people who are literate in Spanish. Clearly, however, the *Star* was not concerned about offering this audience a literate text.

While Puerto Rican code switching is condemned as disorderly, Whites “mix” their English with Spanish in contexts ranging from coffee-shop chat to faculty meetings to the evening network newscasts and the editorial pages of major newspapers. Their “Mock Spanish” incorporates Spanish-language materials into English in order to create a jocular or pejorative “key.” The practices of Mock Spanish include, first, semantic pejoration of Spanish loans: the use of positive or neutral Spanish words in humorous or negative senses. Perhaps the most famous example is *macho*, which in everyday Spanish merely means “male.” Equally important are Spanish expressions of leave-taking, like *adiós* and *hasta la vista*, used in Mock Spanish as kidding (or as serious) “kiss-offs” (Mock-Spanish “adios” is attested in this sense from the mid-nineteenth century). A second strategy borrows obscene or scatological Spanish words for use as Mock-Spanish euphemisms, as on the handwritten sign “Casa de Pee-Pee” on the door of the women’s restroom in the X-ray department of a Tucson clinic, a coffee cup that I purchased in a gift shop near the University of Arizona Main Gate that bears the legend “Caca de Toro,” and, of course, the case of *cojones*, exemplified below. In the third strategy, elements of “Spanish” morphology, mainly the suffix *-o*, often accompanied by “Spanish” modifiers like *mucho* or *el*, are borrowed to create jocular and pejorative forms like “el cheap-o,” “numero two-o,” or “mucho trouble-o.” In a recent example, heard on PBS’s *Washington Week in Review*, moderator Ken Bode observed that, had the “palace coup” in the House of Representatives in July 1997 not been averted, the Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich would have been “Newt-o Frito.” The last major strategy of Mock Spanish is the use of “hyperanglicized” and parodic pronunciations and orthographic representations

of Spanish loan words, as with “Grassy-ass,” “Hasty lumbago,” and “Fleas Navidad” (a picture of a scratching dog usually accompanies this one, which shows up every year on Christmas cards).

Mock Spanish is attested at least from the end of the eighteenth century, and in recent years it has become an important part of the “middling style” (Cmiel 1990), a form of public language that emerged in the nineteenth century as a way for elites to display democratic and egalitarian sensibilities by incorporating colloquial and even slangy speech. Recent relaxations of proscriptions against public vulgarity have made even quite offensive usages within Mock Spanish acceptable at the highest level of public discourse, as when the then-Ambassador to the United Nations Madeleine Albright addressed the Security Council after Cuban aircraft had shot down two spy planes manned by Cuban exiles: Cuban president Fidel Castro, she said, had shown “not *cojones*, but cowardice.” Although many Spanish speakers find this particular usage exceptionally offensive,<sup>10</sup> Albright’s sally was quoted again and again in admiring biographical pieces in the major English-language news media after she was nominated to be Secretary of State (e.g., Gibbs 1996:33).

### The Semiotics of Mock Spanish

In previous work (e.g., Hill 1995), I analyzed Mock Spanish as a “racist discourse.” That is, I took its major functions to be the “elevation of whiteness” and the pejorative racialization of members of historically Spanish-speaking populations. Mock Spanish accomplishes the “elevation of whiteness” through what Ochs (1990) has called “direct indexicality”: the production of nonreferential meanings or “indexes” that are understood and acknowledged by speakers. Speakers of Mock Spanish say that they use it because they have been exposed to Spanish—that is, they are cosmopolitan.<sup>11</sup> Or, that they use it in order to express their loyalty to, and affiliation with, the Southwest (or California, or Florida)—that is, they have regional “authenticity.” Or that they use it because it is funny—that is, they have a sense of humor. In one particularly elaborate example, in the film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, Mock Spanish is used to turn Arnold Schwarzenegger, playing a cyborg, into a “real person,” a sympathetic hero instead of a ruthless and terrifying machine. When Schwarzenegger, who has just returned from the future, answers a request with a curt Germanic “Affirmative,” the young hero of the film, a 12-year-old White boy supposedly raised on the streets of Los Angeles, tells him, “No no no no no. You gotta listen to the way people talk!” He then proceeds to teach Schwarzenegger the Mock Spanish tags “No problemo” and “Hasta la vista, baby” as part of a register that also includes insults like “Dickwad.”<sup>12</sup>

