

## **The First Spanish-Language Album to Reach Number One: *El Último Tour del Mundo*, Bad Bunny, and the *Billboard* 200**

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In 2020, Bad Bunny released *El Último Tour del Mundo*, the first Spanish-language album to claim the top spot in the multi-decade history of the *Billboard* 200 album chart. Scholars have written about Spanish-language music and industry charts, but the question of how that album reached number one in a geo-linguistic context where many listeners do not understand Spanish remains unanswered. This article contends that English-language textual and paratextual markers have been overlooked for their significant role in helping to make the predominantly Spanish-language album successful in the United States. Its discourse analysis shows how an artist works to upend the music industry's long-standing dependency on any one language to reach mainstream audiences.

*Keywords: Bad Bunny, Billboard, music industry, Spanish-language music, youth cultures*

Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio is a Puerto Rican singer, rapper, and producer.<sup>2</sup> In 2020, *El Último Tour del Mundo* [The Last Tour of the World] was the first Spanish-language album to arrive at number one on the *Billboard* 200,<sup>3</sup> an all-genre chart with a multi-decade history (Bad Bunny, 2020f). Albums with select tracks in Spanish have made it to the top spot before, but never a Spanish-language album in its entirety. It was also in 2020 that *Forbes* identified Bad Bunny as the world's biggest pop star, and Spotify announced that he was its most-streamed artist (Shaw, 2021). That level of success

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Date submitted: 2021-12-13

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Johnson & Wales University for a research fellowship that offered time to work on this study. He is also grateful to L. Gabiger and Andrés Richner for their comments.

<sup>2</sup> Bad Bunny, the singer's stage name, refers to a photograph of him involuntarily and angrily wearing a bunny costume as a young boy.

<sup>3</sup> The *Billboard* 200 chart reflects U.S. data based on retail and digital album sales as well as streaming, downloads, and video plays across platforms, including but not limited to YouTube, Apple Music, and Spotify. Interestingly, the artist does not have the marketing budget of one of the "big three" music labels behind him; he is a musical signatory of Rimas Entertainment, an independent label.

would have been difficult to imagine a few years earlier. Singing in English was once a prerequisite for Latine<sup>4</sup> musicians looking to cross over to the U.S. music market, but that is no longer the case.

In recent years, Latine artists have received recognition through digital platforms, radio airplay, and media coverage ("Five Burning Questions," 2020). In 2021, Latine music revenue showed a "six-year trend of double-digit growth" (Friedlander & Bass, 2021, para. 1), reaching 35% that year and 23% during the first half of 2022 (Friedlander & Bass, 2022, para. 1). A growing Latine population has helped to make Spanish-language music profitable in the United States at a moment when, seemingly paradoxically, the rate of fluency in that language has dropped in the second-plus generations of Latine audiences (Lopez, Gonzalez-Barrera, & López, 2017). Some scholars believe that the drop may be connected to a "systemic marginalization of Spanish-language media in mainstream society" (Amaya, 2020, p. 22) or a systematic choice to downplay linguistic pluralism across media industries, including news media (Westgate, 2014). Although the second-plus generations of Latine listeners in the United States are not necessarily Spanish-dominant, they may have grown up hearing that language and can recognize many words. Two questions that follow are not only why interest in Bad Bunny's Spanish-language music has increased when U.S.-based Latine fans' fluency in that language has decreased, but also how English-dominant and English-only listeners make sense of lyrics in a language that many of them may not fully understand. Considering that Latine audiences are not yet a majority in the United States,<sup>5</sup> mostly non-Latine listeners influence the rankings of the *Billboard* 200 chart.

The performer's fanbase<sup>6</sup> includes but is not limited to listeners who speak English, Spanish, or a combination of both (Dvorak, 2020). This observation regarding Bad Bunny's fanbase rings true across all

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<sup>4</sup> The academic usage of terms has shifted over time to reflect and affect forms of self-identification that challenge patriarchy and the gendered rules of Spanish. Latino "subsumes or negates the experiences of Latinas," while Latin@ is problematic for pronunciation; Latina/o may show respect for the unique experiences of Latinas, but the two vowels, a and o, maintain a binary that excludes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and additional populations (Mize, 2019). Latinx is not as common as Latino, and both terms are imperfect, given the usage differences in academic, industrial, governmental, and social spaces. Although Bad Bunny identifies as a Puerto Rican performer, this article uses the word Latine to mirror the artist's inclusive positions on gender and sexual orientation (Schorske, 2020). Latine also conforms to the Spanish language's grammatical structures, given that some words in Spanish already have an "e" at the end, such as the gender-neutral estudiante [student]. The "e" ending also serves as a somewhat happier medium between "a" and "o" and is easier than "x" to pronounce (Carbajal, 2020). Latine is typically pronounced "la-tee-ney."

<sup>5</sup> In 2020, the Latine—what Pew terms the Hispanic—demographic comprised approximately 19% of the U.S. population (Funk & Lopez, 2022). See also footnote #3.

