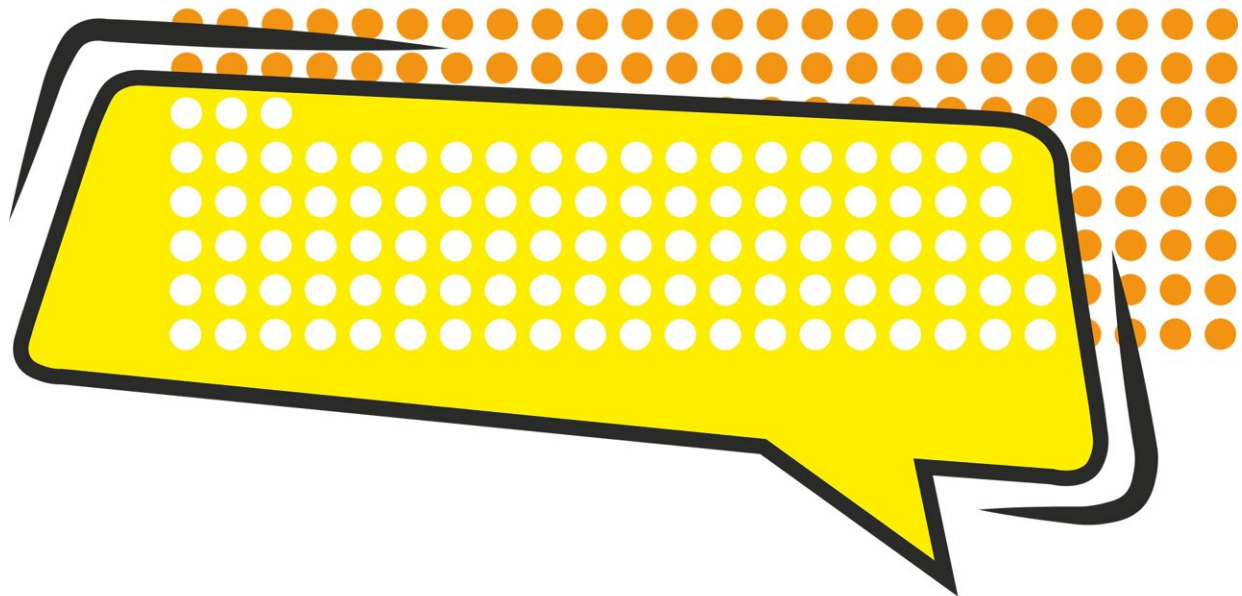


'Get down from the car' is an expression you'll probably only hear in Miami: Research explains why

May 11 2023, by Angela Nicoletti



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Get down from the car. If this expression doesn't sound familiar, you're probably not from Miami.

According to Florida International University (FIU) research published in *English World-Wide. A Journal of Varieties of English*, some expressions unique to the 305 area code are evidence a distinct dialect is

emerging in South Florida. It's the result of a common phenomenon that happens in other regions of the world when two languages come into close contact. In this case, Spanish sayings are being "borrowed" and directly translated into English—then passed down and used by generations who are bilingual.

"When we conduct research like this, it's a reminder there aren't 'real' words or 'pretend' words. There are only words. And all the words come from somewhere and someplace," said FIU sociolinguist Phillip Carter, the study's lead author. "Every word has a history. That goes for all words spoken in Miami."

For nearly a decade, Carter has researched Miami English—a variety of English with subtle structural influence from Spanish, mostly spoken by second-, third- or fourth-generation native English speakers. He previously studied how it sounds. This time, he examined how words are used. Specifically, calques—when a speaker directly translates an expression from one [language](#), considered the "source language" into another language.

This is what's happening in Miami. Spanish expressions are being introduced into English.

The translations can be subtle. For example, "bajar del carro" becomes "get down from the car"—not "get out of the car." And "una empanada de carne" becomes "meat empanada" instead of the more specific "beef empanada," since in Spanish, depending on the context, "carne" can refer to all meat (including chicken and pork) or specifically just to beef.

"There's not a single language that doesn't have words borrowed from another language," Carter said. "Borrowing is an inescapable reality of the world's languages. When you have two languages spoken by most of the population, you're going to have a lot of interesting language contact

happening."

A series of expressions commonly used in the area were given to several groups in Miami with bilingual speakers, focusing primarily on Cuban immigrants and Cuban Americans in two groups: first-generation Cuban Americans born in Cuba and who immigrated to Miami after the age of 12 and second-generation Cuban Americans born and raised in Miami who use English more than Spanish.

Most of the examples were phased out and no longer used by the second-generation participants. They didn't abandon them all, though. "Get down from the car" and "super hungry" stuck around. In fact, "meat empanada" and "give me a chance" were used with the same frequency by both the second generation and immigrant generation.

"This shows Miamians assess certain [phrases](#) differently and don't see some examples as 'ungrammatical.' So, those are the ones that are passed down," Carter said. "This is how dialects are born. Minor things add up."

How these calques were perceived by people in Miami versus outside of South Florida, was the next question Carter wanted to answer. More than 50 sentences were rated, with locals finding Miami expressions more favorable than English speakers outside of South Florida. For example, "get down from the car" and "make the line" sounded "awkward" to national audiences, while people in Miami said it sounded either "perfect" or "okay."

Carter says the data suggests there's a thin line separating what sounds "foreign" from what's acceptable in Miami. There might be some inherent language bias at play here, something his future research will investigate.

More information: Phillip M. Carter et al, Spanish-influenced lexical

phenomena in emerging Miami English, *English World-Wide. A Journal of Varieties of English* (2022). [DOI: 10.1075/eww.22036.car](https://doi.org/10.1075/eww.22036.car)

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