Analysis reveals that Mock Spanish projects, in addition to the directly indexed message that the speaker possesses a “congenial persona,” another set of messages: profoundly racist images of members of historically Spanish-speaking populations. These messages are the product of what Ochs (1990) calls “indirect indexicality” in that, unlike the positive direct indexes, they are never acknowledged by speakers. In my experience, Whites almost always deny that Mock Spanish could be in any way racist. Yet in order to “make sense of” Mock Spanish, interlocutors require access to very negative racializing representations of Chicanos and Latinos as stupid, politically corrupt, sexually loose, lazy, dirty, and disorderly. It is impossible to “get” Mock Spanish—to find these expressions funny or colloquial or even intelligible—unless one has access to these negative images. An exemplary case is a political cartoon in my collection, showing a picture of Ross Perot pointing to a chart that says, among other things, “Perot for El Presidente.” This is funny only if the audience can juxtapose the pompous and absurd Perot with the negative image of a banana-republic dictator, dripping with undeserved medals. It is only possible to “get” “Hasta la vista, baby” if one has access to a representation of Spanish speakers as treacherous. “Mañana” works as a humorous substitute for “later” only in conjunction with an image of Spanish speakers as lazy and procrastinating. My claim that Mock Spanish has a racializing function is supported by the fact that on humorous greeting cards (where it is fairly common) it is often accompanied by grossly racist pictorial representations of “Mexicans.”

I have labeled Mock Spanish a “covert racist discourse” because it accomplishes racialization of its subordinate-group targets through indirect indexicality, messages that must be available for comprehension but are never acknowledged by speakers. In this it contrasts with “vulgar racist discourse,” which uses the direct referential function in statements like, “Mexicans just don’t know how to work,” or hate speech (“Lazy greaser!”), which seems to operate through the performative function as a direct verbal “assault” (Matsuda et al. 1993). It is not exactly like the kind of kidding around that most Whites will admit can be interpreted as racist, as when David Letterman joked that the artificial fat olestra, which can cause abdominal pain and diarrhea, was “endorsed by the Mexican Health Department” (*New York Times*, August 24, 1997:F12). It also contrasts with the “elite racist discourse” identified by van Dijk (1993). Van Dijk pointed out that like Mock Spanish this type has as one function the presentation by the speaker of a desirable persona. Since “being a racist” is an undesirable quality, tokens often begin with qualifications like “I’m not a racist, but . . .” and then continue with a racializing argument like “I really resent it that all these Mexicans come up here to have babies so that American taxpayers will support them.” Such qualifications do not

make sense with Mock Spanish: One cannot say, "I'm not a racist, but no problema," or "I'm not a racist, but comprende?," or "I'm not a racist, but adios, sucker." The reason this frame does not work is because Mock Spanish racializes its objects only covertly, through indirect indexicality.

Mock Spanish sometimes is used to constitute hate speech (as in posters saying "Adios, Jose" held by demonstrators supporting anti-immigration laws in California), and co-occurs with racist joking and with vulgar and elite racist discourses as well. It is sometimes used to address apparent Spanish speakers; many of my consultants report being addressed as "amigo," and Vélez-Ibáñez (1996:86) reports an offensive use of "comprende?" (pronounced [kəmprɛndiy]). However, it is found very widely in everyday talk and text on topics that have nothing to do with race at all. Because of its covert and indirect properties, Mock Spanish may be an exceptionally powerful site for the reproduction of White racist attitudes. In order to be "one of the group" among other Whites, collusion in the production of Mock Spanish is frequently unavoidable.

In my previous work, reviewed above, I have assumed that the "elevation of whiteness" and the constitution of a valued White persona was accomplished in Mock Spanish entirely through direct indexicality. However, in the light of Urciuoli's new work on the imposition of "order" on Puerto Ricans, I now believe that Mock Spanish accomplishes the "elevation of whiteness" in two ways: first, through directly indexing valuable and congenial personal qualities of speakers, but, importantly, also by the same type of indirect indexicality that is the source of its negative and racializing messages. It is through indirect indexicality that using Mock Spanish constructs "White public space," an arena in which linguistic disorder on the part of Whites is rendered invisible and normative, while the linguistic behavior of members of historically Spanish-speaking populations is highly visible and the object of constant monitoring.

