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Understanding the *je ne sais quoi* of mock language*

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Abstract The literature on mock language (ML) is centered around cases of language appropriation reproducing derogatory stereotypes of the speakers whose language is appropriated. However, ML, understood as the integration of linguistic features of a language not native to the speaker in a discourse that is otherwise in a different language, is not necessarily derogatory. I offer a model that explains the interpretation of ML across cases using US European-American English speakers as the empirical domain. The key to understanding ML lies in the fact that speakers *presuppose* an ideology prevailing in the context of utterance. I appeal to *perspectives* (à la Camp) as part of ideologies and responsible for stereotypes, and argue that ML is a meta-*frame*. This allows me to link derogatory ML to *slurs*.

Keywords: mock language, social meaning, ideologies, frames, pejorative speech acts, slurs

1 What is mock language

Mock language (ML) is the deliberate integration of features from a language not spoken by or native to the speaker into a discourse that is otherwise in a different language. This integration is done in a way that the speaker believes fits into the conversation. To keep things manageable in this paper I take mock language within the United States as the empirical basis for the discussion. In particular, I focus specifically on ML as performed by European American (EA) monolingual English speakers. I discuss mock Spanish (S-ML) and mock French (F-ML), which exemplify two opposing cases regarding the perception of these groups of speakers within the hegemonic perspective amongst EAs. Furthermore, I also address specific instances of mock African American Language (A-ML), which presents additional complications.

An example of S-ML is presented in (1):[1]

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1 The example in (1) is from *Notting Hill* (1999), a British/Hollywood movie. While the scene takes

(1) Ann and William are two white characters. Ann, a famous American actress visiting a new city during the promotion of her last movie, went out on a date with a man she had casually met, William. At the end of the date, she invited him to her hotel room and went up in advance to tidy up. When William knocks on the door, Ann's (official) boyfriend, also a famous American actor, opens, and William pretends to be room service to justify his knocking. After some time, Ann and William meet again and Ann apologizes to William:

Ann: I'm really sorry about last time. He just flew in, I had no idea. In fact, I had no idea if he'd ever fly in again.

William: Listen, it's not often one has the opportunity to **adiós** the plates of a major Hollywood star.

Why does William say "*adiós* the plates"? Why doesn't he use the English 'bye' instead? In fact, notice that, from the perspective of White people in the USA,[2] alternatives in other languages do not 'work' and would leave the addressee wondering what the speaker intended to convey by switching languages:

(2) It's not often that one has the opportunity to **auf wiedersehen/au revoir / ciao** the plates of a famous Hollywood film star. (German/French/Italian)

Why and how does Spanish fit in the discursive situation? S-ML in the US has been extensively studied in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology (see, e.g., Hill 1998, 2005, 2008 et seq.). S-ML is characterized by the use of "elements that English speakers believe to be Spanish to create a subregister of colloquial English used in jocular or humorously insulting interaction" (Hill 2005: 113). As Hill points out, S-ML includes loan words like *adiós* ('bye', as illustrated above), *cojones* ('balls'; see (4) below), *macho* ('male'), *cerveza* ('beer') or *mañana* ('morning', 'tomorrow'), or the mark of singular masculine *-o* in English words (e.g., *problem*o instead of *problem*). When performing S-ML, EA monolingual English speakers often reproduce the appropriated Spanish words with a hyper-anglicized accent, making sure that nobody takes them to be close to the Spanish-speaking community. ML can be performed with different degrees of mockery, but that degree tends to be high in S-ML (compare with F-ML below). Interspersed within an otherwise English utterance

place in London and William, a Londoner, is the character showcasing S-ML, ML here seems to be relying on the presumed American audience's background. Americans certainly recognize the subtext of the scene, which I explain below. The British citizens I have consulted argue that a British person is unlikely to use this instance of mock Spanish. Thus, in what follows, I treat this example as an instance of mock Spanish as if performed by an EA, monolingual, English speaker.

2 I use uppercase for ethnographic terms, i.e., terms referring to cultures, social practices, and behaviors. *White people* are also referred to as *Anglos* in the literature. White people are a social group that favors a view of the world that privileges the behaviors and cultural norms of idealized EAs. See §2.1.1.

of monolingual EA speakers in the US, the use of these foreign elements instills the discourse with additional meanings by evoking stereotypes of (racialized/brown) individuals of Latin American heritage in the US (henceforth, Latinx[3] people).[4] S-ML, like other forms of ML, conveys social meaning.[5] It functions to create an "easygoing, humorous, yet cosmopolitan persona and positioning"[6] and "reproduces racist stereotypes of Spanish speakers," Hill further argues that while "this latter function can easily be demonstrated, English speakers generally deny that it exists" (Hill 2005: 113). "The folk theory of the racist as ignorant, backward, and marginal makes ordinary White people intensely resistant to recognizing the racist history and content of common expressions in their own language" (Hill 2008: 179; see also, e.g., Saul 2024 for similar claims regarding racist acts). In this paper, I provide a model of ML that allows us to understand the mechanisms at play in ML, and to explain the effects described above.

Interestingly, not all instances of mock language are the performance of a pejorative speech act.[7] S-ML contrasts with F-ML. Expressions commonly borrowed from French in the same fashion include, e.g., *bon voyage* ('safe travels'), *déjà vu* (lit. 'already seen'), or *je ne sais quoi* (lit. 'I don't know what'). Their borrowing does not reproduce derogatory stereotypes, but rather adds a sense of sophistication associated with stereotypical white, European French (/Parisian) representations.[8] *Je ne se quois*, for example, highlights qualities of subtlety, often finesse, linked to "luxury" regardless of the context in which it is used in the US:

(3) *Orange is the new black, S02E08*: Caputo, penitentiary's assistant warden, is talking to his boss, Figueroa, in her office:

3 *Latinx* is a non-binary label to refer to individuals of Latin-American heritage.

