

PACHUCO: THE BIRTH OF A CREOLE LANGUAGE

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In the last thirty years there has come into existence in the United States a subcultural group known as the *Pachucos*. The rise of this subculture and the evolution of its language is an area of study that has hardly been tapped, yet which, I believe, can throw much light on our culture and the evolution and uses of language.

The name "Pachuco" has been the source of much discussion for the investigators of this group because of the difficulty in tracing the word to its source. Presbítero Canuto E. Anaya¹ makes mention of the word *Pachoa-can* (also *Pachu-can*) of Náhuatl origin and roughly translated as "residence of the Chief." Other Mexican linguists, Cecilio A. Robelo and Dávila Garabí, on the other hand, maintain that the word means "grassy place" from the Náhuatl words *pachtli* (grass of hay) and *ca* (place of).² Haldeen Braddy suggests that the word may come from a corruption of the Spanish *pachucha*, an adjective meaning over-ripe, almost spoiled.³ I tend to agree with George C. Barker that it simply comes from the colloquial way of saying El Paso, the city in which the Pachucos originated.⁴

The genesis of the Pachucos is difficult to ascertain. Professor Rafael Cravioto Muñoz, in an interview with Braddy, stated that they began to organize in the United States in the Thirties.⁵ This statement corroborates those of Barker's informants that they first heard the jargon in the early Thirties, although Barker maintains that the Pachucos did not emerge as a group until several years later (p. 13). But Beatrice Griffith in her book *American Me*, finds that "the term [Pachuco] seems to have been applied colloquially to Mexican American youths and their families coming from El Paso on the crest of one of the great migratory waves to California in the early Twenties."⁶ One thing is agreed upon: the group and its language originated in the underworld of dope traffic and vice in the inland port of El Paso, Texas. Gabriel Córdova, several years court interpreter for the El Paso police court, in a letter to Barker, says the jargon

originated with a group of marihuana smokers and peddlers.⁷ This opinion was also voiced by Braddy in his conversations with me.

According to Barker, the greatest single impetus in the spread of the jargon came in 1942 with the migration of large groups of El Paso boys to Los Angeles, California. This migration was instigated by the El Paso Police Department's use of "floaters," which placed suspended sentences on a number of boys so that they would receive prison sentences should they ever return to El Paso.

Ramón Villalobos, police reporter for the *El Paso Times*, maintains that in the 1940s the Pachucos settling in Los Angeles formed gangs, and warfare broke out between the "native" gangs of *Califas* and the newly arrived Pachucos. The Califas, upon suffering defeat, adopted the name Pachuco for their own designation.⁸ In any event, the Pachucos were a force that moved rapidly from El Paso west and quickly spread their jargon throughout that part of the United States.

In June 1943 the word Pachuco became nationally known because of the riots that took place in Los Angeles County. These riots involved several Pachuco gangs and members of the United States armed forces stationed in the Los Angeles area. The notoriety of the riots was all too well known, but the reasons given for them were too simplistic and varied to tell us much. The best study of the riots is the penetrating chapter titled "The Zootsuit Riots" in Griffith's book. Griffith puts the events in their proper context of war hysteria, fear, and tension. But these factors, along with the Pachuco habits of dress (the zootsuit), tattooing of hands, arms and face, incidence of delinquency, and peculiar argot gave rise to the Pachuco legend that exaggerated the group's harmfulness and culpability. It is through this dense image that we must try to better understand this social phenomenon.

First, two facts have to be considered: 1) that the crime and "evil" of the Pachucos are exaggerated out of proportion, and 2) that since the war the word Pachuco no longer applies to organized groups, for it is now used as the general term for anyone who employs Pachuco language. "The jargon," says Barker, "borrowed by the Pachucos from the El Paso-Juárez underworld has become an important part of colloquial slang or jive talk, and thus has come to symbolize the ways and attitudes of the Pachucos and Mexican American youth *in general*" (p. 15).

That the Pachuco subculture and language sprouted at the exact point of contact between two cultures is not surprising. It was, in fact, a hybrid

not only of two distinct cultures, but rather three. To a large extent, its existence and spread are due to the mutual repulsion of two subcultures which found themselves exiled from their mother culture and forced to mingle with another one different and often antithetical to theirs in language, psychology, and values.