<sup>6</sup> Demonstrating the importance of reflexivity and transparency in qualitative research, this study's author is an "aca-fan" (Jenkins, 2006). The music album was analyzed through an inductive process to generate the larger argument. Still, opportunities for critique of Bad Bunny's work exist in key places throughout this article. Galdas (2017) insists that the "question of how much a researcher's values should be reflected in qualitative research is fallacious . . . Instead, the focus should be on whether the researcher has been transparent and reflexive about the data collection, analysis, and presentation processes" (pp. 1–2).

of the artist's social media platforms and fan pages, where young posters typically comment in English, Spanish, and Spanglish. Alongside speakers of languages other than Spanish and English, his non-Latine and Latine listeners are largely a mixture of English-dominant, English-only, Spanish-dominant, and Spanish-only youth (Bad Bunny, n.d.-a; Bad Bunny, n.d.-b; Bad Bunny Fans, n.d.).

Bad Bunny's fans—primarily comprised of Millennial, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha<sup>7</sup> listeners (Dvorak, 2020)—consider his use of Spanish to be authentic because it is his first language. When comedian and commentator Trevor Noah asked the artist why he records in Spanish, Bad Bunny responded that “people can feel me . . . This is who I am” (Parang, 2021, 00:04:35–00:05:25). He said something similar in an interview with *Billboard*: “I’m not going to have ideas and lyrics come to me in English” (Cobo, 2020, para. 10). In these quotations, the singer points to the influence of affect and authenticity on his decision to record in Spanish. Latine music, of course, is a form of “cultural production . . . imbued with a transcultural sensibility” (Cepeda, 2010, p. 150). Importantly, Latine identity is not defined by any one language. The article now turns to a review of the literature and theories that prove useful for the argument, method, and analysis that follow.

### **Del Contexto al Texto (From Context to Text)**

The production of Latine pop music has been linked to transnational forces that extend to Europe, Africa, Asia, and the United States. Spanish-dominant musicians historically performed in English to cross over to the U.S. music market. This idea became poignant during what journalists referred to as the “Latin boom” at the turn of the 21st century. Avant-Mier (2008) and other scholars critiqued the ethnocentric and ahistorical “Latin boom” descriptor that ignored the long-standing contributions of countless artists such as Chaliá Herrera in the first decade of the 1900s, Desi Arnaz in the 1950s, or Gloria Estefan in the 1980s (to name but three), all of whom performed first in Spanish and later in English for U.S. audiences. Bad Bunny is not a crossover artist precisely because he has consistently recorded in Spanish for all audiences, regardless of their geography, ethnicity, or nationality.

Rap has become a global language that has not been tied to only English or Spanish. This popular style of music has long favored the hidden, the coded, and the inaccessible as political strategies for resisting White supremacy; resistance has been expressed through language mixing, street slang, metaphors, euphemisms, allusions, spelling variations, and neologisms, among other linguistic devices (Loureiro-Rodríguez, 2013). Bad Bunny leverages vernacular phrases, slang, metaphors, and other codes that resonate with fans who appreciate his use of a Puerto Rican dialect of Spanish. Clearly, he is not alone as countless rap and reggaeton musicians have employed linguistic devices in their work;<sup>8</sup> Bad Bunny, however, does this strategically and selectively in English on *El Último Tour del Mundo* and in the album's music videos (Bad Bunny, 2020f).

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<sup>7</sup> These generational terms, though not without their issues, are used here in keeping with the Pew Research Center and the popular press.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Puerto Rican alternative hip-hop group Calle 13's most recent album, *MultiViral*, did not include the same combination of code switches, cognates, and context clues that appear on *El Último Tour del Mundo*. Additionally, English is present in three of *MultiViral*'s 15 songs (Calle 13, 2014). In contrast, *El*

Reggaeton emerged from rap and merged with reggae and the Jamaican dancehall dembow rhythm to produce a modern sound (Marshall, 2009). “Despacito,” for instance, continued to build on its initial success after Justin Bieber added his English-language verses to the Spanish-language song (Fonsi & Yankee, 2017; Rivera-Rideau & Torres-Leschnik, 2019). As is the case with rap, reggaetoneros (reggaeton musicians or singers) use language in diverse ways and speak truth to power. On the whole, reggaeton continues to evolve across genres and geographies after the “Despacito” moment.

As is the case with rap and reggaeton, trap music represents a lens through which youth view themselves and their identities across transnational borders, where language, capitalism, and colonialism intersect (Kaluža, 2018). This is the larger context in which “legacies of racism and ethnocentrism . . . English-only debates . . . rampant xenophobia and anti-foreigner sentiment” have long influenced the production of Latine music (Avant-Mier, 2008, p. 556). Bad Bunny works to change the tenor of conversations around these and related political issues by including trap music on his albums and by speaking out about Puerto Rico’s power outages as well as inequalities across divisions of class, nationality, race, gender, and sexual orientation (Schorske, 2020). Couple this observation with his presence across media, such as late-night television, the Grammy Awards, and World Wrestling Entertainment, and it becomes clear that his influence looms large.

Although scholars have written about Spanish-language music genres and styles, as well as charts and streaming in the music industries (Berríos-Miranda, Dudley, & Habell-Pallán, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2021; Wikström, 2019), the question of how Bad Bunny’s album made it to number one on the *Billboard* 200 albums chart in the United States, where Spanish is not the dominant language, remains unanswered (Bad Bunny, 2020f). Are Spanish-language lyrics less important to listeners than rhythm, melody, and harmony? The results of at least one study would seem to suggest otherwise (Demont-Heinrich, 2021). And yet, how can an album whose success hinges on different types of audiences, including but not limited to mostly English-dominant and English-only listeners, garner the top spot on the *Billboard* 200 chart if its lyrics are not always understood?