4 I will elaborate on a more precise notion of *stereotype* below. For now, it suffices to take stereotypes to stand for widely held, oversimplified, and often generalized assumptions about individuals or members of particular social groups. These assumptions are based on **perceived** cultural, ethnic, gender, or other social differences. They are ideological (/perspectival) representations that include behavioral expectations from the individuals embodying them. As we will see, these stereotypes are communicated, reinforced, and challenged through language and discourse (see, e.g., Woolard 1998; Kroskrity 2000; Johnstone 2001; Bucholtz & Hall 2004).

5 Social meaning is "the constellation of qualities and properties that linguistic forms convey about the social identity of language users—for example, their demographics, personality, and ideological orientation (Eckert 2008; Ochs 1992; Podesva 2011; Silverstein 2003)," (Beltrama 2020: 2).

6 *Persona*, for now, can be considered as the specific identity associated with a specific enactment of a style, a set of semiotic features including linguistic features, tailored to a particular social interaction.

7 *Pejorative speech acts* are "speech acts that ridicule, mock, harass, humiliate, belittle, subordinate, stigmatize, marginalize, degrade, dismiss, insult, derogate, or dehumanize." (Jeshion 2021: 213)

8 Other French speakers, e.g., people from Martinique, are *erased* in the construction of this stereotype (Irvine & Gal 2000). Stereotypes depend on many factors and, for example, the stereotypes of French speakers in Ontario (Canada), Quebecois people, differs greatly from the stereotype of French speakers in the US.

Figueroa: As for the staffing issue, I understand it's hard to find quality people. It takes a certain kind of **je ne sais quoi** to be effective in this environment.

Caputo: "Je ne sais quoi" doesn't always work for $18 an hour. I hire the best people I can find.

Caputo's rebuttal of Figueroa's use of French in (3) indicates that finesse doesn't come at a low price. Notice that, unlike with S-ML, with F-ML, speakers often do their best to pronounce the words as close to the original as they can reasonably manage. In her utterance, Figueroa additionally positions herself as someone who is able to use French (a sort of sophisticated person).

A model explaining ML has to address why the practice is disparaging sometimes (e.g., S-ML) and not others (e.g., F-ML) together with the overall effects pointed out in Hill's work. In what follows I investigate ML, examining cases of S-ML, A-ML, and F-ML as contrasting cases of the same phenomenon.

Building on work in anthropology, formal pragmatics, and philosophy of language, in this paper I argue that the added meaning of ML is brought about by taking into consideration the ideology (and perspective) that the speaker presupposes to prevail in the context of utterance. This is what ultimately produces the evoked stereotypes of individuals and social groups. For ML, these are stereotypes of the group from which the language is taken.

In this paper I cannot adopt/defend a concrete notion of ideology and how ideologies actually relate to social norms, thus establishing expectations regarding agents' behavior. I will review the concept of ideology from linguistic anthropology that I take to be relevant to us, namely the concept of ideology in Irvine & Gal (2000); Gal & Irvine (2019) et seq. This way of conceiving ideologies is compatible with views found in the philosophy of language. For recent examples, see Haslanger (2012); Swanson (2015); Kukla (2018); Starr (in prep). These views are in many ways similar, but still differ in important ways. Deciding between the different views will be consequential in the long run to fully understand ML and other linguistic phenomena that, I argue, are tightly related to it, namely, slurs and dogwhistles. I leave that project for the future. For our purposes, in the modeling of ML I will only consider *perspectives* as defined within Elisabeth Camp's work, i.e., a sort of open dispositions. I take perspectives to be part of ideologies. Within this framework, I conceive ML as a recognizable practice commonly associated with a style associated with a persona holding a specific perspective. As such, ML functions as a meta-*frame*. It serves the function of crystallizing perspectives and the stereotypes they derive regarding the social group from which the language is appropriated. Like other frames, such as metaphors (Camp 2017), ML is a very effective insult, moreover, one that allows the speaker to maintain deniability. Additionally, as slurs, they reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes of social kinds (see, e.g., Camp 2013; Swanson 2015).

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: in §2 I provide an in-depth overview of S-ML, A-ML, and F-ML. I characterize ML as a practice and, in particular, as part of a recognizable style. I also offer examples of infelicitous ML, which will allow us to develop the analysis in §3, where I also introduce the basic concepts from Elisabeth Camp's work on perspectives. I argue that context keeps track of ideologies and monitors participants' styles, making predictions about their behavior, linguistic or otherwise. The fact that ideologies are presupposed and thus it is requested that they be accommodated is what augments the derogatory power of some instances of ML. In §4 I compare ML to slurs as analyzed in Biezma (2026).

2 Mock language and the construction of the self and the other

As I pointed out above, it has been claimed that ML evokes stereotypes of the social group from which the language has been taken/appropriated. Take (1) above. Spanish is an emblem of Latinx people. The only way to understand William's utterance is to recover an "image" of Latinx people as service workers. Conversely, Latinx people are stereotypically taken to be Spanish speakers, even though not all speak the language.[9] However, individuals not fitting the stereotype are ignored or explained away, in the same manner that Spanish speakers from Spain do not count towards building the stereotype of Spanish speakers from the White perspectives in the US (see Irvine & Gal 2000 for *erasure*). Race, and not language per se, is what is at the bottom of S-ML in the US. S-ML "stigmatizes populations *racialized* as US Latinx, regardless of their linguistic practices" (Rosa 2016: 66).

These stereotypes are mediated by *ideologies* about the social group from which the language is emblematic (see Irvine 2001). There is a long tradition of research on *ideologies* within linguistic anthropology.[10] An influential view on ideologies sees them as "conceptual schemas", "positioned and partial views of the world" (Irvine & Gal 2000). That is, an incomplete and interested view of the world, "regimes of value", that "operate in everyday life, penetrating ordinary practices and actions" (Gal & Irvine 2019: 2). Ideologies, as positioned partial perspectives that are not true or false, allow us to perceive features that contrast with our own, be it linguistic or other semiotic signs, and to construct stereotypes of people portraying them and

9 For various reasons, in the US it is common that individuals with Latin American heritage stop acquiring Spanish from a second generation onwards (see, e.g., Anzaldúa 1987; see also Mena 2023 for a more recent take on the pressure to stop speaking Spanish). In a recent survey (run from Aug. 1 to 14, 2022; sample of 3,029 U.S. Latino adults), Mora & López (2023) reports that 24% of all Latino adults claimed that they could barely carry on a conversation in Spanish or not at all. The proportion of non-Spanish Speakers amongst Latinx increases to 65% amongst third or higher generations.

