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Shifting Latino Gender Identity: A Linguistic and Cultural Approach

Abstract

The proposed paper addresses the evolution of the Latina(o) gender national character through the prism of biculturalism and bilingualism; it analyzes the data from fictional and non-fictional works of Latina/o immigrant writers. The author studies the degree of Latina(o) assimilation in terms of dual (cross-cultural) identity, points out the peculiarities of the female and male gender national characters (*marianismo* and *machismo*), traces the specificity of reconsideration of gender roles in correlation with identity shift, identifies the typical social attitudes about Hispanic people in the U.S. through research of the “domestic conflict” concept actualized in specific *communicative strategies* used by Latinas(os) and Euro-Americans. The paper investigates incorporation of Spanish into the English discourse of Latina(o) writers (including possible semantic switch).

While the verbalized negative social attitudes are represented by the semantic derogation of vocabulary borrowed from Spanish, Latina(o) authors often incorporate Spanish into their English writing and create playful linguistic hybrids of Spanish and English. The empirical data includes essays, novels and short stories of Latina(o) authors (*Juan Cadena, Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Rose del Castillo Guilbault, Richard Rodriguez, etc.*).

The main focus is on the intercultural Latina(o) identity transition into the U.S. society, it is studied from the gender perspective and with due regard of linguistic patterns in discourse. It is emphasized that evolution of the gender national character through assimilation typically results in its deconstruction. Specific vocabulary and discursive examples of identity switch are negotiated in the given paper.

Key words: dual culture citizens, identity, marianismo and machismo, Latinas(os), Euro-Americans, identity deconstruction.

Introduction

The purpose of the present paper is to study the Latina phenomenon through linguistic and gender prism and identify the specificity of the Latina cultural and gender identity transition by researching the *language* and *discursive* indicators of these transitions. The proposed research particularly addresses the problem of Latina intercultural identity evolution in the course of integration into the American society which is studied through the prism of reconsideration of gender

roles by first generation female immigrants and specific linguistic patterns in written and oral discourse. As the research negotiates the Hispanic or Latina gender identity, the article provides an insight into the deconstruction of the female gender national character through assimilation in the U.S. culture.

Though the problem of cultural diversity and bilingualism has been studied by many scholars [Wierzbicka, Alba, Anzaldúa, Balestra, Wroge] it is still a topical issue. The gender aspect of the Hispanic national character has certainly been researched from the perspective of gender inequality as well as from the point of view of the influence of gender and generally cultural values on success in schooling [Englander 2012]. There has been research on correlation of success in acculturation in the receiving culture and inclination to violence and criminality [Stevens 1965, Guilbaut 1992, Brooks 1997]. The notions of *marianismo* (Latina female character) and *machismo* (Latino male character) have been studied in terms of family values, sharing household chores, problems connected with home violence [Alvarez 2007; Kulis 2003; Mayo 1996; Galanti 2003] and ethnic prejudice [Anzaldúa, Van Dijk, Huber, Yunatska 2009].

This paper studies the evolution of the Hispanic gender national character through the prism of biculturalism and bilingualism, using the data from Latina immigrant fiction and non-fiction. At the core of the research is an exploration of transition of authentic Latina identity into a dual or the mainstream American identity with regard to different gender roles in patriarchal societies and the American pro-feminist values. The paper particularly addresses first-generation immigration from Latin America, immigrants' biculturalism and bilingualism, and how these factors shape their cultural identity.

The relationship between language and culture is explored aiming to contribute to conversations about immigration, cultural identity, and assimilation. It is argued that self-identification of an immigrant may be different from that of the *mainstream society* even upon successful assimilation. It is stated that women's empowerment and identity deconstruction of the *dual culture* citizens in majority

of cases are accompanied by successful *public individuality*, while *private individuality* may be restrained and infringed.

The link between gender and intercultural problems as well as systems of cultural values is indissoluble and continuous. Hence the topicality of *gender-sensitive research* in intercultural studies is evident and has been reflected in many fundamental and substantial research papers. The United States of America as a country bound by immigration and built due to immigration, thus it is expedient to conduct research based on immigrant experience in this culturally diverse community. In this respect the gender aspect is of special interest as understanding of gender roles is part of culture and identity, however, the minority vision of these roles are different from the one of the mainstream. Apart from that, linguistic and discourse indicators of the newly attained identity facilitate identification of the identity deconstruction and make the study of authenticity transition more efficient.

