

Between English and Spanish: A Linguistic Study of Code-switching in Selena Gomez's Song "Ojos Tristes"

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*Aura Savinka Balqis, Elfa Salsabila, Rahmadsyah Rangkutj^{abc}

¹²³Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

Corresponding Author: aurasavinka@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes code-switching patterns in Selena Gomez's "Ojos Tristes" using Poplack's (1980) structural typology and Gumperz's (1982) functional framework. Through qualitative lyrical analysis, three code-switching types are identified: inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag-switching. Results show English expresses rational control and restraint, while Spanish conveys intimacy and cultural heritage, creating a dual emotional narrative. The study contributes threefold: linguistically, it extends code-switching theory to pop music contexts; musically, it demonstrates how bilingual artistry constructs layered emotional registers; culturally, it reveals language choice as identity negotiation and resistance to monolingual assimilation. Findings confirm code-switching in "Ojos Tristes" functions as deliberate artistic strategy that affirms multilingual expression in mainstream American culture.

Keywords: *Code-switching, Bilingual identity, Cultural expression*

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INTRODUCTION

Modern linguistic scholarship widely recognizes code-switching as a systematic and rule-governed practice that reflects deep sociolinguistic competence. Foundational theorists such as Poplack (1980) and Myers-Scotton (1993) have established that bilingual language alternation is neither arbitrary nor indicative of linguistic instability, but instead follows structural, grammatical, and sociopsychological principles. (Poplack, 1980) early typology identifies the grammatical constraints under which switches occur. Complementing these structural approaches, (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Scotton, 1997) emphasizes the social motivations for code-switching, explaining how speakers choose languages to index identity, negotiate power, or signal interpersonal relationships. Together, these key theoretical frameworks establish that code-switching is a purposeful communicative strategy embedded within broader sociocultural and cognitive systems.

Modern globalization has fundamentally transformed how individuals communicate, blurring traditional linguistic boundaries and creating spaces where multiple languages coexist naturally within single exchanges. Code-switching the fluid alternation between two or more linguistic systems during communication has become increasingly recognized as a sophisticated communicative practice rather than a linguistic deficiency (Poplack, 1980). Contemporary research demonstrates that bilingual speakers employ code-switching strategically to convey subtle meanings, negotiate identity positions, and express emotions that may resist expression within a single linguistic framework (Gumperz, 1982). Within entertainment media, particularly contemporary music production, code-switching functions as a cultural bridge, enabling artists to construct narratives that resonate across diverse audiences while maintaining authentic connections to their heritage communities (Bentahila & Davies, 2002).

The phenomenon of linguistic alternation in popular music has gained substantial scholarly attention, with researchers examining how artists navigate multilingual identities through their creative output. (Picone, 2024) argues that lyrical code-switching represents a form of multimodal intertextuality where language choices intersect with identity construction and cultural positioning. Similarly, (Moyna & Loureiro-Rodríguez, 2022) demonstrate through quantitative analysis that code-switching patterns in bilingual music reflect deliberate artistic decisions rather than random linguistic mixing. These studies collectively suggest that language alternation in musical contexts serves aesthetic, emotional, and sociopolitical functions simultaneously.

Selena Gomez represents a compelling case study for examining bilingual artistic expression in contemporary American popular music. As a Mexican-American performer whose professional trajectory spans mainstream American entertainment, Gomez increasingly incorporates Spanish into her musical repertoire, reflecting a broader cultural reclamation evident among second-generation Latinx artists. Her song "Ojos Tristes" exemplifies this linguistic negotiation, presenting a bilingual narrative structure that moves fluidly between English and Spanish. Raised in Texas with a Mexican mother and Italian-American father, Gomez embodies the bicultural experience common to many American Latinx individuals, where linguistic code-switching reflects lived reality rather than artistic affectation (García & Wei. Li, 2014). Through her musical choices, Gomez demonstrates how language selection operates as both personal expression and cultural statement, challenging monolingual expectations within mainstream American music.