Research on "whiteness" (e.g., Frankenberg 1993) has shown that Whites practice not only the construction of the domain of "color" and the exclusion from resources of those racialized as "colored," but also the constitution of "whiteness" as an invisible and unmarked "norm."<sup>13</sup> Like all such norms, this one is built as bricolage, from the bits and pieces of history, but in a special way, as what Williams (1989), borrowing from Gramsci, calls a "transformist hegemony": "its construction results in a national process aimed at homogenizing heterogeneity fashioned around assimilating elements of heterogeneity through appropriations that devalue and deny their link to the marginalized others' contribution to the patrimony" (Williams 1989:435).<sup>14</sup>

Bits and pieces of language are important "elements of heterogeneity" in this work. Urciuoli (1996) has shown that precisely this kind of "heterogeneity" is not permitted

to Puerto Ricans. What I have tried to show above is that linguistic heterogeneity and even explicit "disorder" is not only permitted to Whites, it is an essential element of a desirable White public persona. To be White is to collude in these practices, or to risk censure as "having no sense of humor" or being "politically correct." But White practice is invisible to the monitoring of linguistic disorder. It is not understood by Whites as disorder—after all, they are not, literally, "speaking Spanish" (and indeed the phenomena of public ungrammaticality, orthographical absurdity, and parodic mispronunciations of Spanish are evidence that they go to some lengths to distance themselves from such an interpretation of their behavior [Hill 1993a]). Instead, they are simply being "natural": funny, relaxed, colloquial, authentic.

I have collected some evidence that members of historically Spanish-speaking populations do not share Whites' understanding of Mock Spanish. For instance, the sociologist Clara Rodríguez (1997:78) reports that she was "puzzled . . . with regard to [the] relevance" of the Mock Spanish in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Literate Spanish speakers in the United States are often committed linguistic purists, and Mock Spanish is offensive to them because it contains so many grammatical errors and because it sometimes uses rude words. They focus on this concern, but of course they have little power to change White usage.<sup>15</sup> It is clear that many Spanish speakers do hear the racist message of Mock Spanish. In an interview,<sup>16</sup> a Spanish-speaking Chicano high school counselor in Tucson said, "You know, I've noticed that most of the teachers never use any Spanish around here unless it's something negative." A Spanish-speaking Chicano businesswoman said, "When you first hear that stuff, you think, that's nice, they're trying, but then you hear more and more and you realize that there's something nasty underneath." In lecturing on Mock Spanish, I have found that Chicano and Latino people in my audiences strongly concur with the main outlines of my analysis, and often bring me additional examples. Chicano scholars, especially Fernando Peñalosa (cf. 1980), have long pointed out the racist implications of disorderly Spanish usage by Whites. Thus, for thoughtful Spanish speakers, the fact that disorderly Spanish and "Mock Spanish" constitute a "White public space" is not news. One of the dimensions of this space is that disorder on the part of Whites (including not only Mock Spanish, but also cursing and a variety of locutionary sins of the "you know" type) is largely invisible, while disorder on the part of racialized populations is hypervisible to the point of being the object of expensive political campaigns and nationwide "moral panics."

### More Sources for Homogeneous Heterogeneity

The "incorporation"<sup>17</sup> of linguistic elements into the linguistic "homogeneous heterogeneity" of White public

space draws on many sources. Perhaps the most important is what Smitherman (1994) calls the “crossover” of forms from African American English (AAE).<sup>18</sup> Gubar (1997) builds on the work of Morrison (1992) and others in a richly detailed study of very widespread and pervasive incorporative processes in the usage of White artists and writers. However, AAE and White English are so thoroughly entangled in the United States that crossover is extremely difficult to study. While obvious “wiggerisms” like “Word to your Mother”<sup>19</sup> or moth-eaten tokens of minstrelsy like “Sho’ nuff, Mistah Bones” are easy to spot, many other usages are curiously indeterminate.<sup>20</sup> Even where an AAE source is recognizable to an etymologist, it is often impossible to know whether the usage indexes any “blackness” to its user or audience. One way of understanding this indeterminacy might be to see it as a triumph of White racial practice. New tokens of White “hipness,” often retrievable as Black in origin only by the most doctored scholarship (although often visible to Blacks), are constantly created out of AAE materials.