The influx of Mexican immigrants did not occur in any telling numbers until the First World War and the period immediately following the Mexican Revolution, which was marked by great social unrest and in which poverty was greatly worsened by the fall of international markets. These immigrants came in two groups, the greater part formed of the newly liberated and uprooted *peones* and lower classes who had little education but great hopes for a new life, "responding to handbills and the many promises of big money made by the labor contractors" and seeking to "fill the need for farm and railroad labor." The immigrants:

supplied cheap labor for Arizona copper mines, choppers for the Montana and Colorado beet fields, gave Texas thousands of cotton pickers, put "gandy dancers" on California railroads, and crop pickers in our rich harvests. They came as hacienda workers, mule drivers, small-farm owners, cobblers, brick-layers, craftsmen, cowboys, miners and small traders and storekeepers. They brought with them a body of tradition, a way of living, that functioned well in Mexico. This pattern of rural craft living was shattered under the impact of our industrialized civilization.⁹

In the other group were the generals, politicians, business and professional men, aristocrats and intellectuals who were uprooted and who had lost their holdings of land and wealth in the political turmoil of Mexico. These people, still leery of the common people of the lower classes, found it easier to either accommodate the Anglo-American culture or form tight groups within their own class. As Griffith notes, "these more sophisticated and articulate Mexicans of the educated upper class have, with rare exceptions, cut themselves off from any connection with the laboring peons" (p. 52).

This last group, with a standard for language usage and an awareness and pride in its cultural heritage, preserved its Spanish intact. The other, without an education and a concept of "good" Spanish, unable to identify either with the United States culture or with their fellow Mexicans of breeding, modified their already "faulty" Spanish, fractured by regional dialects, into a broader slang in which they could talk to one another drawing heavily from underworld argot. It is this slang which through the

course of the years is becoming a creole language into which children are being born and which, to the “old school” Mexican American, is known as Pachuco. Barker notes that

Many well-educated persons, especially those in the upper classes of the Mexican population, are inclined to look upon the jargon with disgust or alarm. A parish priest spoke sadly to the writer about the “disintegration” of the Spanish language and a professional stenographer accused the youth of Tucson of murdering their mother tongue. Persons less well educated including many of those in the middle class of the Mexican population are inclined to be amused by the jargon. The tendency in this group is to look upon some of the jargon’s terms as droll and spicy, and even to use them on occasions when they can do so without risk of their own reputation. Finally, among younger men of lower-class status, including many among the laboring group, the words of the argot form an important part of almost every conversation. As one young clerk in a furniture store put it, “We couldn’t understand each other without it” (p. 16).

Language, we might say, is a form of identification, for with it we catalog, classify and define in order to transmit sensation and thoughts to one another. But language is also a form of identification in another sense—through its use we identify ourselves. As Stuart Berg Flexner in the *Dictionary of American Slang* would have it:

In our language we are constantly recreating our image in our own minds and in the minds of others. Part of this image...is created by using sub-group cant and jargon in the dominant society; part of it is created by our choice of both standard and slang words. A sub-group vocabulary shows that we have a group to which we “belong” and in which we are “somebody”—outsiders had better respect us. Slang is used to show others (and to remind ourselves of) our biographical, mental, and psychological backgrounds; to show our social, economic, geographical, national, racial, religious, educational, occupational, and group interests, memberships, and patriotisms.¹⁰

But it does not stop there; we also create the images of others in our own minds and in theirs. These images of ourselves and of others are often created out of the tension which comes from suspicion and misunderstanding. In speaking of United States slang, Mr. Flexner further notes that

...[at] various periods in history, our slang has abounded in words reflecting the fear, distrust, and dislike of people unlike ourselves. This intolerance is shown by the many derogatory slang words for different immigrant, religious,

and racial groups: *chink, greaser, Heinie, bunkie, mick, mockie, nigger, spik*. Many counters and derogatory words try to identify our own group status, to dare others to question our group's, and therefore our own superiority (p. xi).

The reaction of a minority to the intolerance shown it by a dominant group is a reciprocal intolerance—one which is sometimes manifested in violence, but more often in a fear of or distaste for contact and integration into the majority, and often results in the exclusive use of the inherited language or, as in the case of the Pachuco, the invention of one. To what image did the uneducated Mexican immigrant react? Taking Mr. Flexner's suggestion, let us look for it in the slang of the United States. The *Dictionary of American Slang* cites the following:

Mex — n.	— A Mexican <i>adj.</i> Mexican.
mex — n.	— Any foreign currency.
Mexican [derog.] adj.	— Cheap, inferior... <i>some</i> [derog.] <i>adj.</i> <i>southwest dial. use.</i>
Mexican athlete	— An unsuccessful candidate for a sports team.
Mexican breakfast	— A breakfast which amounts to smoking a cigarette and drinking a glass of water, usually because one has no money, has a hangover, or is too tired to eat.
Mexican promotion, (Mexican raise)	— Advancement of rank or status without any accompanying increase in income (p. 337).