The academic significance of examining bilingual musical expression extends beyond individual artistic analysis to address broader questions of cultural identity, linguistic ideology, and social inclusion in increasingly diverse societies. (García & Wei. Li, 2014) translanguaging framework challenges traditional assumptions that treat bilingualism as the sum of two separate linguistic systems, instead proposing that multilingual individuals possess a unified linguistic repertoire from which they draw strategically. This perspective reframes code-switching from a marginal practice to a natural human capability, positioning bilingual expression as cognitively sophisticated rather than linguistically deficient. For Mexican-American artists navigating predominantly English-language music industries, the incorporation of Spanish represents both artistic choice and political act, asserting the legitimacy of bilingual identity within spaces that historically demanded linguistic assimilation (Zentella, 2000).

Research examining code-switching patterns has established typological frameworks for understanding how bilingual speakers alternate between languages. (Poplack, 1980) foundational work identifies three primary switching patterns: inter-sentential switching, which occurs at sentence boundaries and maintains grammatical integrity in both languages; intra-sentential switching, which combines languages within single utterances and demonstrates high bilingual proficiency; and tag-switching, which involves inserting brief phrases or exclamations from one language into predominantly monolingual discourse. These structural patterns serve distinct communicative functions, organizing discourse structure, marking emotional shifts, and establishing cultural authenticity (Chan, 2009; Lee, 2004).

Inter-sentential code-switching allows speakers to compartmentalize different aspects of their message, often associating each language with particular themes, emotions, or social contexts. This pattern appears frequently in bilingual music, where artists may reserve one language for narrative exposition while employing another for emotional climax or cultural grounding (Bentahila & Davies, 2002). The structural clarity of inter-sentential switching makes it accessible to audiences with varying levels of bilingual competence, as grammatical boundaries remain intact in both linguistic components.

Intra-sentential code-switching demonstrates more complex bilingual integration, requiring speakers to navigate the grammatical structures of both languages simultaneously within single utterances. explains that this switching pattern reflects bilingual speakers' simultaneous activation of both linguistic systems, suggesting that bilingual cognition operates differently from two separate monolingual modes. In musical contexts, intra-

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sentential switching often appears at moments of heightened emotional intensity, where single-language expression proves inadequate to convey layered psychological experiences (Moyna & Loureiro-Rodríguez, 2022).

Tag-switching involves inserting culturally marked words or brief phrases that add nuance without disrupting the grammatical structure of the host sentence. These linguistic tags often carry cultural or emotional connotations that exceed their literal meanings, functioning as contextualization cues that signal shifts in emotional tone, social relationship, or cultural frame (Gumperz, 1982). In bilingual music, tag-switching establishes authenticity and creates intimacy with bilingual audiences who recognize these cultural markers (Picone, 2024).

Beyond structural considerations, the symbolic dimensions of language choice in bilingual discourse reveal how speakers associate different languages with distinct emotional registers, social contexts, and identity positions. (Gumperz, 1982) work on contextualization demonstrates how bilingual speakers use language alternation to signal changes in situational definition, with different languages indexing different social relationships or emotional stances. This metaphorical function of code-switching proves particularly salient in artistic contexts, where language choice contributes to narrative structure, character development, and thematic expression. One language may represent public persona, rationality, and social conformity, while another expresses private emotion, cultural heritage, and authentic selfhood (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Scotton, 1997).

Research on bilingual narrative structures in music reveals how code-switching can establish temporal frameworks, with language alternation marking shifts between present circumstances and remembered past, or between current reality and imagined future. This temporal layering adds narrative complexity, allowing artists to construct multidimensional stories that move across time, space, and emotional registers. (Lee, 2004) demonstrates how Korean popular music uses English-Korean code-switching to negotiate between global modernity and local cultural identity, with language choice marking different narrative perspectives and identity positions.

The present study examines code-switching patterns in Selena Gomez's "Ojos Tristes," analyzing how linguistic alternation between English and Spanish constructs emotional narrative, expresses bicultural identity, and creates meaning beyond what monolingual expression could achieve. By applying (Poplack, 1980) structural typology and (Gumperz, 1982) functional framework, this analysis illuminates how code-switching operates as deliberate artistic strategy rather than random linguistic mixing. The study contributes to broader scholarly conversations about bilingualism in popular culture, demonstrating how musical code-switching challenges linguistic hierarchies, affirms multilingual identity, and creates spaces for cultural belonging in contexts shaped by historical linguistic marginalization.