An example of indeterminate crossover appeared in the “For Better or for Worse” comic strip published in the *Arizona Daily Star* (August 22, 1997). Two White Canadian lads discuss how Lawrence should deal with his partner’s departure to study music in Paris. Bobby, who is straight, tries to reassure Lawrence, who is gay,<sup>21</sup> that falling in love is always worth it, even knowing the risk of loss. Lawrence jokes, “Let it be known that this speech comes from a guy who’s in a ‘happening’ relationship.” “Happening” in this sense comes from AAE “happenin,” but it seems unlikely that here it is intended to convey anything more than the strip creator’s alertness to “the speech of today’s young people” (although the quotation marks around the form do suggest that she regards this register as not part of her own repertoire). Yet similar usages can be highly salient for Blacks: Lippi-Green (1997:196) quotes an audience member on an episode of Oprah Winfrey: “This is a fact. White America use black dialect on commercials every day. Be observant, people. Don’t let nobody tell you that you are ignorant and that you don’t speak right. Be observant. They started off Channel 7 Eyewitness news a few years ago with one word: whashappenin. So what’s happening, America?”

Now, contrast the episode of “For Better or for Worse” described above with another episode, published a couple of years ago. Here the young people are on a ski slope, and one boy, Gordon, “hits on” (I am sure Smitherman [1994] is correct that this is AAE, but in my own usage it feels merely slangy) a pretty girl with our now-familiar token, “What’s happening?” She “puts him down” (probably also AAE, but not in Smitherman 1994)<sup>22</sup> with “With you? Nada.” While probably few White readers of this strip sense “blackness” in “What’s happening?”, most will immediately detect “Nada” as “Spanish.” That is, while the “Black” indexicality of “What’s happening” is easily sup-

pressed, it is virtually impossible to suppress the “Spanish” indexicality of “Nada,” which has in “Mock Spanish” the semantically pejorated sense “absolutely nothing, less than zero.” It seems likely that there are tokens that originate in Mock Spanish where the original indexicality is suppressable (the word *peon*, pronounced [piyan], which appeared in English by the seventeenth century, may be an example of this type), but in general tokens of this practice are relatively easy to spot and interpret.

Because of this relative transparency of Mock Spanish, it is a good choice for linguistic-anthropological research. However, precisely because it is narrower in its range of opacity and transparency than is AAE “crossover,” it must function somewhat differently in White public space, an issue that needs investigation. Furthermore, African Americans themselves apparently use Mock Spanish; Terry McMillan’s 1996 novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, is rich in attestations in the speech of Stella, a beautiful and successful African American professional woman from California. In contrast, as far as I know no members of historically Spanish-speaking populations use Mock Spanish, at least not in anything like the routine way that Whites do.<sup>23</sup>

The same question, of differential functions of such linguistic incorporations into White “homogeneous heterogeneity,” occurs with borrowings from other languages. For instance, tokens of “Mock French” like “Mercy buckets” and “bow-koo” do occur, but they are relatively rare, especially in comparison with the very extensive use of French in advertising, especially in the fashion industry, to convey luxury and exclusivity. “Mock Italian” seems to have been relatively important in the 1940s and 1950s but is apparently on the way out; I have found very few examples of it. “Mock Yiddish” is common but is used by members of historically Yiddish-speaking groups as well as by outsiders. “Mock Japanese” “sayonara” is perfectly parallel to Mock Spanish “adios,” but may be the only widely used token of this type.<sup>24</sup> In summary, “Mock” forms vary widely in relative productivity and in the kinds of contexts in which they appear. By far the richest examples of linguistic incorporations are Mock Spanish and AAE crossover.

