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The 64 million dollar vowel: Anglo pronunciation of a Spanish last name in Texas

# The Sixty-Four Million Dollar Vowel: Anglo Pronunciation of a Spanish Last Name in Texas

Aaron Shield

## 1 Background

There is a long history of conflict between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking peoples in the area that is now the Southwest United States. Colonizing powers from Spain clashed with Anglo<sup>1</sup>-led American forces in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. With the annexation of Texas (1845), New Mexico (1848), and Arizona (1848), English-speaking people gained control of the Southwest and have ruled it ever since. Although the United States has no official language, the *de facto* language has long been English, the hegemony of which has never seriously been threatened. However, Spanish speakers make up the fastest growing minority in the country, with most of their population concentrated in California, Florida, Texas and the Southwest, where they constitute the largest ethnic minority. In the 1990s, the Hispanic population grew almost 39%, reaching 31.3 million. Hispanics are thus expected to surpass African-Americans as the largest minority in the United States within only a few years, since the Black population of 34.8 million is growing at a much slower rate (13.8%)<sup>2</sup>.

The linguistic conflict between Spanish and English has also been racialized, with each language symbolizing an ethnic group made salient by its mother tongue. White speakers of English are called Anglos, regardless of whether or not they can trace their roots to England, and Spanish speakers are called Hispanic, whether they come from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, or Central and South America. Further, the overall income of Hispanics is lower than that of Anglos: as of 1997, the median Hispanic household income was \$26,628, while that of Anglos was \$38,972. Per capita income was similarly disparate, with Anglos earning nearly twice the income of Hispanics (\$20,425 vs. \$10,773)<sup>3</sup>. This socioeconomic difference is reflected in language ideologies and attitudes about Spanish and English: in the popular imagination, English is considered a language of high prestige, while Span-

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<sup>1</sup> As is customary in Texas, I use the terms "Anglo" to refer to English-speaking whites of any national background or regional origin and "Hispanic" to refer to people whose origins are Spanish-speaking countries.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.cnn.com/2000/US/08/30/minority\\_population/](http://www.cnn.com/2000/US/08/30/minority_population/)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/cb98-155.html>

ish is considered the language of the poor and uneducated. Of particular interest to scholars has been the use of Mock Spanish by Anglos, for in this crossing-over, differentials in power and dominance are reflected.

Anthropologist Jane Hill has examined this phenomenon in detail. Hill (1993a) argues that the increasing use of Spanish by Anglos in recent years supports "a broader project of social and economic domination of Spanish speakers in the region" (146). Anglo Spanish is relegated to a register of "jocularity, irony, and parody" (147). Misappropriations can be noted in the realms of phonology, syntax, morphology, and semantics: for the purposes of this paper, I will focus only on phonology. Hill characterizes Anglo Spanish phonology as hyperanglicized, in which "distortions often go well beyond a 'normal' Anglicization of borrowed material. They suggest... an active distancing from Spanish speakers" (147). Hill's thesis lies in the conclusion that "hyperanglicizations occur through a process in which the linguistic resources of a stigmatized Other are appropriated and parodied through exaggeration and bold alteration" (149).

The fact that many Anglos use Spanish in a parodic register cannot be denied. However, it is not the only way that Anglos use Spanish. Indeed, this paper will show that there is strong evidence that Anglos in Austin, Texas adapted their phonology to sound more like Spanish when pronouncing a Spanish last name – at least during the time in 2002 when Tony Sanchez was a candidate for governor. Such an adaptation does not subjugate Spanish for the benefit of English; quite the contrary, it shows accommodation by English speakers to the Spanish-speaking minority.

## 2 Context

The study was conducted in Austin, Texas in the spring and summer of 2002. Austin has a population of just under 650,000 and is situated 230 miles north of the Mexican border. Its demographics are similar to the state at-large, with whites making up 55% of the population, Hispanics 28%, Blacks 11.5%, and Asians 5.6%.<sup>4</sup>

Although English is the *de facto* primary language in Austin, English and Spanish often exist side-by-side in official and commercial contexts. For example, stops on public buses are often announced in English followed by Spanish, signs in businesses warning patrons that it is illegal to carry concealed weapons are in English and Spanish, and voter registration forms as well as other official documents are in both languages. Yet hyperanglicizations in Austin are not hard to find. Many streets have Spanish names, but

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/citymgr/basicfac.hrm>

their common pronunciations go beyond the realm of what might be considered “normal” Anglicization. For example, Manchaca is pronounced [mæntʃæk] rather than Spanish [mantʃaka], Guadalupe is rendered [gwadələp] instead of [madalupe], San Jacinto is pronounced [sæn dʒəsɪnəw] as opposed to [san xasinto], and Salado is rendered [səleydow] instead of [salaðo]. Further, some businesses in town have pseudo-Spanish names which show incorrect gender agreement (e.g., “Casa Loco” (‘Crazy House’—properly Casa Loca)) and thus would constitute, if not a hyperanglicization, then at least a misappropriation.