10 While the vast majority of that work relates to language (/linguistic) ideologies (see, e.g., Silverstein (1979); Woolard (1998); Irvine & Gal (2000); Kroskrity (2000); see also Rosa & Burdick (2017); Gal & Irvine (2019) and Irvine (2022) for overviews), these are built on the concept of *ideology* itself.

of their activities.[11] In this view, ideologies guide our attention to signs bundled together, such as language, clothes, or food, and that contrast with one's own.[12]

Besides stereotypes, ideologies also dictate what the (social) norms are, and what is appropriate and inappropriate. Agents are (often) blind to their own ideological/perspectival bias. Agents tend to consider the way they perceive the world as objective, and the social norms derived as common-sensical.

That our perspectives guide our attention and make us perceive the world differently has been shown experimentally. For example, Granot & Xu (2024) summarizes work on the relation of race and video evidence, and on how perception regarding images from body cameras (like those used by police officers) is different depending on features of the perceiver, and features of the individual on camera. Van Bavel & Packer (2021) offers an overview of studies regarding how our own perspectives influence the way we perceive the world by directing our attention and filtering what matters, thus explaining why "people can experience the same events yet come to very different conclusions about what transpired" (ibid.: 57).

The view on ideologies described above is not far from the views found in the philosophy literature. Building on Gramsci, Du Bois, Lacan, and Althusser, Kukla (2018) summarizes their take on ideologies as functioning to reproduce social relations and identities that maintain social order, enforcing a social ontology (including social identities and relations, as well as general facts about the world explaining them). Importantly, ideologies constitute reality and make the social relations and identities they reproduce look "natural", outside of possible criticism. Much of this view is shared with Swanson (2015). Crucially, ideologies are not just beliefs. Swanson (2015) and Kukla (2018) take ideologies to include clusters of mutually supporting beliefs, as well as interests, norms, values, practices, affective dispositions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world.

2.1 Enacting a style, performing a practice, and indexing persona with ML

Let us take William's utterance in (1) again. The speaker could have used the word *clear* instead of the (not exact) parallel *adiós* ('bye'). ML is marked, not the expected (discarding borrowings as ML), and as such, we reason as to why the speaker made that choice (see Acton 2021 on the construction of social meaning through Gricean pragmatics). The choice of *adiós* brings "Spanish", more precisely, the composite of what Spanish speakers from the agents' perspective are like, which they assume to

11 These partial perspectives are called *ideologies* because "they are suffused with the political and moral issues pervading the particular sociolinguistic field and are subject to the interests of their bearers' social position" (Gal & Irvine 2019: 2).

12 Gal & Irvine (2019) consider contrast as an axis of differentiation, where "bundles of features contrast with other bundles according to a single principle of contrast", e.g., Latinx vs. Anglos.

be available to the addressee (else, the utterance wouldn't be understandable). To understand the speaker's performance, the audience needs to identify the speaker's assumed stereotype of the language speakers and, thus, the speaker's ideology with respect to them. Said differently, in doing ML the speaker presupposes a shared ideology and requests its accommodation to recover the utterance's meaning.

Oftentimes, we identify ML with a recognizable style common to a particular group, where a *style* is a bundle of semiotic resources (/features), including linguistic resources, associated with a particular social type (/persona).[13] We recognize the practice (the enacting of the style).[14] For example, in the US we can only make sense of S-ML in (1) as a way to evoke derogatory stereotypes of Latinx people as service workers. Enacting such a style is a common practice within social groups that hold a view from which Latinx people are "less than", like White people (see §2.1.1). By performing ML, as a recognizable style common within a particular group, the speaker themself is performing a practice that identifies them as belonging to such group.[15] In what follows I examine S-ML, A-ML and F-ML.

2.1.1 Spanish-Mock Language and Whiteness

All agents hold an ideology, which includes perspectives. While ideologies can be more broadly or narrowly shared, *whiteness* in the US is the hegemonic ideology,

13 The meaning of style is the result of contextual processes involving, amongst other things, the histories of social relationships, perspectives on the language used, and their speakers. Styles are resources for people to make meaning; they are often indexically tied to social types. See, e.g., Coupland (2007); Bucholtz (2010).

14 A *practice* is a meaningful, everyday social activity through which individuals both shape and are shaped by social structures, with language use being a key part of these practices (Eckert 2000). While *practices* are used to talk about *communities of practice* (see, e.g., Eckert & Brown 2006), I am using it here to talk about an everyday activity, linguistic in this case, that is common amongst members of a *social group*. Unlike communities of practice, social groups often rely on fixed categories, such as being of Latino heritage or EA. Like communities of practice, social groups often embody and share a way of looking at the world, i.e., an ideology.

15 Identity, as the social positioning of the speaker with respect to others, is taken to be performative, the result of action (see, e.g., Butler 1990). It is jointly produced in interaction in the context of utterance. That is, "identities are inherently relational, so that acts of self-definition are also acts of other-definition and vice versa. Crucially, this social accomplishment is carried out primarily– but not exclusively– through language" (Bucholtz 2010: 10; see also Bucholtz & Hall 2005). Identity is a performative and social process constructed and expressed through language and communicative practices, shaping and reflecting one's position within social structures and relationships. It influences how people interact, how they are perceived, and how they experience belonging or difference in social contexts. Identities are not static and pre-determined, but constructed through social practices. This view is not very different from views of identity within philosophy, in which social identity is also socially constructed. E.g., in Haslanger's work social identities are categories that are socially constructed and tied to structural positions in society (see, e.g., Haslanger 2012).