### Can Mock Forms Subvert the Order of Racial Practices?

A number of authors, including Hewitt (1986), Gubar (1997) and Butler (1997), have argued that usages that in some contexts are grossly racist seem to contain an important parodic potential that can be turned to the antiracist deconstruction of racist categorical essentializing. Hewitt studied Black-White friendships among young teenagers in south London and found a “productive dialogue of youth” (1986:99) in which he identifies antiracist potential. Especially notable were occasions where Black children



would tease White friends as “nigger,” and the White teens would reply with “honky” or “snowflake.” Hewitt comments, “This practice . . . turns racism into a kind of effigy, to be burned up in an interactive ritual which seeks to acknowledge and deal with its undeniable presence whilst acting out the negation of its effects” (1986:238). Gubar (1997) suggests that posters by the artist Iké Udé (such as a famous image of Marilyn Monroe, but in “blackface,” and a transformation of Robert Mapplethorpe’s infamous “Man in a Polyester Suit” with white skin and a circumcised penis) may use the symbolic repertoire of racism as “a crucial aesthetic means of comprehending racial distinction without entrenching or denying it” (Gubar 1997:256). An example in the case of Spanish might be the performance art of Guillermo Gómez Peña,<sup>25</sup> who creates frenzied mixtures of English and multiple registers and dialects of Spanish (and even Nahuatl). Butler (1997), writing in opposition to the proscription of racist vocabulary by anti-hate speech legislation, argues that gays and lesbians have been able to subvert the power of “queer,” and that other “hate words” may have similar potential. The kinds of games reported by Hewitt, however, remain reserved to childhood, unable to break through the dominant voices of racism; Hewitt found that the kind of interracial friendship that permitted teasing with racist epithets essentially vanished from the lives of his subjects by the time they reached the age of 16. In the light of the analysis that I have suggested above, the “subversions” noted by Gubar and Butler can also be seen simply as one more example of “orderly” disorder that is reserved to elites in White public space, rather than as carnivalesque inversions. Or, perhaps we should say that carnivalesque inversions can be a “weapon of the strong” as well as a “weapon of the weak.”<sup>26</sup> The art of a Gómez Peña, to the degree that it is acceptable to White audiences, may precisely “whiten” this performer and others like him.

An important possible exception is the phenomenon of “crossing,” discussed by British sociolinguist Ben Rampton (1995), who reports extensive use of out-group linguistic tokens among British adolescents of a variety of ethnic origins, including strongly racialized populations like West Indians and South Asians as well as Whites. “Crossings,” while they retain some potential to give offense, often seem simply to acknowledge what is useful and desirable in the space of urban diversity. Thus, working-class White girls learn the Panjabi lyrics to “bhangra” songs, and Bengali kids speak Jamaican creole (which seems to have emerged in general as a prestigious language among British youth, parallel to the transracial “hip-hop” phenomenon in the United States). Early reports by Shirley Brice Heath of new work with American adolescents has identified similar “crossing” phenomena.<sup>27</sup> However, only slightly more than a decade ago Hewitt (1986) found that such crossings did not survive

the adolescent years. We cannot be sure that these phenomena are genuinely outside the linguistic order of racism until we understand dimensions of that order—within which age-graded cohorts may have a relatively enduring place. I have tried above to show how linguistic-anthropological attention to the history, forms, and uses of White language mixing can help us toward such an understanding.

## Notes

*Acknowledgments.* I would especially like to thank María Rodríguez, Bambi Schieffelin, and Kathryn Woolard, who have provided me with valuable material on Mock Spanish.

1. Hall et al. (1978) borrow the notion of “moral panic” from Cohen (1972).

2. In a survey of 34 entries, encompassing about 100 messages, under the heading “Ebonics” on Linguist, the list that probably reaches the largest number of linguists, I found only one explicit mention of “racism” by an author who used the expression “institutional racism.” It is, perhaps, appropriate for linguists to focus on their special areas of scholarly expertise, and it is certainly the case that there may be a linguistic dimension to the educational problems confronted by many African American children, but the neglect of racism on the list was quite striking. It was sometimes addressed obliquely and euphemistically, as with one author’s proposal of the “special” situation of African Americans in the United States.