A rebellion against this attitude can be expected in the argot of the Pachuco as indeed Barker found it in his analysis of the use of that jargon.

The Pachuco argot may be said to have two main social functions in the Tucson community. The first and basic of these is its function as the private language of groups of boys who find themselves not fully accepted in either American or Mexican society. As such, Pachuco transmits a set of values which runs counter to the accepted social order and tends to isolate the users from the type of social contacts which would assist their assimilation into American life. The second function of Pachuco is as a symbol of sophistication among members of the younger generation. In this use it may be compared to the jive-talk of some teen-age Americans. In both cases the argot is sufficiently diluted in conventional speech so that its exclusive character is lost. Instead

of indicating the separation of the speaker from the general society, this limited use indicates that he is modern and *en rapport*, or, in short, that he "gets around."

To the extent that Pachuco persists as a private language...it might be taken as symptomatic of the continuing disorientation of one element of the younger Mexican generation. We may venture to predict that only when the goals of American society can be demonstrated as obtainable to him...will the Pachuco as a linguistic and social type disappear...(p. 25).

At least in the Southwest the language of the Pachuco does not seem to be disappearing. In fact, it shows indications of becoming a creole language and it seems to intrude even among those who attempt to assimilate into the dominant culture. Alexander Moore, formerly of the Modern Languages Department of the University of Oregon, told me of several instances of Mexican American students taking courses in Spanish (which they could neither write nor speak) who would supply shockingly vulgar Pachuco equivalents for Castillian words which they had learned from their parents unaware of their impropriety.

Griffith is essentially correct in saying that

"Pachuco talk" represents a degeneration of the Spanish language which has resulted from an inadequate Spanish vocabulary and the inability to write in the tongue that is spoken in the home. About nine-tenths of the Mexican American youth cannot write Spanish, since few stay in school long enough to take it. The vocabulary of their parents is such that the children hear many words in English but not the equivalents in Spanish. Hence the Hispanicizing of English words is common in the homes of second-generation youngsters (p. 56).

In speaking with the students who come from the Second Ward, the poorer section of El Paso, I have noted the constant change that takes place in this peculiar language. In a conversation, Braddy also noted this phenomenon. One can certainly agree with Flexner that, "It is impossible for any living vocabulary to be static. Most new slang words and usages evolve quite naturally; they result from specific situations. New objects, ideas, or happenings, for example, require new words to describe the same old things" (p. vii). But in Pachuco this tendency for change seems to be a bit more conscious, more intended. Barker has much reason to say that "in general, it may be said that habitual speakers of Pachuco try to keep it an exclusive language, restricted to the initiated through the frequent introduction of new slang words" (p. 8).

The Pachuco dialect is mainly composed of Caló (the jargon of the Spanish gypsy much used by the bullfighters), Hispanicized English, Anglicized Spanish, and words of pure invention interspersed with words from the Náhuatl and archaic Spanish and is held together by faulty Spanish sentence construction and grammar.

As Griffith points out, Caló forms a good portion of the vocabulary of the illiterates in Mexico City and its underworld (p. 55). Caló, though, has spread throughout Mexico mainly through the bullfighters, those folk-heroes whose particular brand of jargon reaches the streets through the crowded, cheap *sol* sections of the *Plaza de Toros* and the cafés frequented by them. The existence of archaic Spanish in the Pachuco is to some extent a result of the influence of Caló, but mainly it is due to the use of Pachuco in New Mexico and Arizona, where Spanish settlements founded in the fifteen- and sixteen-hundreds were left stranded from the subsequent growth and development that took place in the culture and language of Spain and Mexico. Thus words and forms were kept which disappeared from the standard language. Some of the Caló words found in Pachuco are:

chavala (muchacha)	— girl (slang but included in standard dictionary)
tando (sombbrero)	— hat
calcos (zapatos)	— shoes
lisa (camisa)	— shirt (unusual but included in some dictionaries)

We may include the word *gacho* meaning “bad” or “lousy” in Pachuco. Griffith astutely lists *gacho* with the words from bullring Caló, though Barker says it “cannot at present be traced to any outside source and thus presumably originated among the pachucos...” (p. 12). But both Griffith and Barker are mistaken. Although *gacho* did come into Pachuco through the bullring, it is not true Caló and its origin is known. The word *gacho* in standard Spanish means “bent toward the ground” and is specifically applied to cattle which may have one or both horns sloping downward. Since this particular aspect in a bull makes him difficult to fight in the ring, bullfighters naturally tried to avoid getting such a bull and the Pachucos just as naturally gave the term the same negative meaning.