the "unmarked". Whiteness is the ideology that situates the 'white race' as "the best one [...] for the purpose of social control, and the maintenance of wealth and power" (Spears 2020).[16] White people are often unaware of whiteness and how it organizes everyday society, but non-white people are aware of the structural imbalance that the *white gaze* (a way to interpret the world that privileges the behaviors and cultural norms of idealized EAs) perpetrates. The white gaze is not only attached to the speaking subject but also to a listening subject, affecting the perception of other groups' behaviors, including language. Seen under the lens of the hegemonic White listening subject in the US,[17] Spanish is an emblem of Latinx people,[18] and the speech practices of the Latinx people is seen as deviant "based on their racial positioning in society as opposed to any objective characteristics of their language use" (Flores & Rosa 2015: 151).[19] For example, Flores & Rosa (2015) studied differences in perception of racialized and non-racialized people in the US, and show how racialized populations are perceived as unable to speak 'properly' regardless of how much their speech adheres to standardized norms.[20] Latinx people are stigmatized regarding language as well as other social practices (Flores & Rosa 2015; Rosa & Burdick 2017). Notice, however, that the 'White listening/perceiving subject' is "a structural position that can be inhabited by whites and non-whites" (Rosa & Flores 2017: 9; se also, e.g., Hill 2008).[21] Let us examine (4):

(4) *Fox News Sunday*; 8/1/2010: Sarah Palin on immigration, Brewer (AZ Governor), and Barack Obama (US President at the time).

16 See, e.g., Mena (2024) for a recent overview of White ideology.

17 Flores & Rosa (2015) build on Inoue's notion of the masculine listening subject in the production of the linguistic category of Japanese 'women's language' (Inoue 2003, 2006).

18 See, e.g., Hill (1998); Flores & Rosa (2015) amongst many others. See also Smalls, Spears & Rosa (2021) for an overview of language and other signs in relation to *White supremacy* understood as a social system in which White people enjoy structural privileges over other racialized communities despite formal legal equality.

19 See Irvine & Gal (2000); Gal & Irvine (2019) for *iconization/rhematization*, the process by which speakers are taken to embody the qualities perceived as characterizing their speech.

20 While not all US Latinx are Spanish speakers, those who are bilingual see their English-Spanish bilingualism framed as deficient and in need of remedy so they can have access to the 'academic language' required for complex thinking and participation in the modern society. See, e.g., Flores (2016); Rosa & Burdick (2017).

21 Being "white" does not make a person a White perceiver, and one does not need to be "white" to have a white gaze. Rosa & Flores (2017) mentions the case of non-white Latino political commentator Geraldo Rivera commenting on the killing of African American teenager Trayvon Martin, and suggesting that Martin's hooded sweatshirt was 'thug' wear. This was despite the fact that this is a normative youth style throughout the US. Rivera was reproducing white perceiving subject perspectives according to which African American + Hoodie = thug, whereas White + hoodie $\neq$ thug. Hill (2008: 7) also points out that "ordinary people who do not share white supremacist beliefs can still talk and behave in ways that advance the project of white racism."

Palin: Jan Brewer has the **cojones** that our president does not have to look out for all Americans, not just Arizonians.

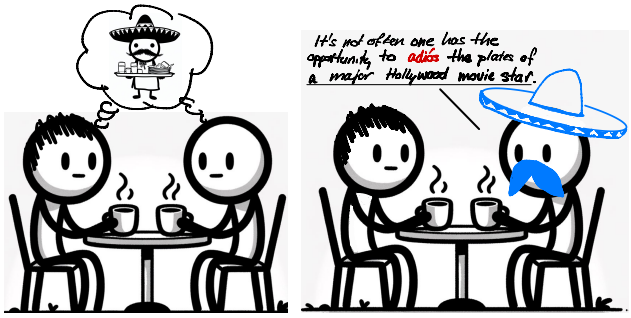
The word *cojones* in (4) is used as an euphemism to avoid the use of the English word *balls*. It has the added purpose of creating a humorous-enough / easy-going persona (Palin is, after all, violating expectations by going out of her way to use "masked" profanity) while perpetuating racist stereotypes derived from the White ideology. More specifically, in (4) *cojones* invokes stereotypes of racialized (brown) Spanish speakers as non-rational people in times of conflict, a behavior that often leads to dangerous actions even at risk of their own physical integrity. In this case, Palin evokes the stereotype, but it is Jan Brewer who is assimilated to Latinx with respect to how brash she is. Importantly, in performing S-ML Palin is enacting a practice that identifies her as a member of the White people, and what she does (evoking irrationality in relation to Latinx people) reinforces the ideology of her group. The same stereotype of irrationality is evoked in (5), from eurohoops.net.

(5) Mike Malone: Campazzo has big **cojones**, he doesn't care. (2/1/21)

In this case, Malone (a white coach) still evokes stereotypes of Latinx people and perpetuates, in that way, racist views on Latinx people. The person on whom Malone is commenting regarding how brash he is is himself a Latinx person, the Argentinian basketball player Facundo Campazzo, making it an easy fit for the evoked stereotype.

Let us now return to (1), which shows an example of S-ML in which the speaker evoked stereotypes of Latinx people in the US as being service workers. One way to understand William's utterance is as saying *It is not often one has the opportunity to be like a Latinx person and clear up the dishes of a major Hollywood movie star*.

(6)



This unexpected assimilation of the speaker to Latinx people (with respect to the relevant disparaging stereotype) is often found "humorous."

To summarize, adjectives such as *trabajador* ('hard working') or *compasivo* ('compassionate') are not words often found in S-ML, they do not fit with the stereotype of Latinx people. Only those evoking derogatory stereotypes often do. Since S-ML evokes derogatory stereotypes of Latinx in the US, it is subordinating speech.

