Panameño for Dummies

NICOLE LASSO
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Oh patria tan pequeña que cabes toda entera
Debajo de la sombra de nuestro pabellón:
Quizás fuiste tan chica para que yo pudiera
Llevarte por doquiera dentro del corazón!
- Patria, by Ricardo Miro -

Just as there are many accents for one language, say Spanish (Mexican accent, Colombian accent, etc.), there are also hybrid forms of Spanish writing, speaking, and communicating. For example, the way a Panamanian talks is different from how a Dominican might express themselves. Panama is a perfect example of cross-cultural richness and language wealth. We speak "*panameño*" proudly, and we are constantly building, rebuilding and expanding on its meaning. It is not uncommon to talk Spanglish here in Panama. We invert words. We create phrases that make absolutely no sense to explain day-to-day situations. Depending on your social status and where you live, there's a very high chance that you'll speak with either a *yeye* accent or in a *xacal* accent. We create stereotypes, mock them, and then adopt them into our culture. Our Panamanian Spanish is just as alive, rich, and colorful as people in Panama are. It is ever-changing and extremely influenced by different narratives, cultures, countries, languages and people. Because of that, this essay will deeply analyze "el panameño", the ways we speak and write, how dialect is influenced by social ranking, how it depends on the rhetorical situation, how it adds to the overall culture of a country, and how Panamanian Spanish is translingual in and of itself.

But before I put on a medical coat and start dissecting my country's language, let's talk about what translingual literacy is. Renowned linguist Canagarajah defines it in relation to code-meshing: "code-meshing is a form of writing in which multilingual merge their diverse language resources with the dominant genre conventions to construct hybrid texts for voice…beyond language as a medium to accommodate other semiotic resources such as color, images and symbols" (40-41). Basically, code-meshing is a form of translingual literacy that involves combining two different languages, like English + Spanish, to enhance the meaning of a text. A lot of multilingual students do this, as they have more language resources available to them. Think about it this way: you are at an all-you-can-eat buffet, you have all these options to pick from to create your perfect lunch, and you choose the best out of every section. After that, your plate (in this case a text, phrase, or saying) is filled with different types of food and ingredients, which makes your dish richer, more delicious, and attuned to your likes. Expressing yourself in a translingual way is exactly the same. You can start by talking in French, and then midway through the sentence change to English, and then end the text by sending a smiley emoji. Or maybe you started talking in English, but then realize that the best word to express what you feel is in Spanish, so you switch to that language. Exactly like that buffet, multilinguals have

so many language resources to pick from that it's easy to code-mesh between idioms, expressions, and cultures.

Not only that, but Canagarajah also makes the point that translingual literacy goes beyond different languages (41). It is also seen within the same language, as I explained was the case with Spanish and Panamanian Spanish. Consequently, "translingual literacy addresses the *synergy*, trading languages as always in contact and mutually influencing each other, with emergent meanings and grammars. [It] is an understanding of the production, circulation, and reception of texts that are always mobile" (Canagarajah 41). When literacy becomes translingual, there are no geographical barriers, no thousand-kilometer distances between cultures, and no regulations, dictionaries, or limitations. Translingual literacies are enriched and informed by the global language varieties of the world. I communicate this way regularly, as I feel that combining Spanish, French, and English can make what I want to say sound better and more attuned to my feelings. It is like an alliance within dialects; a "synergy," as Canagarajah puts it. There's a trade-off and a compromise between languages but also a cultural income, thus enriching the conversation by making it more global. As a result, translingual literacy seeks to understand and explain how humans speak and write, how they are influenced by environmental and cultural upbringings, the business of code-meshing, and the language exchange.