From the New Mexican dialect, Pachuco gets

bato, bata	— guy, girl (originally a rustic, clownish man, in New Mexico meaning sweetheart);
jefe, jefa	— father, mother (originally chief);
chuchuluco	— candy (from Náhuatl—a gross, disagreeable person, in New Mexico meaning toy);
garras	— clothes (rags);
el mono	— movies (monkey, in New Mexico meaning cartoon);
rolarse	— to sleep (to roll in circular motion, in New Mexico to lie down);
trapos	— clothes (dry goods);
chante	— home (from Náhuatl home);
tacuchi	— suit or dress (from Náhuatl—to bind with cloth)
cachuquear	— to doublecross (from cachuco, in Mexico a counterfeit coin, probably of Náhuatl origin)

In this category I have listed two words which may give rise to some questions. The word “trapos” (dry goods) could have come from either archaic New Mexican dialect or through bullring usage. The word in the bullring is applied to the *capote de lidia* (the cape used in the actual fighting of the bulls as opposed to the *capote de paseo* used as part of the “suit of lights”). Because the capote de lidia is not at all a part of the torero’s attire, I believe that it came into Pachuco through the New Mexico dialect as I have heard the word used in more general non-Pachuco slang.

The other word is *chante*, meaning home. Professors Barker and Braddy and Griffith all maintain that the word is an Hispanization of the English “shanty” (from the French Canadian *chantier*), but I maintain that it has its origin in the Náhuatl *chantia*, “to live in a place,” which is the same root for the word *Chantico*, used to designate a hearth goddess. Her name literally means Guardian of the Home, *chantli* being “home” in Náhuatl.

Probably the most fruitful source of words for Pachuco has been the *anglicismos* or *pochismos* (from *pocho* meaning discolored or pale and designating a person of Mexican extraction who, living in the United States, has lost or rejected his Mexican cultural heritage). These words

are created through the Hispanization or change of pronunciation of English words into Spanish nouns and verbs, the translation of English slang expressions into Spanish, and the substitution of Spanish words without regard to their meaning for similarly sounding English words.

Of the first type, which is the most common, loan words assimilated phonologically to Spanish phonology, we have the following examples:

nouns

bonque	—	bunk
daime	—	dime
guaino	—	“wino”
pápiro	—	paper
brecas	—	breaks
bonchi	—	bunch
chain	—	shine
fonis	—	funnies
suera	—	sweater
tíquete	—	ticket
yarda	—	yard (as in “back yard”)
espiche	—	speech

verbs

chutiar	—	to shoot
guachar	—	to look at (from to watch)
chitiar	—	to cheat
chequiar	—	to check
flonquiar	—	to flunk
mistiari	—	to miss
parquiar	—	to park
ponchar	—	to punch
puchar	—	to push
chainar	—	to shine
dichar	—	to ditch
tichar	—	to teach

It seems that all manufactured verbs from the English into Spanish form are given “ar” or “iar” verb endings, never “er” or “ir.” This allows for the incorporation of an infinite number of verbs which can always be regularly conjugated by the rules for “ar” verbs of orthodox Spanish grammar

Another anglicismo (loan translation) may also be noted. In Pachuco there is almost exclusive use of the construction "vamos a ir" (we are going to go) to express futurity which in standard Spanish is expressed by the simple forms "vamos" (present) or "iremos" (future imperfect). This Anglicized form is arrived at by analogy from the English use of the present participle to express futurity.

The second type of anglicismos, loan extension, contributes the following examples:

bote (can)	— jail
chueco (crooked)	— illegal
quebrada (break)	— opportunity
dar quebrada	— to give a break
huesos (bones)	— dice
lechuga (lettuce)	— dollars
patada (kick)	— thrill
agarrar patada	— to get a thrill
papel (paper)	— newspaper
monquiar	— to monkey around

Some Pachuco words can actually be fitted into more than one category. For example, the verb *monquiar* has as its root the transliteration into Spanish of the word monkey, but as a verb it is the translation of the slang expression "to monkey around."

The third class, possibly the most perplexing to the parents and acquaintances of the speaker of Pachuco who may be better acquainted with Spanish, gives us the following samples:

birria (a meat dish)	— beer
dátil	— date
(fruit of the date palm)	(an appointment)
ganga (a bargain)	— gang
mecha (a wick)	— match
chanza (an amusing saying or act)	— chance
carro (a cart)	— car

Griffith notes several times in *American Me* the poetic flavor of the speech of her informants. "Since many think in Spanish and speak in English, their language is vigorous and poetic, rich in imagery" (p. ix). And then again:

A by-product of the language block which handicaps these boys and girls so severely in school, work, and in the courts, is the deep sense of poetry that is present in much of the speech of the younger Mexican American children...it often comes through as a literal translation from Spanish to English in a strong, primitive kind of speaking. Sometimes the results are lyrical expressions of rare beauty (p. 59).