Performing S-ML is performing a pejorative speech act, and it is a case of covert racist discourse. S-ML "accomplishes racialization of its subordinate-group targets through indirect indexicality, messages that must be available for comprehension but are never acknowledged by speakers" (Hill 1998: 683). It evokes stereotypes of racialized Latinxs people from the White perspective without making the racist stereotype explicit, i.e., avoiding getting it into the conversational record and thus maintaining deniability (see Camp 2018 on insinuation).[22] Put differently, performing S-ML is performing a "back-door" speech act (Langton 2018), a speech act that achieves its illocutionary force not through the explicit content of the utterance but indirectly. It "passes through the back door" of communicative intentions, often evading direct accountability or scrutiny.[23] With S-ML the speaker takes a superiority stance and perpetuates derogatory stereotypes while indexing whiteness.[24]

Mock Spanish is a case of *cultural appropriation*.[25] It is usually perceived as disrespectful, and often harms the cultural integrity, or identity, of the source culture (see Matthes 2025 for discussion). In fact, Callahan (2010) shows that perception of S-ML ranges from "good fun", amongst White people, to "making fun" amongst Latinxs in the US.

That S-ML is a recognizable practice can be shown by considering *inverted Spanglish* (Rosa 2016). This is a language practice observed in young Spanish/English bilingual Latinx teens (Rosa's 2016 work is based on a public high school in Chicago). It consists of the "inversion of the pronunciation patterns associated with Spanish lexical items and the ethnolinguistic identities associated with these linguistic forms" (Rosa 2016: 66). Inverted Spanglish reproduces the same patterns of pronunciation found in S-ML, where monolingual White people hyper-anglicize Spanish words. However, produced by racialized Latinx, the practice functions to "signal intimate familiarity with both English and Spanish" (ibid., 74). Inverted Spanglish serves to highlight Latinx identity (via the use of Spanish),[26] claim cool Americanness (through English dexterity), and show insider knowledge of Spanish, since the hyper-anglicized Spanish words are not commonly known by EA monolingual English speakers (ibid., 74).[27] The use of inverted Spanglish as

22 Hill (1998) follows Ochs (1990) more directly refers to this as a case of "indirect indexicality".

23 See also (McGowan 2004, 2009) on 'conversational exercitives'.

24 *Indexicality* refers to how language forms, together with other semiotic signs, serve as signs that connect to social meanings. This process is ideologically mediated. See, e.g., Ochs (1992); Silverstein (1985); see also Bucholtz & Hall (2005).

25 Cultural appropriation arises when members of a dominant culture adopt or use elements from a marginalized or minority culture for their own benefit without permission or proper understanding. It is particularly problematic in power imbalance situations when performed by the majority group.

26 In racialized bodies, Spanish is an emblem of Latinx (see, e.g., Silverstein 2003). Furthermore, in the US, Spanish-English hybridity is a sign of Latinx identity (see Rosa 2016 and references therein).

27 Rosa (2019) argues that inverted Spanglish is a way of reappropriating S-ML.

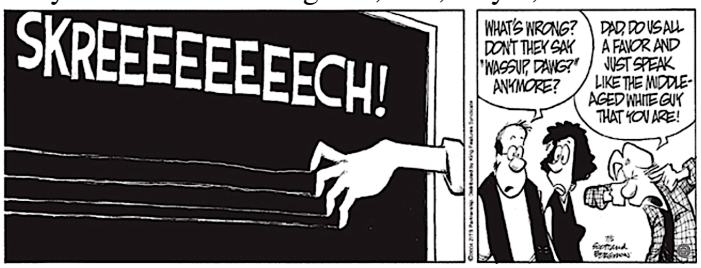
a stylistic practice that reverses S-ML to index membership to the Latinx people shows that S-ML is itself recognized as a practice associated with a style.

2.1.2 African American Language-Mock Language

A-ML is also known as mock Ebonics (see, e.g., Ronkin & Karn 1999). A-ML has been largely documented in the literature. Kiesling (2001), for example, shows how American fraternity white men use African American Language (AAL) features to adopt superiority stances of overt confrontation of physical power by drawing from racial stereotypes. In particular, they adopt African American linguistic styles to index masculinities stereotypically associated with African American men. By using A-ML, these white men are not indexing the social group *per se*, but evoking its stereotypes to adhere specific features.

In the same way, Bucholtz (2010) studies how EA teenagers at a high school during the 90s use A-ML. At that time, teenagers had to take some sort of stance toward the dominant form of African American youth culture embodied by hip-hop. Some EAs embraced it, and with that comes a performance of identity that includes clothing and language in the form of some elements of AAL (see Alim 2006), and yet selectively so. This conforms to an identifiable style, allowing youths to position themselves with respect to their peers, the younger kids, and their parents. It indexes coolness, youth, non-standard White, a sort of rebellious kid. When out-group individuals try to enact the style, we find ourselves in a discursive dissonance:

(7) Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman, *Zits*, July 5, 2004



Walt, Jeremy's father in *Zits*, cannot nonchalantly use the greetings appropriated from AAL by the group of White teens attempting to adopt a cool stance. The White teens' appropriation of some AAL linguistic features, such as this greeting, is enregistered[28] as a specific group's style and Walt's own individual style is incompatible with it. The result is a sort of Austinian misfire: Walt does not have the credentials to enact the White teens' style.

28 *Enregisterment* is a process whereby styles become recognized and socially meaningful signs of identity, community membership, or social stance (Agha 2003, 2005).

2.1.3 French-Mock Language

As illustrated above, not all instances of mock language are derogatory. Whether mock language is a derogatory practice depends on the stereotypes evoked (which depends on the speaker's ideology). On the opposite side of S-ML and A-ML we encounter French-ML (F-ML).

In discussing (3) we saw how the stereotypes evoked include features regarding sophistication and finesse. F-ML is also used in academic circles (not just in US academia), aligning with the stereotype of the French (/Parisian) intellectuality. Interspersing French evokes the stereotypes of French speakers under the presumed prevailing ideology. Additionally, by interspersing French, the speaker enacts a style and links them to the social group who can, in fact, enact such a style (the people who know of French): people who are thus related to a high level of education and sophistication. Figueroa can attempt to pull that off, but this is hardly available to Caputo (someone whose personal style is somehow rough around the edges) beyond sarcastic instances like (3).