If Hill is correct, then these uses of Spanish support her claim that Spanish is used by Anglos to reinforce English dominance by distorting Spanish phonology and morphology. However, this characterization is overly simple. For example, George W. Bush sometimes used Spanish while governor of Texas. Even though Bush did not possess native-like competence, the use of Spanish in a political context lends it legitimacy and prestige which is indicative of the power of the Hispanic vote. Indeed, Bush won far more of the Hispanic vote in the 2000 Presidential election than previous Republican candidates ever had. In Texas, the Hispanic vote yields considerable power, as the state is more Hispanic than the U.S. in general (32% and 12% respectively, according to the 2000 U.S. Census).<sup>5</sup>

In the fall of 2001 and spring of 2002, two Hispanic candidates fought for the Democratic nomination for Texas Governor: Dan Morales and Tony Sanchez. The campaign received national attention, as it was the first time that two Hispanics were both frontrunners and opponents in a major political contest.

The question of ethnic authenticity was a theme throughout the campaign. Sanchez, who has spoken Norteño Spanish his whole life, clearly tried to construct an “authentic” Hispanic identity through his language and politics. This culminated in the first-ever gubernatorial debate held in Spanish, which took place in March of 2002. Sanchez was perceived to speak better Spanish than Mr. Morales (who sounded competent but not fully fluent), and was widely recognized as the winner of the debate. In fact, Mr. Morales often started his answers in Spanish and finished in English, which provoked accusations that he was trying to appeal to conservative white voters. *The Dallas Morning News* reported on March 2, 2002, that:

Mr. Morales... criticized Mr. Sanchez for trying to elevate Spanish to equal status with English in Texas and said it would drive a wedge between Texans based on language.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2001/tables/dp\\_tx\\_2000.pdf](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2001/tables/dp_tx_2000.pdf)

"This is Texas, and in Texas, we speak English as our primary language," Mr. Morales said.

He said that he was proud of his ethnic background but that using English is a key for success.

In a stinging retort, Mr. Sanchez said that it is a "slap in the face to 7 million Latinos that live in Texas when you tell them that you do not want to communicate with them in the language that they prefer."

Sanchez also outspent Morales 6 to 1, spending nearly \$20 million on the campaign (at the time of the debate), including heavy advertising on television and radio. Sanchez ended up carrying every region of the state and received more than 60% of the vote in heavily Hispanic South Texas. Between March, when the debate was held, and the November election he spent yet another \$44 million<sup>6</sup>, most of which went into relentless television advertising. It was the one of the most expensive gubernatorial campaigns in American history.

These television and radio commercials are of interest to linguists because Sanchez pronounces his name with a low back vowel [a], which more closely resembles a Spanish vowel than the default English (Anglo) pronunciation, which uses a fronted mid-low vowel [æ] which can be nasalized or non-nasalized. Variation exists within the public in how Sanchez's name gets pronounced, ranging from [a] to [ɑ] to [æ] to [æ̃]. All television and radio commercials produced for Tony Sanchez used the non-fronted, approximate Spanish vowel [a], which contributed to Sanchez's campaign for ethnic authenticity as a strategy for political gain.

Following Hill's hypothesis about Anglo Spanish, one would expect Anglos who have a stake in the political and linguistic status quo (i.e. Anglo dominance and hegemony over Hispanics) to use the fronted low vowel [æ].

### 3 The Study

The questions motivating this study were threefold:

1. How are Anglos pronouncing the vowel in Tony Sanchez's last name?
2. What does it say about linguistic and political ideologies about Spanish and English in Texas? If Anglos in Texas are changing their phonology to fit the Spanish pronunciation more accurately,

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<sup>6</sup> Dallas Morning News, 11/07/2002

then might traditional linguistic ideologies such as that described by Hill be eroding?

3. What is the role of the media in determining or changing the pronunciation of Sanchez's name?

### 3.1 Methodology

My method was to conduct short anonymous interviews with Anglo students on the University of Texas campus during the spring and summer of 2002. Three elicitations of the name "Sanchez" were obtained from each informant.

It is well known in sociolinguistics that people do not accurately report their own speech (e.g., Labov 1972); thus, my goal was to get Anglo informants to pronounce the name Sanchez without drawing their attention to the fact that I was listening to their pronunciation. First, informants were asked if they knew who the two candidates for governor were (first elicitation). If informants did not know who the candidates were, they were shown a list of candidates and asked to choose the winner of the Democratic nomination. This would usually elicit the correct response, Tony Sanchez. Second, informants were given a list of supposed "Texas Political Figures" and asked to read each name and say whether or not they knew who each figure was. The list of Texas political figures given to the informants was the following:

1. Kay Bailey Hutchison (Republican US senator)
2. Ron Kirk (Democratic candidate for US Senate)
3. Michael Sanchez (nonexistent – variable)
4. Phil Gramm (Republican US Senator)
5. Ann Richards (former Democratic governor)
6. Jose Sanchez (nonexistent – variable)

Thus, three tokens of the name Sanchez were elicited in different contexts. Vowel quality was noted on each elicitation.