Terms *Hispanic* and *Latina(o)* are official ethnonyms and are used in this research interchangeably. However the term *Hispanic* was officially adopted by the U.S. government in 1970 and is less preferable than *Latina/o*, because it was imposed by the Census Bureau and is too generalized. *Hispanic* denotes a relationship to the Spanish language and/or a Spanish speaking country, but does not focus on ethnicity or immigrant's home country. On the other hand it can be quite suitable in situations where specifics and specificity regarding ethnicity is redundant.

Latina/o originates from American Spanish and officially was adopted by the U.S. government in the 1990s. The term describes a person (Latino – male, Latina – female) with a Spanish-speaking, particularly Latin American background). As there is no practical difference between the two terms in most sources they are qualified as synonyms [see for example, Voronchenko 2001: 133]. Although in this research the preference is given to the term *Latina* (the presented empirical data addresses women of Latin American descent), sometimes the term *Hispanics* is used, for instance, in cases of meaningful generalization, where

specifics is redundant (for example, when dealing with stereotypes or attitudes to all Spanish-speakers irrelevant of ethnicity). To name immigrants from concrete Latin American countries we use specified official ethnic terms (here only *Mexican* or *Puerto Rican*).

In this paper *cultural identity* is understood as self-identification of *belonging* to a particular cultural group, country or community. The main focus is on nationality, ethnicity, gender, and religion [Moha Ennaji, p. 19].

Latina cultural identity: transition and verbalized opposition to the rules

Although the idea of the *melting pot* (incorporated into English in 1908 by Israel Zangwill [Feeley 2001: 11]) has been perceived as an assimilationist and anti-democratic as it forces people give up their differences, integration and success in the U.S. implies adjustment. Mexican is the largest group of Spanish-speaking origin in America; the Puerto Rican group is the oldest of all Hispanic groups (Puerto Ricans were granted U.S. citizenship in 1917 and now have the commonwealth status) [Solé 1990: 35].

Resisting the *assimilationist model* of the U.S. society, bilingual educators state that children lose a degree of individuality by blending into the Anglo mainstream. Contrary to this statement, an educational consultant and a free-lance writer R. Rodriguez, a Mexican American who grew up in California, stresses that a student should *not* be reminded of his difference from others and his heritage in mass society [Rodriguez 1993a]. Rodriguez's American identity was only achieved after a painful separation from his past, his family, and his culture.

Assimilation is an especially urgent issue in terms of the Hispanic question. To the utmost the empirical data for this paper was collected from the fictional and non-fictional works of the first-generation Latina, J.O. Cofer. Hence in this part I would like to take a look at demonstrative mechanisms, steps, indicators, and results of identity transition in her immigrant experience. Judith Ortiz Cofer was a professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Georgia, poet and writer of Puerto Rican origin, who came to the United States at the age of three. In

her book *Silent Dancing* the author negotiates her life between two cultures and recalls how unhappy she was by everything she encountered upon immigration; the American atmosphere was totally alien to her. Everything seemed to be in *gray* color [Cofer 1993:185].

She remembers the scornful attitudes of Euro-Americans to her family. However, in some years everything became different; speaking about American and Puerto Rican cultural values Cofer actually reconsiders her cultural identity. Having assimilated in the United States she started embracing American values and abandoned her attachment to the culture of her descent. The speaker's identity developed into obviously Anglo-American. Adjustment to the mainstream also caused rejection of everything reminding of Puerto Rico.

Cofer calls Puerto Rican women *humildes* (shy girls) and distinctly underlines that her *new identity* makes her *free*; she rejects nearly everything that is supposed to remind of conservative Puerto Rican values (*primitive island, black mantilla, humilde*). She is even ashamed to speak her native language at a certain stage of her identity transition. Spanish is used with pejorative connotation, to emphasize her choice (not in favor of Puerto Rican values). The immigrant does not accept Puerto Rican cuisine anymore and stresses the negative consequences women may experience because of it (*I hate rice and beans, that's what makes these women fat*). She criticizes Puerto Rico openly and demonstrates a certain "alienation" and "estrangement" from the Puerto Rican traditions. The gender perspective is already outlined in this case, however, yet indirectly [Cofer 1993:185].