Trade and popular press reporters have cited the following explanations for the album’s success: the artist’s fluid identities—in terms of his gender expression and semiflexible sexual orientation—as well as his talent as a creative performer, the proliferation of streaming technology, and an increase of Latine listeners in the United States. And yet these indicators related to identity, artistry, technology, and demography gloss over the textuality of the album itself. For that reason, this article acknowledges those indicators and argues for the addition of one overlooked yet crucial explanation: the artist’s strategic use of universal textual and paratextual markers in the English language.<sup>9</sup> The album contains three types of textual markers—context clues, cognates, and code switches—alongside its music videos, which function as paratexts. Context clues are hints that help listeners recognize the denotations and connotations of unfamiliar lyrics. Cognates are words with similar spelling and pronunciation in English and Spanish. Code switches are alternations between Spanish and English in one place. Paratexts, a term originally coined by the French literary critic Gérard Genette, are part of the context—

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*Último Tour del Mundo* features at least one of the three English-language markers on all of the album’s 16 songs (Bad Bunny, 2020f).

<sup>9</sup> Not all fans will use fallible search-engine translation technologies. Of course, not all listeners are fans.

in this case, music videos—and frame the primary text of the album. *El Último Tour del Mundo*'s consistent mix of markers allowed it to achieve a level of success that other Spanish-language albums did not match before the album's release and have not been able to reach since it dropped in 2020, at least at the time of this writing (Bad Bunny, 2020f).<sup>10</sup> If identity, artistry, technology, and demography had been the only reasons for the album's success, other Spanish-language albums theoretically could have garnered the top spot on the *Billboard* 200 before 2020, including Bad Bunny's own back catalog. While *El Último Tour del Mundo*'s rhythm, melody, and harmony are essential, so are its lyrics and videos (Bad Bunny, 2020f). Thus, the album's success could have a few possible explanations, but this article argues for a sociolinguistic one that bridges the album as the primary text and its videos as paratexts, in keeping with *Billboard*'s methodology.

Interactional sociolinguistics is concerned with the qualitative interpretation of what speakers convey in everyday life. Face-to-face conversations are typically analyzed, but music lyrics also have served as rich scholarly resources. A speaker can be thought of as a performer, and forms of communication, such as an album's lyrics, can produce social meanings (Gumperz, 2015). Given the presence of lyrics across Bad Bunny's music videos and the album, it is useful to theorize between the micro and the macro as well as the audio and the visual, particularly in light of convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006; The New London Group, 1996). Alongside interactional sociolinguistics, this article integrates theories of context clues, cognates, code switches, and paratexts (Blumenfeld, Bobb, & Marian, 2016; Coats, 2016; Loureiro-Rodríguez, 2017; Mora-Rioja, 2022). Moreover, Bourdieu's (1986) idea of linguistic capital can help to explain how artists' linguistic skills once contributed to a dependency on powerful institutions for access to audiences across geo-linguistic markets, a situation that may be changing, however slowly, with the assistance of independent digital platforms (Straubhaar, 2008).

As the following discourse analysis demonstrates, three songs evince the aforementioned textual and paratextual markers: "Hoy Cobré," "Yo Visto Así," and "Booker T" (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 2020c, 2020e). Each one of these songs includes all of the markers, whereas the 13 remaining songs on the album encompass most of the markers; for example, some songs do not have accompanying music videos, and other tracks do not include code switches. The analysis of the album began with listening sessions and an inductive process through which the textual markers emerged as patterns. An exhaustive search for

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<sup>10</sup> One exception is with the same artist, whose 2022 album *Un Verano Sin Ti* charted at number one on the *Billboard* 200 for much of the year (Bad Bunny, 2022b; Sisario, 2022). A comparison between *Un Verano Sin Ti* and *El Último Tour del Mundo* is beyond the scope of this study and is not possible at this point in the peer-review process (Bad Bunny, 2020f, 2022b). However, a cursory reading suggests that the same kinds of textual and paratextual markers appear in Bad Bunny's 2022 album and in its videos, including a verse performed entirely in English (Bad Bunny, 2022a). Future studies would do well to analyze the presence or absence of these markers across the artist's back catalog and track the changes over time. If the answer to the success of both albums was Bad Bunny's progressive politics, his creative talent, the availability of streaming platforms, or a growing percentage of Latine listeners, then theoretically the other two albums that Bad Bunny released in 2020—*YHLQMDLG* and *LAS QUE NO IBAN A SALIR*—could have also ranked at the top of the chart (Bad Bunny, 2020g, 2020h). Considering that they did not, there may be another variable at play, which is why this article argues for a focus on an album's linguistic devices—contained in the text itself—in a context that includes music videos as paratexts.

paratexts was conducted and revealed several music videos, three of which were thickly described. Moreover, popular and trade press articles were carefully read and selectively integrated into the analysis. The “messages, stories, ideas, and lives that have been kept low in the urban mix, but have never not been there” (Kun, 2017, p. 20) have risen and become widely audible and visible in the case of the album and its videos. The article now offers an analysis of the first of three songs.