Spanish is a poetic, lyrical language and poetry forms very much a part of the everyday life of the Mexican, but I suggest that metaphor is an inherent earmark of argot and jargon and this is what gives so much color and flavor to Pachuco. Among the argot expressions derived from metaphor or image are the following:

al alba (at dawn)	— to be alert
cohete (firecracker)	— pistol
chanate (black bird)	— Negro
melena (mane)	— hair
ojales (button holes)	— eyes
andar águila (to walk eagle)	— to be "sharp"
caldearse (to heat exceedingly)	— to become angry
escamarse (to shed one's scales)	— to become afraid
traer cola (to carry a tail)	— to be on parole
vacilar (to vacillate)	— to fool around

Another source of Pachuco vocabulary consists of purely invented words. (We call "invented" those words which we cannot trace to any logical source, but given the character of language and the difficulty of linguistic studies, many of these words may have a most ancient and noble ancestry whose descendants survive but whose lineage we cannot trace.) Among them we find:

achisquiar	— to mess up
borlote	— ball or dance;
borlotear	— to dance or "have a ball"
caer sura	— to bore or displease someone
fila	— knife;
fileriar	— to knife someone (possibly from filo—edge)
guarear	— to look at
rayar	— to curse
refinar	— to eat

Many other words could be added to this list. I have not included other words in the Pachuco vocabulary which clearly come from standard Spanish twisted or changed, such as the word *abujerar* (to drill)—clearly from the Spanish *agujerear* with the same meaning. Nor have I included such words as *chantarse* (to marry)—formed by analogy to the Spanish. Pachuco *chante* = Spanish *casa*, *casarse* (Spanish to marry) = *chantarse*.

Griffith notes that their limited vocabulary demands that the Pachucos get the utmost use out of every word they create. Thus to those limited to Pachuco slang or even creole, the noun “jainos” is the word for lovers, *estan jainos*—they are sweethearts, *jainar* is to make love, and *vamos a jainar*—let’s neck (p. 57).

Although the tight gang-culture which gave birth to the Pachuco jargon has almost disappeared, the Pachuco language has shown little sign of becoming extinct. In fact, there seem to be indications that it is becoming a creole language, that children are being born into it. The reason for this survival of Pachuco is the same for the survival of the “hep-talk” of the American Negro, which so much bewilders visitors from other countries. (Recently a Chilean friend studying in the United States asked me why there was such a difference in the pronunciation of English between the Negro and “the other North Americans.”)

Pachuco will not disappear until the “goals of American society can be demonstrated as attainable” to the United States citizens of Mexican descent and they are fully accepted, and their pride in their unique heritage is given back to them through instruction in Spanish and in Mexican history and culture.

In the cases where Pachuco has disappeared, whatever Spanish came with it is also gone, completely replaced by English. This is due, unfortunately, to the pressures of prejudice and conformity which are so strong in the United States. Although this situation is better than persecution and discrimination, the nation loses the variety of its pluralistic culture that is so fecund in creativity and grace.

NOTES

- ¹ Anaya, Presbitero Canuto E., *Bosquejo geográficohistórico* (Guadalupe, Hidalgo, D.F., 1918), p. 1.
- ² Robelo, Cecilio A., *Diccionario de mitología Náhuatl* (México, D.F., 1951), p. 209; Garabi, Dávila, *Toponimias Náhuas* (México, D.F., 1942), p. 25.
- ³ Braddy, Haldeen, "The Pachucos and Their Argot," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, XXIV December 1960, no. 4.
- ⁴ Barker, George C., *Pachuco: An American-Spanish Argot and Its Social Functions in Tucson, Arizona* (University of Arizona Bulletin XXII, no. 1, Tucson, Arizona, 1950), 13.
- ⁵ Braddy, p. 224 (note 2).
- ⁶ Griffith, Beatrice, *American Me* (Boston, 1948) p. 45.
- ⁷ Barker, p. 13.
- ⁸ Braddy, p. 256.
- ⁹ Griffith, p. 52.
- ¹⁰ Wentworth, Harold, and Stuart Berg Flexner, *Dictionary of American Slang* (New York, 1960), p. xi.