Michael and Jose Sanchez are not real Texas Political Figures. The second and third elicitations served to control for the first elicitation as well as to provide information about whether pronunciation varied in co-occurrence with a markedly Spanish or English first name. In other words, I wanted to see if those people who were changing their pronunciation had done so for Tony Sanchez exclusively or if the change had been generalized to other names.

To ensure that the first elicitation of Tony Sanchez was not conditioning the second and third elicitations, the order in which questions were asked

was varied. Half of the time, respondents were shown the list first, then asked to name the two candidates for Governor; half the time the reverse order was used.

Sex, reported place of origin, and reported knowledge of Spanish were noted. These demographic questions were asked between the first elicitation and the second and third elicitations, in order to create a short break between elicitations.

Although informants were approached on the basis of "looking white," informants were also asked to identify their ethnicity. Any data from someone identifying as other than white, Anglo, or Caucasian was not used, since the purpose of the study was to identify linguistic trends of Anglos within the context of a larger political and linguistic ideological system.

### 3.2 Results

Five patterns of usage emerged:

1. Those who used [æ] on all three elicitations (20/61: 33%).
2. Those who used [a] on all three elicitations (16/61: 26%).
3. Those who used [a] on the first elicitation and [æ] on the second and third elicitations (12/61: 20%).
4. Those who used [a] on the first and third elicitations and [æ] on the second elicitation (10/61: 16%).
5. Those who used [æ] on the first and second elicitations but [a] on the third elicitation (3/61: 5%).

Crucially, no informants used [a] for Michael Sanchez if they did not also do so for Tony and Jose. In other words, a clear hierarchy of preference for [a] over [æ] emerged.

1 <sup>st</sup> elicitation (Tony Sanchez):	62% (38/61)
2 <sup>nd</sup> elicitation (Michael Sanchez):	26% (16/61)
3 <sup>rd</sup> elicitation (Jose Sanchez):	47% (29/61)

Figure 1. Percentage of informants using [a], by elicitation.

Thus, informants were most likely to use a more Spanish-like vowel when pronouncing *Tony Sanchez*, then *Jose Sanchez*, and least likely to use it for *Michael Sanchez*.

Several interesting demographic patterns emerged as well. Texans used significantly more [a] than non-Texans (52% vs. 35%). This result may be because of increased exposure to the Texas political scene or greater knowledge of Spanish. About half of the Texan informants claimed to have knowledge of Spanish, in contrast to a third of their counterparts from other states.

In addition, women used [a] slightly more than men (49% of tokens vs. 40% of tokens), and those with a knowledge of Spanish were more likely to use [a] than those without a knowledge of Spanish (64% of tokens vs. 29% of tokens).

	<b>Tony</b>	<b>Michael</b>	<b>Jose</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
Texan (N=37)	76% (28/37)	27% (10/37)	54% (20/37)	52% (58/111)
Non-Texan (N=24)	42% (10/24)	25% (6/24)	38% (9/24)	35% (25/72)
Male (N=28)	62% (17/28)	18% (5/28)	43% (12/28)	40% (34/84)
Female (N=33)	67% (22/33)	30% (10/33)	52% (17/33)	49% (49/99)
Spanish (N=28)	79% (22/28)	39% (11/28)	75% (21/28)	64% (54/84)
No Spanish (N=33)	48% (16/33)	15% (5/33)	24% (8/33)	29% (29/99)

Figure 2. Percentage of informants using [a].

### 3.3 Interpretation

Speakers who only used [æ] displayed standard English phonology. Most American English speakers, when confronted with a last name such as Sanderson or Samson that starts with 'Sa' plus a nasal consonant, use a fronted mid-low vowel [æ]. Thus, for these speakers, no change has been made in their phonetic realization, regardless of exposure to the media or to the Spanish language.

Speakers who only used [a] had approximated the Spanish pronunciation for all three elicitations. These speakers had more knowledge of Spanish than the first group by a ratio of more than 2 to 1. Thus, they presumably grew up with the standard English vowel and then with exposure to Spanish learned to approximate the Spanish pronunciation, which has become generalized. Another possibility is political correctness, by which I mean the awareness that many students have regarding politically acceptable ways of behaving with regards to issues related to identity politics. Since informants were college students, political correctness has to be considered as a factor since there is considerable sensitivity on college campuses about ethnic identity, and the pronunciation of names is taken as an indication of one's respect for or knowledge of a particular ethnic group.