### **“Hoy Cobré” [Today I Got Paid]**

This song’s title, with its emphasis on payment, reinforces the importance of economic activity in the daily life of an artist. The lyrical voice tells listeners that it has made a name for itself: “*ninguno ha sub[ido] como yo subí*”<sup>11</sup> [no one has climbed up the charts like I have] (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:01:24–00:01:26). Interestingly, *Billboard* is referenced explicitly and prophetically: “*número uno, Billboard ya envió el reporte*” [Number one, *Billboard* already sent the report] (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:01:51–00:01:54). This observation is prescient, considering that is exactly where the album debuted. The lyrics mention legendary status, award shows, and brands more generally, all of which reinforce the lyrical voice’s socioeconomic status. And yet, despite the ethos of success, there is also the possibility of running out of money or blowing it; in a sense, the anxiety of failure is in the background, particularly as listeners detect a degree of vulnerability in the idea that “*me tienen que soportar*” [they have to put up with me] (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:00:22–00:00:24). This kind of ambivalent stance points to the way that reggaeton has served not only as a medium through which the “fantasies of urban youth” have been articulated (Manuel, 2016, p. 115) but also as a vehicle through which their preoccupations have become audible.

Context clues add nuance to the significance of the song. Such clues allow listeners to “deduce the meaning of unknown words . . . By looking at the words, phrases, or sentences around an unknown word, it is often possible to get an idea of what the word means” (Míguez, 2017, paras. 1, 7). At least four types of clues show up in the song: Brands, celebrities, places, and events. The lyrical voice is smoking and wearing Gucci. This international brand calls to mind the process of conspicuous consumption not only in reggaeton and trap music but also in rap. Moreover, “LeBron” refers to LeBron James, and “Miami” and “6” signify James’s jersey number from when he was a member of the Miami Heat (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:00:58–00:00:59). Earlier references to “Curry,” “Klay,” and “Golden State” are shorthand for Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson, and their National Basketball Association team, the Golden State Warriors (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:00:52–00:00:55). In addition, the context clues of places such as “PR,” for Puerto Rico, point to Bad Bunny’s birthplace (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:01:00–00:01:01). Lastly, the “*Billboard*” and “Grammy” media events are easy enough for U.S.-based listeners to identify (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:01:15–00:01:17).

Apart from context clues, cognates are widely used. Listeners may depend on “lexical representations that are shared across languages and provide cross-linguistic scaffolding”; to that degree, cognates can be thought of as “translation equivalents” with “form overlap in two languages” (Blumenfeld

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<sup>11</sup> Cases of mumbling may reflect the larger trap style and quotidian register as much as a Puerto Rican dialect of Spanish and the preservation of a song’s rhyme scheme; for example, “subido” may be enunciated or heard incorrectly as the shortened “subió.”

et al., 2016, p. 192). Many true cognates are part of "Hoy Cobré" (Bad Bunny, 2020a). For example, "yeh," "falso," "un millón por show," "pasaporte," "soporte," "el polo norte," "reporte," "disco," and "botella" [yeah, false, a million per show, passport, support, the North Pole, report, disc, and bottle] all mean what they suggest in English (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:00:02–00:02:11). These words not only aid listeners with different linguistic backgrounds but also offer context for the verses in which they appear. False cognates are words in one language that are similar in form or sound to a word in another language, except with a different meaning and an unrelated etymology. Words such as "soy"—a verb form that does not signify "soybean," but rather "I am," the first-person-singular-indicative-present-tense conjugation of the verb "ser," which means "to be"—appear in "Hoy Cobré;" such instances, however, do not seem to impede the song's overall meaning (Bad Bunny, 2020a).

Code switches are also common in "Hoy Cobré" and serve as an additional tool for interpretation. Code switching means alternating between two or more languages during a single conversation or, for this analysis, in one or more verses. Indeed, the songwriter switches to English in a number of places (Bad Bunny, 2020a). The lyrics "Yeh-yeh-yeh, ey/Bad Bunny, baby, bebé/ey, ey" introduce a mode of address and interpellation in the first verse (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:00:02–00:00:09). Another instance is "hustlin[g] hustlin[g] every day," where the lyrical voice channels the success of sports heroes, ultimately acknowledging their global influence (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:00:54–00:00:56). The "what do you say?" code switch is curious, considering that it functions as a direct recognition of the thoughts of listeners who may not grasp all of the words they hear (Bad Bunny, 2020a, 00:01:01–00:01:02). The mainly Spanish-language usage in this song and across the album—a kind of defiant approach that is authentic to the performer—creates a "tug of war over the politics of language," where "language negotiations" (Fagan, 2013, pp. 214–215) take place with the English language.

Although the usage of such markers is not specific to Bad Bunny, and pop culture references are common in various musical genres and styles, the integration of these markers and references throughout the album is unique. For example, the performer draws on a rich Afro-Latine tradition of crossing and styling, evinced in the "street slang" of "hustlin[g] hustlin[g]" in "Hoy Cobré" (Bad Bunny, 2020a). Bad Bunny's linguistic repertoire includes the "prosody and phonology" that are common in rap and reggaeton (Cutler, 1999, p. 429). The artist's intonation, stress, and rhythm—as well as various types of speech sounds—are palpable when one listens to the entire album and situates its textual markers in the paratextual context of music videos on YouTube (Vernallis, 2013).

Paratextual markers surround "Hoy Cobré" (Bad Bunny, 2020a). Film and television scholars have analyzed paratexts that range from trailers and marketing campaigns to reviews, tie-ins, and recommendations that help viewers decide whether to engage with a primary text, such as a movie or a show (Gray, 2010). By extending this paratextual theory to music, scholars can take account of music videos that accompany albums. Not surprisingly, paratextual markers are crucial for an intertextual analysis, offering additional context for the primary text of the album.