Now that I've given an overview of global translingual literacy, let's look at it from a local point of view and analyze my native tongue: *Panamanian* Spanish. Our culture has been extremely influenced by many countries and people throughout history and across the world. The United States is one of the most prominent influences of Panama's modern culture and Americanized society. Many years ago, Americans came to Panama wanting to build a canal that could connect the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. The great geographical advantage of our country is that it's an isthmus surrounded by water located in the middle of Central America, making it a prime location for such a canal. The Americans decided to stay here for an extended period of time and lived near the Panama Canal (also known as "La Zona"). Panamanians could not enter that area, even if it was in **our** land. It was a sort of segregation. On the American side of Panama, there were great schools, beautiful houses, shopping centers, restaurants, and businesses. On our side, there was discrimination, inequality, poverty, and a hunger for justice. Panamanians wanted to share and control the Panama Canal. Americans didn't want to concede. They stayed here for years. After a while, Panamanian Spanish and culture were "infected" by American words and foreign views, eventually becoming the hybrid language we speak, write, and know today. We adopted American behaviors, mannerisms, words, clothing, architecture, and ideologies and gave them our "*sazón*" (twist) *panameño*. It was the beginning of our translingual practices and the spark of a revolution. Canagarajah mentions that, "texts not only participate in local ecologies; they are themselves ecological" (44). In my opinion, "*panameño*" is in itself a habitat, an environment, and a system that can transform, survive, adapt, grow, and learn from its surroundings. Our language seems to be aware of its history. It has a mind, soul, and heart of its own. "*Panameño*" is especially translingual because it evolves very easily, becoming more modern, global, and attuned to society's necessities. It is sensitive to cultural movements, people, and global economies, and yet it's grounded enough to remember its roots. Its native speakers are just lucky enough to have been born with its history running through our blood.

Aside from its ecological and cross-cultural abilities, there are many reasons why I believe Panamanian Spanish is a perfect translingual example. First, all Panamanians will tell you that even

if we technically speak Spanish, we're in essence speaking "*panameño*". To explain this to you if you are unfamiliar with panameño, let me take you on a tour of Panama's most iconic phrases and sayings. For example, "*que xopa*!", "*tas awebao*", "*cha, no se bro*", "*toy guillado*", "*vamos a un parkin'*," and "*ayala bestia*" are common everyday phrases. "*Q xopa*" is our go-to phrase for a greeting between friends or anyone you feel comfortable with. *Xopa* is the inverted version of "*paso*", meaning "*qué paso*" or "what's up". It's funny now that I am writing this because it's the first time I've had to explain Panamanian idioms and seen how strange they are. Another thing we like to do is mix a lot of Spanish and English words together, as you can see in the common phrases, "*vamos a un **parkin**'*," "*te están tirando los **dogs***," "***fren***" (friend), or "*te tienen el **cheso***" (queso + cheese). *Parkin*' in Panama means you're going to hang out with your friends, and, yes, it is a direct allusion to car parkings. You can hang out or "*parkear*" with others, or you can go to a low-key party/reunion or "*parkin*'." Be careful, though, because when Panamanians put "parking" with a "g" then they are referring to the actual parking with cars. "*Te están tirando los dogs*" is most commonly used to tell a woman that a man's hitting on her or flirting. It literally translates to "he's throwing you the dogs", as a way to show how obvious or somewhat aggressive the guy is, or how ferociously he wants that woman's attention. "*Te tienen el cheso*," or "they have cheese for you," refers to the idea that a guy has a crush on a girl or just likes her so much he can't separate from her, like sticky fondue. As you can see, Panamanians speak with a lot of imagery. Our language expresses our hunger for life and the "*chispa*" (or "spark") within us, essentially making us the Shakespeares of modern metaphor.

Another landmark of Panamanian Spanish is the way we invert words when we talk. Instead of saying *playa* (beach), we sometimes say *yapla,* which is just *playa* inverted. Instead of saying *tengo hambre,* we say *tengo breham* when we're really hungry. The same goes for *laope,* or *pelao* (kid), and *voshue,* which is the inverted form of *huevos* (eggs). I imagine that for an outsider reading or hearing this for the first time, Panamanian Spanish must sound/look very confusing. In fact, it kind of feels like Panamanians speak in a secret code with encrypted phrases and composed algorithms known only by its programmers. Once I went on this trip to Europe with my family, and on one of the tours we took, there was another Panamanian couple. At one point in the tour, our group ran into an Asian tour group. I remember distinctly that one of the Panamanians said something like "there's the *nochi* again." I later realized that *nochi* was an inverted version of *chino* (Chinese). It was almost like an unspoken agreement, a negotiated meaning settled on by "*panameños."* They had used the word's inverted form to not make it obvious about whom they were talking about to avoid sounding racist. As you can see, there are different ways to speak "*panameño*", and it is heavily influenced by the situation or the people involved in the conversation. There are different layers hidden beneath its surface, and you'll find something extremely unique on each one. Because of that we can confirm that our tradition of inverting words works like a secret code that can only be deciphered by those versed in "*panameño*".