Less straightforward, of course, is the behavior of people who used both [a] and [æ]. The three patterns for these users are:

1. [a] for Tony Sanchez, [æ] for Michael and Jose Sanchez;
2. [a] for Tony and Jose Sanchez, [æ] for Michael Sanchez; and
3. [æ] for Tony and Michael Sanchez, [a] for Jose Sanchez.

These patterns are crucial to understanding what is likely motivating speakers' behavior. It is significant that speakers do not use [a] for Michael Sanchez alone; indeed, the presence of [a] for Michael Sanchez would predict the presence of [a] for Tony Sanchez and Jose Sanchez, but not vice versa. Why is this?

Accounting for Pattern #1 ([a] for Tony Sanchez, [æ] for Michael and Jose Sanchez) is straightforward: speakers have made an exception in their phonology for Tony Sanchez alone, which I take to result from the intense media bombardment in which his name with the vowel [a] is repeated over and over.

Pattern #2 ([a] for both Tony Sanchez and Jose Sanchez but [æ] for Michael Sanchez) is due to a combination of factors, the most important of which is the impact of the first name. Jose (or, properly, José) is a recognizably Spanish first name while Michael is an English one. If names are indicators of identity, then this phonetic difference can be viewed as an accommodation. Thus, Jose Sanchez is imagined by the speaker to have a more Hispanic identity than Michael Sanchez, and the speaker guesses which pronunciation might be preferred by the person in question. The [a] for Tony Sanchez is again probably attributable to the media. Finally, Pattern #3 ([æ] for Tony and Michael Sanchez, but [a] for Jose Sanchez) can be accounted for by the same rationale, except that these users had not changed their phonetic realization for Tony Sanchez.

### 3.4 The Impact of the Media

Because this study was not originally designed to study media affects on language, informants were not asked if they had seen the television commercials for Tony Sanchez. This question is a crucial link to demonstrating that those commercials are indeed the impetus for variation in phonetic realization. Luckily, Finch, Shetty, Lidz and Ren (2002) did just that. They conducted short anonymous interviews around the University of Texas-Austin campus, asking if informants knew who the two candidates for Texas governor were. Informants were then asked if they had seen the Sanchez television commercials. Fifty-eight percent of those who reported seeing the ads also used the low back vowel [a], while only 29% of those who reported not having seen the ads used [a] in pronouncing Tony Sanchez's last name. These data support my contention that these ads are primarily responsible for a

change in the Anglo pronunciation of the name Tony Sanchez. Repeated exposure to television and radio commercials may thus have a demonstrable effect on some speakers' phonetic realizations. However, this effect may be short-lived if exposure does not continue: follow-up data from September showed less [a] than data from April when commercials were more frequent. At the same time, there had been a notable decrease in the number of television commercials for Sanchez.

#### **4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Although many sociolinguistic studies employing the technique of short anonymous interview do not consider the potential impact of the researcher, it is my belief that the researcher always influences any communicative situation in which s/he is involved. Thus, the fact that the researcher in this study was Anglo may have influenced informants' responses. It is important to try to understand what kind of accommodation effects might come into play between subject and researcher. These might be controlled for by having a Hispanic researcher duplicate the study.

Also at issue are class, education, and political correctness. The phenomena described in this study may well be specific to middle-class, college educated people. As mentioned, political correctness is a force on college campuses, which may influence linguistic behavior. Certainly, these data are meant to be indicative, not definitive. More data are needed in order to draw sound statistical conclusions. An additional problem with the data is that the factor "Knowledge of Spanish" is gradient, not binary. In this study, answers were either 'yes' or 'no.' Further, exposure to television and radio was never quantified in this study. It would be interesting to see how people's reported exposure to television, for example, might correspond to actual linguistic behavior. Finally, this study is only concerned with the linguistic behavior of Anglos. However, just as interesting might be the question of how Hispanics, African-Americans, or Asian-Americans reacted to this political situation, the variable pronunciation of the name 'Sanchez,' and the changing role of Hispanics in regional and national politics more broadly.

#### **5 Conclusion**

Thus, along with changing demographics in America and in the Southwest come changing racial and linguistic ideologies. Some Anglos seek to reinforce English hegemony through the use of Mock Spanish, but others, like those in this study, are changing their pronunciations to adapt to Spanish. As Hispanic politicians and voters become more numerous and powerful, the

political import of Spanish in Texas will likely grow. Traditional linguistic and political ideologies that reinforce English hegemony in Texas may be eroding or at least subject to erosion.

Secondly, a tangible and significant influence of radio and television on speech can be observed, and, to a limited extent, quantified. The effects of the media on language can and should be studied in greater depth, as the media are a pervasive and powerful tool in today's society.

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