The song's official music video, which registered more than 117 million views on YouTube at the time of this writing, features a conspicuous usage of the English language. At one point in the video, Bad Bunny enters a shop with a vape pen and the attendant tells him that he cannot smoke in the store (Figure

1). Snoop Dogg, the store's manager, quickly appears and asks the worker, "Why do you have to act funny with the Big Bad Bunny?" (Bad Bunny, 2020b, 00:01:50–00:01:53). After abruptly firing the attendant, Snoop Dogg apologizes to "Benito" and encourages him to "smoke up," to which he responds with a "thank you" (Bad Bunny, 2020b, 00:02:03–00:02:05). This break in the music is notable because it introduces English-language dialogue in an otherwise Spanish-dominant space. The video is part of the evolution of music content on YouTube, a platform on which the representation of Spanish-language videos increased between 2015 and 2018 (Baños-González, Canorea Tiralaso, & Rajas Fernández, 2020).



**Figure 1. Alongside Snoop Dogg as store manager, Bad Bunny reacts to the store attendant in English (Bad Bunny, 2020b, 00:01:48).**

As Mora-Rioja (2022) points out, videos and other paratexts can reinforce an artist's authenticity. Music videos can be read as texts in their own right, certainly, with nuanced visual codes that are not part of the primary musical text, but isolating these paratexts can limit their ability to expand the meaning of the album that they were designed to support. Instead, the primary musical text—the album—and its larger context of audiovisual materials—the videos—should be analyzed together for an intertextual interpretation. The article now moves to an analysis of the second of three songs.

### **"Yo Visto Así" [This Is How I Dress]**

This song focuses on self-affirmation and self-assurance, particularly around how one dresses, and argues against the need to change one's appearance based on someone else's opinion. The lyrical voice indicates that "*Yo visto así, no me voy a cambiar/Si no te gusta, no tienes que mirar*" [This is how I dress and I will not change; if you don't like it, you don't have to watch] (Bad Bunny, 2020c, 00:00:14–00:00:21). That voice has a strong need to disregard other people's views, thereby reinforcing the intertextual theme of independence that was referenced in Bad Bunny's earlier album, *YHLQMDLG* (Bad Bunny, 2020g). Lines such as "*no me voy a*" and "*no me importa*" [I'm not going to and it doesn't matter to me] rebuke expectations, conventions, and



institutions (Bad Bunny, 2020c, 00:00:16–00:00:17, 00:00:30–00:00:32). The song involves a substantial amount of dialogue between “I” and “you” as the voice introduces a fictionalized persona that can stand in for the listener, thereby increasing the lyrics’ transferability to common situations in which one person does not care what someone else thinks (Bad Bunny, 2020c, 00:01:33–00:01:40). The idea of indifference—and, by extension, defiance—is repeated at least six times in the song. The repetition accentuates how the artist works to “keep it real” by “being true to oneself and one’s social experience” (Loureiro-Rodríguez, 2013, p. 666). This observation is relevant precisely because fans remark that they identify with the artist’s authenticity.

Context clues assist listeners in their interpretation of the song. As examples of “top-down processing,” such clues draw on the background knowledge of listeners to infer what the lyrics mean (Coats, 2016, p. 8). At least three types of context clues emerge in the song as well as elsewhere on the album: Games, celebrities, and brands (Bad Bunny, 2020c; Bad Bunny, 2020f). “Backpack” and “Flack Lack” represent a play on words alongside the game of “blackjack,” the detective game “hackjack,” and the celebrity “Jack Black” (Bad Bunny, 2020c, 00:01:17–00:01:32). Brands also play a prominent role, such as when the lyrical voice dumps Nike for a contract with Adidas or when it mentions a Louis Vuitton backpack (Bad Bunny, 2020c, 0:00:46–00:00:48, 00:01:16–00:01:18). These popular brands point to the larger narrative of global materialism and commodity culture, a story that is common throughout *El Último Tour del Mundo* and in the genres and styles from which the album borrows and to which it contributes (Bad Bunny, 2020f). Of course, materiality and commodification are not without their problems, and the ways that Bad Bunny ostensibly buys into them can certainly be critiqued further. This kind of critique has also circulated widely in hip-hop studies for decades.

Apart from context clues, most of the cognates mean what they suggest in English. Cognates can be thought of as “translations that are phonologically similar and potentially orthographically similar in same-script languages,” such as Spanish and English (Hoshino & Kroll, 2008, p. 503). For example, “*yeh*,” “*decida*,” and “*criticando*” [yeah, decide, and criticizing] speak to the lyrical voice’s ongoing process of decision making and choosing what is best, free from the criticism experienced in childhood (Bad Bunny, 2020c, 00:00:03–00:00:11, 00:01:00–00:01:05). The cognates “*lista*,” “*artista*,” “*fantasías*,” “*policía*,” “*criticaba*” and “*repetía*” [list, artist, fantasies, police, criticized, and repeated], nearly all of which occur at the end of their respective lines, serve as a listening guide to some of the key themes in the song, just as different cognates do in other songs on the album (Bad Bunny, 2020c, 00:01:13–00:01:16, 00:02:09–00:02:19). An attitude of rebellion and a display of authority in this section of “Yo Visto Así” point to the antiestablishment views of youth culture more generally. The song does not contain any false cognates that would impinge on its overall meaning.