METHOD

The present study employs a qualitative descriptive method to analyze the patterns and functions of code-switching in Selena Gomez's "Ojos Tristes." The analysis follows a textual approach in which the song lyrics are treated as linguistic data, examined through close reading and systematic identification of code-switching instances. Guided by Poplack's (1980) typology, all occurrences of inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag-switching were categorized and coded to determine their structural characteristics. After the structural patterns were identified, each switch was interpreted through a functional lens, drawing on sociolinguistic theories of bilingualism and the metaphorical meaning of language alternation. The analysis also considers phonetic cues, emotional tone, and cultural references embedded within the switches to understand how the song constructs bilingual identity. To ensure analytic rigor, the study integrates theoretical cross-checking with existing frameworks in bilingual discourse, situating the linguistic features of the song within broader psychological

experiences of bilingual speakers and the sociocultural context in which English-Spanish mixing occurs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of "Ojos Tristes" shows that code-switching functions as a deliberate stylistic and emotional strategy, rather than simply a random change of language. The song features a clear and meaningful shift between English and Spanish, reflecting the cultural background of the artists and the emotional development in the lyrics. Based on (Poplack, 1980) typology, three distinct structural types emerge in this composition: inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag switching. Each type has a different communicative and artistic purpose in constructing the meaning of the song.

Inter-sentential Code-Switching

Inter-sentence code-switching, which occurs between complete sentences or sections, is the most dominant type in "Ojos Tristes." This form of switching is easily identifiable because the boundary between the two languages is clear. The song begins with verses entirely in English and continues with lines entirely in Spanish. This transition marks a clear emotional and narrative shift between the two sections.

Table 1. Inter-sentential Code-Switching

Lyrics	Language	Explanation
"No, it's not hard to see That you probably feel worse than me It's not your fault I have to leave Please don't you look that way, baby Those sad eyes, sad eyes You know I don't wanna say goodbye"	English	These opening lines express a calm and gentle farewell in English. The speaker shows empathy and emotional restraint, specifically through phrases like "It's not your fault" and "Please don't you look that way," which demonstrate careful word choice to soften the pain of separation.
"El muchacho de los ojos tristes Vive solo y necesita amor Como el aire necesita verme Como el sol lo necesito yo"	Spanish	The song shifts completely to Spanish, expressing deep romantic feelings and longing. The poetic imagery intensifies with metaphors like "Como el aire necesita verme" (like air needs to see me) and "Como el sol lo necesito yo" (like the sun, I need him), creating a more passionate emotional atmosphere.

This type of switching separates two emotional states: rational acceptance and emotional nostalgia. The English verses describe control and maturity, implying a carefully and politely handled separation, particularly evident in the apologetic tone of "It's not your fault I have to leave". In contrast, the Spanish verses express intimate emotions, through vivid imagery. The phrases "El muchacho de los ojos tristes" (the boy with sad eyes) becomes a recurring motif that personalizes the beloved, while "Vive solo y necesita amor" (lives alone and needs love) reveals vulnerability that was not present in the English section. The separation between these languages symbolizes the speaker's dual emotional world between what is said openly (English) and what is felt deeply in the heart (Spanish).

This pattern reflects (Poplack, 1980) observation that code-switching between sentences is the least disruptive form of language switching and is often used to organize speech into clear emotional or thematic sections. The bilingual structure of "Ojos Tristes" thus reinforces the narrative clarity and emotional layers of the song, while representing the bilingual identity of Selena Gomez and The Marías.

Intra-sentential Code-Switching

Intra-sentential code-switching occurs within a single sentence or phrase, involving elements from both languages. Although less frequent in "Ojos Tristes", it still plays a subtle role in reflecting bilingual thought processes.