Stereotypes of French people within the hegemonic view in the US also involve romantic shades (French is the 'language of love').[29]

(8)


The New York Times
Week in Review
Sunday, January 25, 1998
Scandale
Public Tolerance in the Clinton Era, and Its Limits

"*The week after the Monica Lewinsky story broke, the New York Times Week in Review section ran its story about it under a picture of the White House at night that was headed* Scandale. *When I asked an editor at the section why they felt the need to put that final* e *on the word, he said, "Oh, that's so readers will know it's about sex and not money.*""
(Nunberg 2018: 267)

As in the case of S-ML above, the NYTimes editor's aim wouldn't be possibly achieved if the word used were, e.g., *escándalo* (Spanish for 'scandal'). If the editor had used Spanish instead, the reader would have been forced to entertain a completely different kind of issue.

2.2 Taking stock

We have seen above that ML works by evoking stereotypes of speakers of the appropriated language that are presupposed to prevail in the context. These stereotypes depend on how the ideology the speaker presupposes characterizes those social groups. By evoking the stereotype, the speaker takes a stance towards them.

For the sake of simplicity in exposition, we have focused on ML in which the

29 The picture of the White House in (8) is not the original. The rest of the composition is.

speaker is identified with the hegemonic social group holding a White (Supremacy) ideology. This doesn't mean that there cannot be ML in which a minoritized group evokes stereotypes of the hegemonic group generated from their own ideology. These can be negative stereotypes, and in such cases, it would be parallel to minoritized social groups having slurs for social groups that, beyond the utterance situation, have a higher status.[30] What matters is that within the utterance situation, ML (as slurs would), serves to adopt a local (discursive) stance.

We have seen that practices are often recognized and associated with a style, enregistered (conventionalized) to index a particular social type. As such, X-ML (where 'X' is a language) is not always possible. The stereotypes evoked must match a particular feature with what is relevant in the context of utterance and be compatible with an entity that *fits for it* (see Camp 2017: 50, for the parallel case of metaphors). The resulting entity's features have to form a coherent set.

3 Mock Language as a framing device: Meta-frames

The contribution of ML is not *at-issue*. In all the examples above we could substitute the ML-expression so that the entire utterance is in the language of the discourse (e.g., above, in English) without altering the at-issue meaning.[31] ML serves the function of evoking stereotypes of the social group that speaks the language. These stereotypes are mediated by the ideology operating in the context of utterance.

Stereotypes are the product of ideologies, and, ultimately, a full understanding of ML would require a thorough understanding of ideologies. However, for our purposes, it is enough to talk about *perspectives*, which I take to be part of ideologies (see §1 above on ideologies). For the sake of concreteness, I adopt here the concept of *perspectives* in Camp's work (see, e.g., Camp 2015, 2017, 2019, 2025).

3.1 Perspectives, stereotypes and frames

Perspectives are epistemic tools guiding information processing. They are open-ended dispositions that allow us to understand and interpret the world and our experiences. Perspectives drive our attention, dictate what features matter (prominence) and how (centrality), making connections between them and assigning explanatory structures and degrees of centrality (a feature is more central the more it is connected to other features). In sum, perspectives help us synthesize complex bodies

30 See, e.g., Kukla (2018) for discussion on the slur *Becky* used in the African American community to refer to some white woman.

31 See Simons, Tonhauser, Beaver & Roberts (2010) for *at-issueness*. I am not dwelling here on what the at-issue meaning of greetings is (this would be relevant for (7)). What interests us is that the speaker could have just said, e.g., "how are you doing?", instead of "wassup, dawg?"

of information. In doing so, they produce *characterizations*, i.e., "rich, holistic, multi-dimensional construals," (Camp 2025: 23). Characterizations, based on perspectives, "connect the many constituent features that they attribute to their subject into a complex multidimensional structure, reflecting the different ways in which a feature can matter in an agent's characterization of a given subject" (Camp 2019: 20). Stereotypes (of social kinds) are a kind of characterization. Just as characterizations, they are ways of thinking about social types that rely on prominent and central features identified by our perspectives. Simplifying this view, we can take characterizations (/stereotypes) as clusters of interconnected features.

While perspectives are useful in helping us to process complex bodies of information, because of their nature, perspectives can also be pernicious in the same ways ideologies are said to be (see discussion in §1).

> The upshot is that perspectives must be selective, preferential, and abductive in order to perform their function of encoding, selecting, synthesizing, and responding to information in purpose-driven ways in real time. But the open-ended, intuitive, flexible, holistic nature of perspectives means that they implement selection, preference, and extrapolation in ways that tend to induce distortion and blind us to those distortions. We don't just ignore certain information and deprioritize certain values. We fail to notice the streams of perspective-dissonant information we neglect, even as we take the streams of perspective-conforming information we do collect to support our interpretive acuity. (Camp 2025: 38)

To illustrate this point with our discussion in §2, that Latinx people speak Spanish, or that Spanish speakers are Latinx individuals (e.g., Spaniards do not count), is a stereotype. Individuals that do not fit this stereotype are *erased*, and counterexamples explained away (see discussion in §2 regarding Irvine & Gal's 2000 erasure).[32]

In Camp's framework, linguistic devices that express perspectives are called *frames*. They not only communicate factual information, but also offer an intuitive way of thinking about their subjects. Frames function to "stabilize perspectives by associating them with concrete, intuitively resonant representational types that can be retokened across contexts and agents," (Camp 2025: 23). Examples of frames are metaphors ("Juliet is the sun"; Camp 2017), or slurs (Camp 2013). They are

32 Camp & Flores (2024); Camp (2025) argue that social kind terms, e.g., *Latinx*, express interpretive principles rendering some features, like skin-color, highly prominent because they are diagnostic of categories and, in turn, those features become correlated with group membership. We avoid even encountering information that fails to fit our perspectives and, thus, the stereotypes that they derive. When we encounter that information, we tend to dismiss it or minimize its effect on our overall perspective.

used, amongst other things, to structure our thinking about a subject. In the case of metaphors (e.g., when Romeo says "Juliet is the sun"), one uses a characterization shared with other participants in discourse (e.g., a characterization of the sun) to structure the characterization of another (e.g., Juliet).