Code switching occurs a few times in “Yo Visto Así,” as in other songs on the album. The affirmative salutation “hey, hey, hey” repeats in the first verse and at the end of the song (Bad Bunny, 2020c, 00:00:02–00:00:11, 00:02:53–00:02:55). “Yeh-yeh” is also a universal expression that most listeners can identify (Bad Bunny, 2020c, 00:00:02–00:00:14). Like translations, code switches can reaffirm the identity of an artist, signal a way of communicating with members of a cultural or linguistic group, represent stylistic devices, and, for the purpose of this article, “serve as a means of opening up the lyrics to outsiders or of producing effects such as alienation and exclusion” (Davies & Bentahila, 2014, p. 247). While it is possible that the latter kind of marginalization could occur, judging from the popularity of the album, it seems more likely that the former invitation is true.

Part of Bad Bunny's contribution to Latine music production is the way in which he weaves these textual markers into the fabric of the album. Sociolinguistic theory would suggest that the album functions as "discourse where social knowledge and social reality are produced, reproduced, and transformed through a variety of speech genres, mediated by a variety of communications technologies" (Androutsopoulos, 2009, p. 44). The usage of nouns that are common in Puerto Rico—such as "la combi," which translates to combination, though it may also serve as an intertextual reference to sexual organs or the whole package in the song "En la Cama" (Jam, 2001)—helps the artist maintain his connection to his roots as he continues to expand his global fanbase.

Along with textual markers, paratextual markers add a critical layer of meaning to the song. On YouTube, the official music video for "Yo Visto Así" begins with a skateboard session after a recurring shot of a Mack truck that also appears in the album's other music videos (Bad Bunny, 2020d). Viewers see Bad Bunny dancing and sitting with his signature shoes as various men skateboard around him. Cameo shots with Bad Bunny, Ricky Martin (Figure 2), and other performers quickly follow. The scene changes to a cage with motorcyclists encircled by fire on a nearby football field in front of the album title *YHLQMDLG*, another intertextual link illuminated on a marquee in the background. Meanwhile Bad Bunny dances on the grass and in the stands (Bad Bunny, 2020d, 2020g). The video, which had more than 118 million views at the time of this writing, exhibits a "mixing-board aesthetic" where its elements—for example, gestures, lyrics, hooks, costumes, and props—"come to the fore and fade away" (Vernallis, 2013, p. 35). These elements are highlighted in the video's incorporation of dance, context clues, cognates, code switches, sneakers, and the stands. As a platform, YouTube allows users to select subtitles in English or Spanish in the United States (Bad Bunny, 2020d).



**Figure 2. Bad Bunny poses next to Ricky Martin during a code switch to English (Bad Bunny, 2020d, 00:01:08).**

Scholars have analyzed videos, interviews, voice memos, and memes as paratexts (McNutt, 2020). Though not officially part of the primary musical text of "Yo Visto Así," Ricky Martin adds celebrity endorsement to Bad Bunny's music and consequently influences its reception in a larger historical context

(Bad Bunny, 2020c, 2020d). Although he shares Bad Bunny's Puerto Rican heritage, Ricky Martin is known for his earlier contributions to English-language Latine pop music in the United States. In this way, paratexts work to embody the "flow of content across multiple media platforms" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 2). This kind of convergence emerges from the realization that the audio has historically been related to the visual, just as the paratextual has long been attached to the textual. The article now moves to an analysis of the third song under consideration before offering some concluding thoughts.

### "Booker T"

This eponymous song reveals Bad Bunny's profound respect for the professional wrestler Booker T. Huffman Jr. Much of "Booker T" revolves around the lyrical voice's recognition of success, such as arriving and staying at "*mi peak*" [my peak] (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:01:06–00:01:07). Lines such as "*mi nombre por siempre se va a escuchar*" [my name will always be heard] blur the distinction between the success of a wrestler and a singer (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:01:04–00:01:06). The songwriter makes a few references to the best-selling album of the year, awards, and professional success, similar to what appears in "Hoy Cobré" (Bad Bunny, 2020a). There is also a noteworthy juxtaposition between "you" and "me," heard in the imperative mood and the interrogative "*mírame, ¿que tú qué?*" [look at me, what about you?] (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:02:17–00:02:21). This part of the song invites listeners to participate in the flow of the lyrical voice's success. Additionally, the repetition of "*mírame*" [look at me] a few times in the song signifies a direct command that resonates with younger generations concerned with concepts of individualism, self-expression, and self-identification (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:01:19–00:01:20, 00:02:18–00:02:19).

Context clues add a critical dimension of meaning to "Booker T" (Bad Bunny, 2020e). There are several game-, celebrity-, and technology-related clues in the song. "Yankee" could refer to the Major League Baseball team of the same name (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:00:59–00:01:02). Indeed, sports are a common thread in several of the album's songs. "*Hadouken*" and "*Bulbasaur*" are shorthand for the fighting series games and a small Pokémon anime figure with blue-green patches, respectively (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:00:31–00:00:32, 00:00:40–00:00:42). Moreover, the lyric "*Y yo sí soy milly sin usar Richard*" [I am milly without using (the name) Richard] is a play on words and likely a nod to Richard Mille, a Swiss luxury watch company that reifies the heightened emphasis on commodity culture (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:00:58–00:01:01). In addition, the lyrical voice explicitly recognizes the performer in the third person: "*Bad Bunny se llevó to[dos] los premio[s]*" [Bad Bunny won all the awards] (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:01:44–00:01:48). The lyric "*no contesto DM*" [I do not answer DM] resonates with young fans because direct messages are a staple of social media (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:00:46–00:00:48). In this sense, "gathering and listening for contextual clues can only reveal what surrounds a performance" (McRae, 2013, p. 118). And yet, listeners can piece together the song's various senses with the assistance of context clues and the remaining markers.