On the other hand, a staple of Panamanian society is the clear difference between social rankings. Hierarchies have always been a part of our culture, since the Spanish first settled in Panama. So, like all countries in the world, there is a social divide and social ladder in Panama. One thing you need to know about us: we're easy and quick to judge. We pay attention to how people dress, talk, and their mannerisms to figure out where on the social ladder they belong. The main categories are: *yeye, xacal, chumerri, bewy, del campo, and chusma*. For better or worse, Panamanians are pure devotees of stereotypes. You see, even if we live in the same small country, we talk, act, write

and behave in tons of different ways. If Panamanian Spanish was considered a Spanish dialect, it would surprise you with how many factions, dialects, and accents "*panameño*" can be divided into. You are blessed or cursed (whichever you believe in) to act, speak, and sound like the people with your same label. What's interesting is how the different social classes interact within and outside their boundaries, and how that creates Panamanian culture and Panamanian Spanish. So, let's have a closer look at these cultural stereotypes.

Yeyes are at the top of the hierarchy. They speak a lot of Spanglish; they're so well versed in it that it's basically an art. As such, they're easily made fun of because they have an accent that is completely different from most Panamanians, and yet they still attempt to sound more traditionally Panamanian. The most distinctive characteristic of their accent is that they speak, "*con la papa en la boca*" or "with a potato in their mouth." This might sound strange to you, but it's yet another example of our mastery of metaphors and imagery. I swear to you, y*eyes* speak with an accent that makes it sound like they are literally speaking with a potato in their mouth. Also, if you want to identify a *yeyesito,* pay attention to their clothing and expressions. They talk the same way, dress the same way, act the same way and even live in the same area. *Yeyes* are mostly rich or very rich, and they only go to private schools. To give you an idea, a y*eyesita* may say, "jajajajaja ay te lo juro que lit estoy broke *osea*" (hahahaha aw I swear that I literally am broke *osea*). *Osea* (different to globally-accepted Spanish's "*o sea,"* or "I mean/that is") is a Panamanian idiom that has no actual meaning. It's just a thing we say to complain, sound funny, fill in gaps between sentences, or imitate *yeyes*. See, *yeyes* love to show off the fact that they can speak Spanish and English, and so they engage in a lot of code-meshing. It is a part of who they are. However, it is important to mention that *yeye* has different meanings for different people. To some, I could be considered *yeye* because I went to an expensive, bilingual, private school and because I hang out with a lot of rich, popular people. The only difference is I do not speak with "*la papa en la boca*."

Now that I've described the top of the hierarchy, I'll talk about the iconic bottom and the messy middle. *Xacales,* also known as *chumerris,* are the opposite extreme of the social ladder. Like *yeyes,* they also have a characteristic accent and style. *Xacales* talk with an accent of their own, sometimes shortening words and phrases (like saying "*vamo' pue*'", instead of "*vamos pues*", or "let's go") and, mostly, screaming. Another key characteristic of *chumerris* is that they post Instagram stories or Tik Toks with a lot of emojis. They usually use these ones: 😈, 💸, 🔥, 🍃, 🐕 and 👊. Finally, *xacales* attempt to use Spanglish, but the ways in which they use it is different to what typical Spanglish practices are like. To explain this better, let's look closely at this example. A few years ago, Snapchat did these global stories where people could post stories of their country for the rest of the world to see. There's one viral Panamanian video where a woman says "these are my Panamanian *helech.*" At this part of the snap, she was showing the *helechos* (ferns) in her apartment and referred to them as *Panamanian helech. Helech* is not a word in either Spanish or English, and it is also not a typical example of combining Spanish with English. A common translingual literacy example would've been saying "these are my Panamanian *helechos",* thus combining words from both languages and following grammatical rules. If a *yeye* had to say this, they probably would say the whole sentence in English or say it in the way I wrote above. They most likely would've forgotten the English word for *helechos* and thus preferred to stick with grammatical rules and Spanglish (their ever-loyal ally, of course) rather than to invent a whole new word. This example is, therefore, a great depiction of a failed translingual practice across different languages, but a perfect example of

Panamanian day to day translingual literacy. *Cholos, chumerris, bewys, xacales,* whatever you want to call them, are fundamental to our culture. Their loudness, their presence, their *sazón,* their expressions, and their mannerisms are so distinctive that it's impossible to think about Panama without thinking of this subculture. In fact, a lot of our traditional expressions and sayings, like "*Que xopa*" were born from the *xacales.* Panama is a cultural pool full of colors, phrases, clothing, dances, food, music – a reflective pond through which we can all observe the way we act, think, live, behave and imitate. Consequently, our country is the perfect ecosystem, the most malleable culture, in which one social group can imitate the other, like the *yeyes* making TikToks pretending to be *chumerris,* or the *chumerris* trying to speak Spanglish as *yeyes* do. We're all inventors of our language, builders of our country and consumers of our ever-growing culture.