Metaphors offer a helpful parallelism with ML. For example, in using S-ML in (1), the speaker evokes stereotypes of Latinx people (by using Spanish, an emblem of the social group) and uses it to characterize another entity. In (1), the other entity is the speaker themself. William's utterance is roughly overall interpreted as in (9):

(9) It's not often one has the opportunity to be like a Latinx person and clear up the dishes of a major Hollywood movie star.
⇝ Latinx people are service workers

In a parallel manner to how metaphors work in Camp 2017, using ML requires that the addressee apply a stereotype as a frame for structuring another. That is, in using, e.g., S-ML, the speaker is requesting the addressee to apply the stereotype of Latinx people for structuring either himself (1), or someone else, like the Governor of Arizona in (4). X-ML requires the addressee to identify the most contextually prominent features within the stereotype of X-Speakers and to match them to the relevant features in the salient entity's individual stereotype. Those matching features thus rise into prominence, both for the stereotyped X-speaker and for the framed entity. ML is, in this way, a meta-frame. It is a tool for thought (for characterizing an entity) that expresses a perspective via evoking a stereotype through enacting a practice ("speaking" the language) emblematic of the stereotyped group.

3.2 A simple model for ML

When we interact with others and present ourselves to the world, we make assumptions about the context. Not just about what can be part of a (Stalnakerian) common ground, but also about how the addressee is likely to read our performance. In a way, this is like claiming that we assume a perspective/ideology mediating our interactions. When participants belong to the same social group, they can assume that the perspective is (broadly) the same. When they do not, and there is a power imbalance, the weaker group is very much aware of the gaze held by the more powerful one (see §2 in general, and, more specifically, §2.1.1). Intuitively, the assumption is that we are aware of how we are perceived (the features that stand out and how they are interrelated/construed) by the outside world, and that this may be different from in-group perspectives. In fact, our own construction of the self is influenced by our awareness of this global/"outside" perspective that governs the interpretation of our performance (of course, we could also dogwhistle; see, e.g., Saul 2018; Henderson & McCready 2024). I call this global perspective *I*.

For simplicity, below I assume that the speaker using S-ML is unambiguously identifying themself (via I) as having a White gaze: S-ML is emblematic of the style indexing a social type holding that perspective, and, in the examples, it is compatible with the speaker's overall style. Outside, however, there may be exceptions.[33] Similarly, I identifies AAL-mockers as indexing a rebellious White teenager (see §2.1.2). I also allows us to identify what other semiotic features are relevant and how they connect. Let us consider Walt in (7). I drives our attention regarding Walt's prominent features and their connections, producing his personal stereotype/style:

(10) $I(\text{WALT}) = \text{Stereo}_{\text{WALT}} = \left[\begin{smallmatrix}\text{SUBURBAN}\\ \text{MID-AGE}\\ \text{WHITE-PHENOTYPE}\\ \text{NORM-CONFORMING}\end{smallmatrix}\right]$

At the same time, individuals who practice A-ML are identified by I as having special interconnected features (A-mocking is an emblem).

(11) $I(\text{A-Mocking}) = \text{Stereo}_{\text{A-MOCKER}} = \left[\begin{smallmatrix}\text{TEENAGER}\\ \text{WHITE-PHENOTYPE}\\ \text{NORM-NON-CONFORMING}\end{smallmatrix}\right]$

Intuitively, an individual stereotyped as Walt is in (10) is incompatible with A-Mocking: $I(\text{WALT} + \text{A-MOCKING})$ is undefined. We can model this by constraining style updates, thus constraining individuals' behaviors:

(12) a. **Stereotype:** For a bundle of features e, $I(e) = \text{Stereo}_e$ is a bundle of prominent features of e according to I, structured by centrality. Features include properties of individuals or social groups, as well as practices (speech practices, clothing, etc).

b. **Style update:** For an entity x, an update of Stereo_x with $I(y)$, $I(x+y)$, is defined iff $I(x)$ is **compatible** with $I(y)$. When compatible: $I(x+y) = I(x')$ s.t., for all m, where m is a central features of Stereo_x, and for all n, n is a central feature of Stereo_y, $m, n \in I(x')$

c. **Feature compatibility:** Two bundles of features $I(x)$ and $I(y)$ are compatible iff for any central feature $f \in I(x)$, an *opposing* feature $-f$ is not a central feature of $I(y)$.

$I(\text{WALT} + \text{A-mocking})$ is thus undefined: e.g., a central feature of Walt's is norm-conformity, while A-Mockers identity is centered around being non-norm-conformers.

Let us turn now to S-ML, and in particular to Will in (1):

33 While S-ML usually indexes Whiteness, it is true that this is not necessarily the case. In identifying the speaker's identity, we also consider many other signs that build their style, which ultimately index their persona. One way to model this is to follow Henderson & McCready (2024) on their approach to dogwhistles, which builds on Burnett's (2019) Social Meaning Games. Applying Bayesian reasoning, we can capture how listeners identify the speaker's persona (and their ideology), given their performance. The likelihood of a speaker having a particular persona (e.g., having a white gaze) given their performance (e.g., performing S-ML), is proportional to the likelihood of the speaker performing S-ML while having a white gaze, weighted by how likely, independently of this performance (considering other semiotic signs), the listener takes the speaker to bear a white gaze.