Cognates such as "*campeón*" are true in the line "*Soy un rey, campeón, Booker T*" [I'm a king, champion, Booker T] (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:01:10–00:01:14). The "compositor," as in a composer or creator of music, is described as unique because "*nadie compone*" [no one composes]; the lyrical voice's assumption here is that most people do not or cannot write music (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:01:25–00:01:27). Furthermore, "*emocionen*" [all of you get excited] is part of the lyric "*ninguna de esta gente escribe en sus*

*canciones, so no se emocionen*<sup>12</sup> [none of these people write their own music, so don't all of you get excited] (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:01:27–00:01:31). Listeners can deduce the denotations and connotations of the cognates, in part because they are transparent and communicative in their spelling (Lubliner & Heibert, 2011). As in the last two songs, there are not enough false cognates to adversely affect what listeners can decode from "Booker T."

As for code switches, the songwriter includes a direct mention of dinosaurs—"y se extinguieron como los dinosaurs" [they went extinct like the dinosaurs]—as a simile for songs that do not have the same degree of longevity as the lyrical voice's compositions (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:00:33–00:00:35). In the next instance of the English language, "un breaking" is associated with Booker T and rhymes with "bakin[g]" from the previous line (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:02:01–00:02:05). Furthermore, the question "Can you dig it, sucker?" is posed immediately at the start of the last verse (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:02:23–00:02:26). The repeated use of "ey" in the last verse functions as a bookend to the way the song began, providing a sense of closure that is common in Bad Bunny's repertoire (Bad Bunny, 2020e, 00:02:27–00:02:31). The above examples of code switches illustrate spontaneity on the part of the songwriter as well as style, identity, and convenience (Robinson, 2015). They also exemplify the songwriter's conscious need to reiterate an idea and to defy the status quo with nonstandard expressions (Loureiro-Rodríguez, 2017), both of which are done throughout *El Último Tour del Mundo* (Bad Bunny, 2020f).

From the point of view of sociolinguistics, different types of code switches are exhibited in the song, including but not limited to tag switches. These "situation indicators" help to "convey the direction of the conversation to be addressed without having any meaning" (Supri & Pratiwi, 2021, p. 646). Tag switches show up in interjections like "wuh," "ey," "ah," or "uh," typically at the end of select lines. Such switches do not necessarily add anything significant to the song's message, but they do help to ground the song in monosyllabic expressions that are universal and accessible here and elsewhere on the album. On the whole, this album stands out through its distinctive combination of textual and paratextual markers, several of which give voice to the desire for socioeconomic mobility among listeners.

As has been shown for the preceding songs, paratextual markers visually supply information that listeners may not be able to interpret from the audio alone. The official music video for "Booker T" currently has more than 260 million views on YouTube (Bad Bunny, 2021). Like all of the album's music videos—and the album cover itself—the video for "Booker T" begins with a Mack truck. In addition, this video features close-up images of the wrestler's arms and tattoos. In general, the video displays a minimalist set with limited action. The wrestler looks unfazed for much of the song. He has only one line in the video: "Can you dig it, sucker?" (Bad Bunny, 2021, 00:02:33–00:02:36). The question highlights the performative "logic" of masculinity in the context of wrestling in general and the song in particular (Figure 3). This English-language code switch in an otherwise Spanish-language song appeals to audiences that may not understand all of the lyrics; the question is also uttered in the primary language of Booker T, who does not speak Spanish. As a platform, YouTube supports linguistic plurality, considering that fans encounter music videos like this one with various degrees of fluency in different languages (Burgess & Green, 2018). Those degrees of fluency exhibit different levels of linguistic capital across geo-linguistic markets, where one's linguistic competence depends on socioeconomic

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<sup>12</sup> Note the incorporation of "so" in English.

status and an ability to demonstrate fluency not just verbally but also nonverbally, with body language (Bourdieu, 1986). Bad Bunny's fluency in Spanish has the highest degree of linguistic capital in Latin America, but that capital is increasingly recognized among fans in the United States and elsewhere. The colloquial register and the wrestler's use of English demonstrate street credibility and another form of linguistic capital.



**Figure 3. Booker T utters the English-language line, "Can you dig it, sucker?" (Bad Bunny, 2021, 00:02:33–00:02:35).**

Paratexts matter because Booker T's celebrity brand represents a synergy that allows Bad Bunny's work to resonate with different groups of fans across a variety of media forms and formats. As Gray (2010) writes, "Synergy works because hype creates meaning" (p. 4). Whether it is TikTok, YouTube, or another platform, producers collaborate to produce an effect that is greater than what can be achieved by any one entity. The cause of collaboration may be commercial, inspired by a desire to make money, but the effect is rhetorical, as meaning is added to the context of an album's reception.