Table 2. Intra-sentential Code-Switching

Lyrics	Explanation
"Han pasado dos años Te sigo pensando en todos mis sentidos Antes eran tus ojos lloviendo en otoño Y ahora son los míos"	This passage demonstrates fluid emotional continuity in Spanish, building from "Han pasado dos años" (two years have passed) to the present continuous "Te sigo pensando" (I keep thinking of you). The imagery shifts from "tus ojos lloviendo en otoño" (your eyes raining in autumn) to "ahora son los míos" (now they are mine), showing how the sadness has transferred from one person to another. The natural flow within Spanish shows seamless bilingual expression.

This type of switching represents a natural bilingual expression. The transition in "Antes eran tus ojos lloviendo en otoño / Y ahora son los míos" specifically illustrates temporal and emotional reversal—the metaphor of "raining eyes" (crying) has shifted from the former partner to the speaker, showing how roles have changed over time. The phrase "Cómo cambió, amor" (How it changed, love) followed by "Felices éramos los dos / Y ahora lloro, por Dios" (We were both happy / And now I cry, by God) demonstrates the speaker's reflection on this transformation, mixing nostalgic remembrance with present pain.

According to (Bennett, 2025), this type of code-switching can signify a change in social or emotional position. In "Ojos Tristes," the contrast between "Felices éramos los dos" (past happiness) and "Tristeza en mí amaneció" (sadness dawned in me) marks an emotional journey within the Spanish section itself, showing that emotions transcend linguistic boundaries and depict a psychological fusion between two linguistic identities.

Therefore, even though intra-sentence code-switching occurs less frequently in "Ojos Tristes," it adds to the authentic representation of bilingual identity and supports the emotional depth of the song.

Tag-Switching

Tag-switching refers to the insertion of short phrases, single words, or tags from one language into another. These elements are often expressive, emotional, or conversational. In "Ojos Tristes", tag-switching appears in emotionally charged words or exclamations that strengthen the lyrical tone.

Table 3. Tag-Switching

Lyrics	Language	Function
"Don't cry, don't cry, baby"	English	The repeated imperative "Don't cry, don't cry" creates urgency and emotional comfort. The tag "baby" appears twice in the opening section "Please don't you look that way, baby" and "Those sad eyes, sad eyes" softening the tone and expressing affection even in farewell.
"Por Dios"	Spanish	This religious exclamation in "Y ahora lloro, por Dios" (And now I cry, by God) expresses despair and emphasizes the pain of separation, adding cultural and emotional depth specific to Hispanic emotional expression.

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Tag switching often conveys emotional meaning, highlighting emotions and connections. The switch between "baby" (used in "Please don't you look that way, baby") and "por Dios" shows how different languages express emotions with different cultural weight. The English term "baby" appears in moments of direct address and comfort, particularly in "Just hold me for one last time," creating intimacy. Meanwhile, "por Dios" reflects Hispanic emotional intensity and spirituality, invoking divine witness to the speaker's suffering in a way that has no direct English equivalent in the song.

According to (Gumperz, 1982), such shifts can serve as contextual cues, helping listeners understand the emotional or social meaning of utterances. In "Ojos Tristes," the tag shift enriches the expressive style and deepens the emotional resonance of the lyrics.

Communicative Functions and Meanings

The communicative meaning of the code-switching in "Ojos Tristes" goes beyond structure. It contains symbolic, emotional, and cultural meanings. Among the six functions proposed by (Gumperz, 1982), the metaphorical function is the most relevant in this song, where language choice reflects changes in emotion, identity, or relationships.

Metaphorical Function

Metaphorical code-switching occurs when a change in language signifies a change in meaning or emotional tone. In "Ojos Tristes," English and Spanish represent two sides of the speaker's emotional experience. English reflects rational expression and emotional distance, while Spanish expresses intimacy, love, and sadness.