(13) a. $I(\text{WILL}) = \text{Stereo}_{\text{WILL}} = \left[\begin{smallmatrix}\text{WHITE PHENOTYPE}\\ \text{EASY-GOING}\\ \text{MIDDLE-CLASS}\end{smallmatrix}\right]$

b. $I(\text{S-Mocking}) = \text{Stereo}_{\text{S-MOCKER}} = \left[\text{WHITE-GAZER}\right]$

c. $I(\text{WILL} + \text{S-MOCKING}) = \text{Stereo}_{\text{WILL}'} = \left[\begin{smallmatrix}\text{WHITE PHENOTYPE}\\ \text{EASY-GOING}\\ \text{MIDDLE-CLASS}\\ \text{WHITE GAZER}\end{smallmatrix}\right]$

As in the case of A-ML, Will's use of S-ML identifies him as belonging to a social group with specific features (White-gazer). Additionally, the use of ML evokes stereotypes of the language's speakers. For Spanish speakers, the hegemonic ideology in the US would deliver the following:

(14) $I(\text{SPANISH\_SPEAKERS}) = \text{Stereo}_{\text{SPANISH\_SPEAKER}} = \left[\begin{smallmatrix}\text{BROWN PHENOTYPE}\\ \text{LAZY}\\ \text{UN-EDUCATED}\\ \text{GUTSY}\\ \text{LOW-QUALIFIED WORKERS}\end{smallmatrix}\right]$

With this in hand, we can now address ML by considering that ideologies (which include perspectives) and entities (conceived as bundles of features) are tracked in the context of utterance c. (15) characterizes the context update effect of ML: (15a) spells out the effect for the speaker, and (15b) for the target entity.

(15) Let $\Psi_{\text{X-ML}}$ be a sentence with a X-ML phrase m, and Ψ the de-mocked parallel. $c = \langle I, E, \ldots \rangle$, where I is the assumed prevailing ideology and E the set of **entities** conceived as bundles of features. Ideologies are functions from bundles of features to characterizations/stereotypes. c' is the update of c by $[\![\Psi_{\text{X-ML}}]\!]$.
$[\![\Psi_{\text{X-ML}}]\!]^{\langle I,E\ldots\rangle} = [\![\Psi]\!]^{\langle I,E'\ldots\rangle}$ defined iff

a. for s, the speaker, $I(s_E + \text{X-MOCKING}) = I(s_{E'}) = I(s')$ is defined (12b-c) (i.e., if defined, $I(s_E) = \text{Stereo}_{s_E}$ is updated to $I(s_{E'}) = I(s')$ in c'); **and**

b. there is a relevant $f \in \text{Stereo}_{\text{X-SPEAKERS}}$ s.t. $-f \notin \text{Stereo}_{y_E}$ for salient entity $y \in E$ and $I(y_E + [f]) = I(y_{E'}) = I(y') = \text{Stereo}_{y_{E'}}$
(i.e., $I(y_E) = \text{Stereo}_{y_E}$ is updated to $I(y_E + [f]) = I(y_{E'}) = I(y')$ in c').

Applied to (1), the result is that William's utterance is equivalent to the full-English counterpart, and that there is a relevant feature within the stereotype Latinx people (X/Spanish-Speaker) that fits a salient entity. Via Gricean relevance, considering the utterance, the salient entity in c is the speaker. The feature in the stereotype of Latinx people concerns clearing out plates (/being a waiter or service worker), and ML presents William as fitting for it (even if accidentally). The derogatory association is compatible with the speaker having a White gaze and, thus, holding a derogatory stereotype of Latinx, reinforcing the view that S-ML is emblematic of White people.

In the case of (4), S-ML also identifies Palin as White. In this case, however, the salient entity is Arizona's Governor, and the word *cojones* in the stereotype of Latinx people appeals to the gutsy feature associated with this social group, presenting the Governor as fitting for it.

4 Worse than insults, closer to slurs

Our model correctly remains agnostic regarding whether a given performance of ML is derogatory or not. The derogatory effect of ML depends on the perspective the speaker's style is compatible with, and, thus, presupposed. If the stereotype of the individuals speaking the language appropriated/borrowed derived from the suitable perspective is derogatory, ML would be derogatory. If it isn't, then it shouldn't.

ML crystallizes the presumed prevailing perspective within the presupposed ideology. Given that ML presupposes that a perspective prevails and is operationalizable by the addressee in the context of utterance, by using ML the speaker cultivates intimacy: we understand the speaker's assumption that our familiarity allows things to remain unsaid, and that the presuppositions made are right-play/acceptable.[34] Since perspectives are presupposed, they are 'not-at-issue' (not up for discussion/challengeable), and nor are the stereotypes they evoke. If not already agreed upon, the speaker is requesting accommodation of such perspective, and accommodation is often instinctive and automatic (see, e.g., Beaver & Stanley 2023 for discussion). Presupposed derogatory perspectives on social groups are problematic because, by quietly accommodating them, we indirectly legitimize and perpetuate the stereotypes they produce. Presupposition is known to have a persuasive function via accommodation (Sbisà 1999), and it is at the basis of manipulative language (this can be seen in advertising; see Sedivy & Carlson 2011).

Thus, presupposing derogatory stereotypes via ML is a way of derogating the speakers of the appropriated language. This presupposition takes it as a given that the social group ought to be derogated, and that this attitude is mutually shared by all. In fact, even if the addressee opposes the stereotype, identifying it by understanding the speaker's overall message already acknowledges its existence. Interpreting ML is involuntary and contributes to the impossibility of denying the shared stereotype. Furthermore, if there is laughing, then it becomes more difficult: the "appreciative" understanding of the "joke" can overpower any subsequent refusal of the stereotype.

ML is related to other ways of conveying social meaning, in particular, slurs (see Biezma 2026). Slurs are frames (see Camp 2013), and ML is a meta-frame, both thus evoking perspectives. Like slurs (see, e.g., Camp 2013; Swanson 2015; Kukla 2018), ML and ideologies/perspectives stand in a mutually supporting relation. When the stereotypes of X-speakers triggered by the presupposed prevailing perspective are derogatory, enacting X-ML is performing a pejorative speech act. In both cases, the identification of the prevaling perspective is mediated by the speaker's style (see Biezma 2026). Derogatory ML and slurs differ in that ML is a *practice* emblematic of a style indexing a persona associated with a derogatory perspective on people linked to a language, whereas slurs are *words* emblematic of styles indexing *bigots*.

34 This is somehow similar to what Swanson (2015) calls acceptability implicature.

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