### ***El Final es el Principio [The End is the Beginning]***

As for the politics of translation, is it noteworthy that many listeners may not understand all of the lyrics? One might insist that the answer is no, but rhythm, melody, and harmony are arguably not the only reasons that *El Último Tour del Mundo* made it to the top spot, nor are identity, artistry, technology, or demography solely responsible for the album's ranking (Bad Bunny, 2020f). Instead, this article asserts that alongside these factors is the importance of Bad Bunny's overlooked use of textual and paratextual markers in the English language. As Schorske (2020) remarks,

Bad Bunny's dialect . . . inspires exultant proprietary feeling in those who understand it instinctively and desperate thirst in those who don't . . . He is well aware of the politics latent in his language choices, and he performs this awareness slyly in his lyrics (paras. 14, 16).

Apart from its entrenchment in linguistic politics, Latine music is an area of substantial economic growth for the music industry, a fact that is not lost on Bad Bunny.

From the rhetorical tradition to the linguistic turn, media and communication scholars have long valued language and music as modes of expression. This article contributes to media and communication studies in at least three ways. First, it is one of only a few studies to situate interactional sociolinguistics within contemporary media scholarship. Second, it pushes media and communication studies into the field of sociolinguistics by acknowledging and moving beyond classic concerns with speech acts and conversational analysis. Third, this article shows how Bad Bunny positions the Spanish language in the mainstream U.S. popular music market—and the larger media culture that surrounds it—by “employ[ing] various linguistic means and resources for meaning negotiation” (Wu & Li, 2016, p. 23). Such means and resources are the textual and paratextual markers analyzed in this article and the linguistic capital that the artist brings to his music by recording in Spanish and only selectively and strategically using English.

More specifically, this article contributes to Latine media studies because it focuses on the music industries and the sociolinguistic strategies of a Puerto Rican artist. The implications are significant for how youth cultures in the United States—many though not all of whom are English-dominant or English-only in their language usage—can interpret music when it is created in Spanish and circulated through streaming platforms. Bad Bunny's success raises the stakes for the place of the Spanish language in U.S. media culture and opens doors for it to figure more prominently in other areas of mediated life, as it has already done in mainstream sports and advertising (e.g., the Super Bowl LIV halftime show; Kirschner, 2020) as well as in film and television (e.g., *La Casa de las Flores* [The House of Flowers]; Taibo, 2018–2020).

Moreover, it is important to think of the album's reception as fluid and changeable across streaming platforms. While Puerto Rico is the artist's birthplace, music cannot be confined to one geographic location. As Kun (2005) writes, “Music is always from somewhere else and always en route to somewhere else . . . on the other side of the border line, on the other side of the sea” (p. 20). Beyond the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, this idea suggests that Bad Bunny's music is in a perpetual state of circulation.

There are a few limitations to this study, including the reliance on evidence from *Billboard*, the album, and the videos. It can be difficult to get a full picture of the music industry without interviewing media workers or accessing internal documents. For that reason, it would be desirable to triangulate internal documents, when available, with interviews and observations. In the future, researchers may also consider the different ways that fans appreciate music beyond the meaning of lyrics. This study was limited by its focus on only lyrics and videos; because of space limitations, sometimes it was necessary to sacrifice breadth for depth. The study's findings could have been situated alongside additional Spanish-language music, within the same style or across different styles, bounded by a specific time range and geographic area.

The significance of the first Spanish-language album to climb to number one on the *Billboard* 200 chart cannot be underestimated; this is a tremendous gain for the Latine music industry in general and for Bad Bunny in particular. The album's inclusion of textual and paratextual markers in the English language should not detract from the significance of that accomplishment, but this inclusion is by no means insignificant. Mainstream media industries exhibit a "hegemony of monolingualism," where an "increase of multilingual practices has to be viewed against the backdrop of a still persistent 'monolingual framework'" (Yildiz, 2012, p. 4). The presence of languages other than English does not mean monolingualism in the music industry is a thing of the past. Instead, multilingual expressions may mean something precisely because they contrast so sharply with the monolingual English-language paradigm. Following Yildiz's (2012) logic, such expressions may end up paradoxically reinforcing the pervasiveness of English. Only time will tell whether Bad Bunny's album marks the beginning of a gradual diminution of English-language monolingualism in mainstream U.S. media culture.

Is there a need for new forms of multilingual activism, a mechanism by which audiences demand more non-English-language content across media platforms? Will the rapid pace of algorithmic development somehow make ideological conflicts over language less contentious? Will the poetics of technology lead to new forms of creative expression that defy gender, genre, or geographic boundaries? In the case of *El Último Tour del Mundo*, the Spanish language appears to have done as much for Bad Bunny as he has done for it: His native tongue allowed him to maintain an authentic identity without having to cross over; at the same time, he enlivened the language by creating new forms of musical expression (Bad Bunny, 2020f). The singer has opened up more geo-linguistic markets and lowered barriers to entry for future Spanish-language content at a time when other media platforms seem to be following suit. As Gary Gersh, an executive for the live entertainment company AEG, pointed out, "I think we are going to see more music that isn't sung in English reaching English-speaking kids, and we're probably going to see more English-language music reach into other countries where English isn't the first language" (Sisario, 2022, para. 16). As languages other than English continue to infuse globalized streaming platforms, the lines, limits, properties, and practices of geo-linguistic markets—including their industries, texts, and audiences—will remain in flux.

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