The rest of us are left in the middle of a dialect battleground, choosing the best from each side, exploiting it, and declaring it the official "*panameño*". We adopt the most regularly appropriated phrases from *xacales* and some defined behaviors of *yeyes*. By combining them, we're code-meshing within an already code-meshed version of Spanish. We're masters of "language camouflaging" – adapting to our surroundings and people to choose the best set of words. Because of that, you can say that Panamanians are mindful when reading rhetorical situations, and we take note when others fail at it. A year ago, a video of our Vice President went viral because he greeted a group of women saying "e*ntonces, que e' lo que e*'" (which is informal for "what's up"). Notice that he cut the words like *chumerris* do. People mocked him for being a *yeye* trying to sound like a *xacal.* There are situations in which you cannot act like a "*cholo*" because others will think you're uneducated. There are also moments where you cannot be *yeye* because you'll come across as annoying and condescending. There are moments when you can combine the two. However, it is frowned upon to cross these dialect barriers when it's uncalled for. These stereotypes can be called constraints in a rhetorical situation. Professor Keith Grant-Davie talks about this in his article, "Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents." According to Grant-Davie, a constraint can be positive or negative. For this analysis, we'll use the definition that "they might be beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, interests, motives and the like" (500). Panamanian Spanish is full of these cultural constraints. We're very good at reading situations and knowing when to use which version of Spanish, which code-meshed dialect(s), or what behaviors. However, in the example of the Vice President, he wasn't mindful of the rhetorical situation, made a bad language decision, and completely disregarded the constraints, thus becoming a national class clown. For that, he is a perfect representation of "*panameño*" code-meshing gone wrong. The silver lining is that you now understand Panamanian rhetorical situations and the cultural restraints found within our society.

Well reader, we have concluded our tour, observation, and dissection of Panamanian culture and language. The purpose of this essay was for me to show that translingual literacy doesn't just happen between or across different languages – it can happen within one language, one culture, and one country. Translingual literacy and code-meshing go beyond the typical examples and practices, and can be applied to societies, traditions, and cultures. Panamanian dialects are a reflection of socioeconomic status and privileges. We like to combine these dialects and idioms while remembering where we come from, where we are, and where we want to be. We speak in very weird ways, using Spanglish, mixing *yeye* and *xacal,* and staying aware of our surroundings. Even though it is difficult to explain some of the most iconic Panamanian phrases, these linguistic choices define us as "*panameños*". They are part of who we are. Our language is the embodiment of our liveliness, of

our need to dance, our hunger for laughter, our hope, and our freedom. It has its constraints, cultural restrictions, and strict stereotypes, but not having all of those things would be just like asking Quentin Tarantino to not make bloody, violent movies. Our culture and language are so rich because they're unique and true to themselves, the environment, their history, and their contradictions. Panamanians are excellent negotiators of meaning, jurors of rhetoric, brilliant creators of imagery, composers of life, miners for language wealth, and cultural revolutionaries.

That, my fellow reader, es el *Panameño*.

Works Cited

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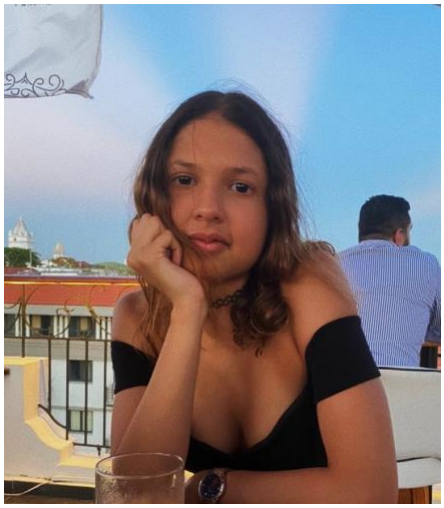
Nicole Lasso



Nicole Lasso is a freshman at the University of Central Florida. She is majoring in Film and wants to be a film director. She hopes her art can inspire others the same way cinema has brought peace to her own life. Movies are her happiness. During the 2020-2021 academic year, she made two short films, one of them about human trafficking. When she's not watching films, she's writing or reading. These last two years she's been working on publishing a collection of poems and managing my Instagram writing account. She hopes to one day transmute what she writes to beautiful cinema.