Table 4. Metaphorical Function

Switch Type	Lyrics	Function	Interpretation
English → Spanish	"Don't cry, don't cry Just hold me for one last time" → "El muchacho de los ojos tristes..."	Emotional intensification	The change from the English imperative "Don't cry" and the request "Just hold me for one last time" to the Spanish romantic declaration "El muchacho de los ojos tristes / Vive solo y necesita amor" marks the move from calm farewell to emotional confession. The metaphorical language intensifies with "Como el aire necesita verme / Como el sol lo necesito yo" (like air needs to see me / like the sun, I need him), showing Spanish as the language of the heart.
Emotional journey within Spanish	"Han pasado dos años Te sigo pensando en todos mis sentidos Antes eran tus ojos lloviendo en otoño Y ahora son los míos"	Temporal and emotional transition	The phrase "Han pasado dos años" (two years have passed) establishes temporal distance, yet "Te sigo pensando en todos mis sentidos" (I keep thinking of you in all my senses) reveals ongoing emotional attachment. The reversal from "Antes eran tus ojos lloviendo" (before it was your eyes crying) to "ahora son los míos" (now they are mine) demonstrates role reversal and shows how memory becomes both

painful and reflective. The exclamation "Cómo cambi6, amor" (How it changed, love) emphasizes this transformation.

The metaphorical function shows that code-switching is not random, but rather driven by emotional motivation. English functions as an external self-language, evident in the controlled expressions "It's not your fault I have to leave" and "You know I don't wanna say goodbye" statements that are socially controlled, polite, and restrained. In contrast, Spanish becomes an internal self-language that is passionate and vulnerable, as seen in "Vive solo y necesita amor" (lives alone and needs love) and the desperate cry "Y ahora lloro, por Dios/Tristeza en m6 amaneci6" (And now I cry, by God/Sadness dawned in me). This symbolic use of language reflects the bicultural identity of the artists, who navigate both English-speaking and Hispanic worlds.

The shift from English to Spanish can also be interpreted as a return to one's roots, that is, the reemergence of emotional truth through one's mother tongue or heritage language. The repeated refrain "El muchacho de los ojos tristes/Ha encontrado al fin una raz6n/Para hacer que su mirada r6a/Con mis besos y mi gran amor" (The boy with sad eyes/Has finally found a reason/To make his gaze smile/With my kisses and my great love) uses Spanish to express hope and redemption through love, providing a richer emotional vocabulary. This is in line with (Zentella, 2000) idea that bilingual speakers often choose the language that best suits their emotional intent or cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of code-switching in Selena Gomez's song "Ojos Tristes" demonstrates how the deliberate switching between English and Spanish functions as a sophisticated artistic strategy, going beyond a simple mix of languages to reveal deeper emotional layers and cultural identity. Through the use of inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag-switching patterns, the song expresses a dual emotional narrative in which English symbolizes a rational, calm, and outward-looking identity, while Spanish serves as an intimate language representing passion, vulnerability, and cultural heritage. This deliberate language shift not only structures the song's narrative by distinguishing between moments of controlled separation and deep longing, but also metaphorically depicts the speaker's bicultural experience, navigating between two worlds with different emotional resonances. This study makes significant contributions to multiple fields: linguistically, it demonstrates how Poplack's (1980) and Gumperz's (1982) code-switching frameworks can be applied to contemporary pop culture, revealing that structural patterns in music serve communicative and metaphorical functions that extend beyond conversational contexts; in music studies, it illustrates how bilingual artistry enriches sonic narratives by assigning distinct emotional registers to different languages, showing that code-switching is not merely ornamental but integral to the song's affective power and artistic authenticity; and culturally, it reveals how language choice in popular music becomes a site of identity negotiation and cultural pride, reflecting broader sociocultural dynamics in which bilingualism resists monolingual assimilation and affirms the value of multilingual expression in representing the lived experiences of bicultural communities. The emotional intensification achieved through code-switching enriches the song's authenticity and listener engagement, inviting audiences from diverse linguistic backgrounds to share layered experiences of belonging, memory, and emotional truth. This analysis emphasizes that bilingual practices in music should be understood as forms of cultural narrative and resistance, where language choices are intimately linked to social identity, emotional expression, and the assertion of heritage in a globalized world. For future research, it would be beneficial to explore how bilingual code-switching in popular music influences audience perception and cross-cultural communication, potentially increasing appreciation for linguistic diversity and the complexity of bicultural

identities while contributing to our understanding of how multilingual artistic expression shapes contemporary cultural landscapes.

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