3. The “all languages are equal” argument continues in spite of a warning by Dell Hymes (1973) that this claim is technically incorrect in many subtle ways.

4. Hirschfeld (1996) documents the very early association between raced categories and an essentialized understanding of “human kinds” for young children in the United States.

5. I am mindful of Hartigan’s (1997) argument that “Whites” are by no means a homogeneous population. Indeed, in other work (Hill 1995) I have suggested that working-class speakers are less likely to use “Mock Spanish” than are other Whites. Much of my material comes from mass media that are part of the homogenizing project of “whiteness,” and there is no question that different “Whites” experience this project in different ways. I use “Whites” here (perhaps injudiciously) as a sort of shorthand required first by lack of space and second because the data required to precisely characterize the population I have in mind are not available. Certainly it includes White elites such as screenwriters and nationally syndicated columnists.

6. Urciuoli (1996:16) points out that it is essential to use Spanish in the folklife festival context because to translate songs, the names of foods, and the like into English would render them less “authentic,” this property being essential to claims on “ethnicity” that are one way to resist racialization.

7. Here the canonical study is the matched-guise test conducted by Rubin (1992). Sixty-two undergraduate native speakers of English listened to a brief lecture (on either a science or humanities topic) recorded by a native speaker of English from central Ohio. While they listened, one group of students saw a slide of a White woman lecturer. The other half saw a slide of an Asian woman in the same setting and pose (and even of the same size, and with the same hair style, as the White woman). Students



who heard the lecture under the “Asian slide” condition often reported that the lecturer had an Asian accent and, even more interestingly, scored lower on tests of comprehension of the lecture.

8. It should be *Lavarse las manos*, the usual directive for public places being the infinitive (e.g., *No fumar* ‘No Smoking,’ *No estacionarse* ‘No Parking’), the verb being reflexive, and body parts are not labeled by the possessive pronoun *su* unless they are detached from the body of their owner.

9. In earlier publications (e.g., Hill 1993b), I referred to these practices as “Junk Spanish.” I thank James Fernandez for the expression “Mock Spanish” and for convincing me that “Junk Spanish” was a bad nomenclatural idea, and the source of some of the problems I was having getting people to understand what I was working on (many people, including linguists and anthropologists, assumed that by “Junk Spanish” I meant something like the “Border Spanish” of native speakers of Spanish, rather than jocular and parodic uses of Spanish by English speakers). The most extensive discussion of Mock Spanish available is Hill (1995).

10. I am indebted to Professor Raúl Fernández of the University of California-Irvine for a copy of a letter he wrote to the *Los Angeles Times* protesting the appearance of *cojones* in a film review. Ernest Hemingway is probably to blame for the widespread knowledge of this word among monolingual speakers of English.

11. While some Whites who use Mock Spanish have a classroom competence in that language (I was a case in point), most of the speakers I have queried say that they do not “speak Spanish.”

12. An anonymous referee for the *American Anthropologist* argues that this analysis, suggesting that the “elevation of whiteness” is accomplished through direct indexicality, is not exactly correct. Instead, the direct indexicality of Mock Spanish elevates the individual, conveying “I am a nice/easy-going/funny/locally-rooted/ cosmopolitan person.” The elevation of “whiteness” is then accomplished indirectly when combined with the indirectly indexed message “I am White.” This is an interesting suggestion, but I think the *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* sequence argues that the indexicality is direct: Mock Spanish is precisely “the way people talk”—and “people” can only be that group that is unmarked and thereby “White.” Thus positive individual qualities and “whiteness” are simultaneously indexed. (A direct version of this, perhaps mercifully obsolete, is the expression that applauds some act of good fellowship with “That’s mighty White of you.”)

13. As Harrison (1995) points out, a more explicit construction of whiteness often appears among marginalized Whites, as in the current far-right “White pride” movement. She notes that this “undermines whatever incipient class consciousness exists among poor Whites” (Harrison 1995:63). Thus we can see such movements as part of the very large cultural formation wherein “race” may be the single most important organizer of relationships, determinant of identity, and mediator of meaning (Winant 1994).

14. Williams focuses her analysis on the “national process,” the creation of what she calls the race/class/nation conflation, but the construction of whiteness is probably a project of global scope, and in fact Mock Spanish seems to be widespread in the English-speaking world. Bertie, a character in the Barrytown novels (*The Commitments*, *The Snapper*, *The Van*, which depict

life in working-class Dublin) by the Irish author Roddy Doyle, often uses Mock Spanish. For another example from outside the United States, I am indebted to Dick Bauman for a headline from the gardening section of a Glasgow newspaper, inviting the reader to “Hosta la vista, baby!” (that is, to plant members of the genus *Hosta* for their decorative foliage).

15. I have discovered only one case of apparent concern about Spanish-speaking opinion in reference to the use of Spanish in mass media. Chon Noriega (1997:88) reports that when the film *Giant* was presented for review to the Production Code Administration in 1955, Geoffrey Shurlock, the head of the PCA, requested that the ungrammatical Spanish in the film (in which Spanish appears without subtitles) be corrected, apparently for fear of offending the government of Mexico, then seen as a “good neighbor.”

16. Dan Goldstein and I have begun a project of interviewing members of historically Spanish-speaking populations about Mock Spanish. We have compiled a scrapbook of examples, and subjects are audiotaped as they leaf through these and comment on them.

17. I borrow this term from Raymond Williams (1977).

18. I do not include “Vernacular” (many scholars refer to “African American Vernacular English” or AAVE), because AAE has a full range of register ranging from street argot through middle-class conversational usage to formal oratory and *belles lettres*. Scholars like Smitherman (1988) and Morgan (1994) have criticized sociolinguists for typifying AAE only through attestations of street registers.

19. Smitherman (1994:237) defines *wigger* as “literally, a white NIGGER, an emerging positive term for White youth who identify with HIP HOP, RAP, and other aspects of African American Culture.” She gives the proper form of the affirmation as “Word to the Mother,” but I first heard it (from a young White woman) in the form given.

20. In the lexicon of AAE provided by Smitherman (1994) I recognized many forms in my own usage that she does not mark as “crossovers” (to give only one example, “beauty shop” for a hair-and-nails salon was the only term I knew for such establishments as I was growing up, and it was universally used by my grandmothers, aunts, and mother, all White ladies who would never have dreamed of essaying any “Dis and Dat” [Gubar’s (1996) term for the adoption of AAE forms by White writers]). My grandfather, an egregious racist who grew up in southeastern Missouri, was very fond of “copacetic,” which Smitherman attributes to the speech of “older blacks” and does not recognize as ever having “crossed over.”

21. A number of U.S. newspapers refused to publish the series of episodes in which Lawrence mourns his partner’s departure.

22. The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Third Edition) lists “put down” as “slang.” Unsurprisingly, their sentence of attestation comes from the work of Dr. Alvin Poussaint, an African American.

23. Some Spanish speakers find some of the greeting cards in my sample funny. One woman said that she might send a “Moochos Smoochos” card (illustrating hyperanglicized parody and the use of Spanish morphology to be funny) to her husband; she said, “That one’s kinda cute.”

24. “Honcho,” from Japanese *han* “Squad” and *chō* “chief” (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Third

Edition) seems to be etymologically inaccessible as Japanese except to specialists; many Whites probably think that it is Spanish.

25. See, for instance, his *Warrior for Gringostroika* (1991). However, Gómez Peña uses so much Spanish that one must be bilingual to understand him; his art seems to me to be addressed mainly to multilingual Spanish-speaking audiences. Woolard's (1988) study of a comic in 1970s Barcelona, who entertained audiences with jokes that code switched between Castilian and Catalan during a period of extreme linguistic conflict and purism, provides another example of this type of subversion.

26. "Weapon of the weak" comes, of course, from Scott (1985). Work on discourses of resistance by scholars like Scott (see also 1990) and Bhabha (1994) often seems to imply that parody and humor are primarily strategies of resistance. However, it is obvious that humor is an important part of racist discourse, and the accusation that antiracists "have no sense of humor" is an important weapon of racists.

27. In a colloquium presented to the Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona, Tucson, January 27, 1997.

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