An important role is given to religion, which can be traced in the story "My Rosetta". It is a story of a nun-rebel, who is against adherence to tradition just for the sake of tradition. Unexpectedly democratic beliefs and ideas of nun Rosetta turn out to be a breakthrough for Ortiz Cofer. This concerns her identity shaping and life in the U.S. Consequently, her own unwillingness to follow Puerto Rican Catholic traditions is verbalized through word combinations, like *predictable life* and *predictable future* and characteristics like *good Catholic barrio woman*. She

would like to «*fly away from ... **predictable life** and (what I feared most) a **predictable future** as a good Catholic **barrio** woman» [My Rosetta, p. 71].*

The next stage is rejection of the patriarchal concept of a *weak woman*, which is not close to Ortiz Cofer at all. She cannot accept this approach to gender roles:

«...Rodriguez's deep-throated laments about lost loves and **weak women** in tears **did not appeal much to me**» [My Rosetta, p. 71].

It is noteworthy that the mechanisms of assimilation can also act as correspondent steps to identity evolution. In another Cofer's creative non-fiction story she describes an important step toward identity reconsideration. Once before Christmas parents informed their children that they would celebrate Christmas and «... get presents on December 25 instead of **Los Reyes**» since they were «in **Los Estados** while in **Puerto Rico** gifts are exchanged on Three Kings Day»¹ [Cofer J.O. The Story of My Body]. That is the way the kids experienced first *clash of cultures* (one significant holiday was substituted by the other (*alien*) one. The switch works as a reference point for the sufficient reason to question one's identity.

Particularly at the point of *clash of cultures* the mechanism of reconsideration makes immigrants compare different cultural values and choose those they like. This happens through rejection of the earlier, home *values*:

*But there were too many **illogical rules**, especially for girls and women:... **do not interrupt or join men's conversations; serve men first at meals; and, more infuriating to me than anything else, I was told that all boys... needed to be outside more and more as they got older to "experience" the world. Girls, however, needed to stay home more each year because the world became more dangerous for a female as she matured...*** [My Rosetta, p. 75].

Ortiz is indignant about the set of rules existing in Puerto Rican culture. They are simply «illogical» regulations, which are unfair in the girl's opinion, but they are followed, because, as a rule, traditions are cherished in Latin American countries and patriarchy is one of the integral and distinguishing features of these

communities. A distinctive characteristic of the young immigrant girl is curiosity and ability to *analyze*. Accordingly, for her these rules make a «*suffocating cycle of acceptance and adherence to tradition*» she would like to break free from [*My Rosetta*, p. 75].

Nun Rosetta helps Ortiz to understand the pros and cons of adherence to tradition by asking a simple question: «What is tradition?» The little girl readily responds: «Tradition is something that has always been done» [*My Rosetta*, p. 76].

Consequently, this analysis leads to «*a normal stage of rebellion in the special setting of the barrio* », «*fantasy of flight from everything <her> Puerto Rican family and neighbors stood for*» [*My Rosetta*, p. 75]. The breakthrough and conclusion of the conversation is that it is not «*always good to do something just because it has always been done that way*». Rosetta mentions horrors that «had been defended as tradition» throughout American history [*My Rosetta*, p. 76-77]. When the girl receives an answer it becomes «the beginning of hope for an argument against her parents' ways»; she believes that finally it will be possible to break free from a *cycle*» [*My Rosetta*, p. 77]. Judith Ortiz demonstrates maturity by making a serious decision and an important choice not to follow *the essential* Puerto Rican traditions.

It is common knowledge that derogatory and pejorative ethnic stereotypes about Hispanic people remain one of the most urgent problems for the U.S. society. In high school Judith Ortiz falls in love with a white young man and her feelings seem to be mutual. They are planning to go out together and the girl is enthusiastically preparing for the date. Suddenly Ted (the guy) telephones her in order to let her know that the date will not take place.

The fact is that Ted's father asked him who his son was going to take out. Having realized that the girl-friend was a Puerto Rican he forbade Ted to take her out: «*Ortiz? That's Spanish, isn't it?*» the father asked.... No. Ted would not be taking me out». As a matter of fact, «*Ted's father had known Puerto Ricans in the army. He had lived in New York City while studying architecture and had seen how the spics lived. Like rats...*» [Cofer J.O. *The Story of My Body*]. The Anglo

American (Ted's father) openly uses slur, pejorative and offensive vocabulary to refer to Puerto Ricans (*spics, rats*) and shows explicit disrespect to minorities. His son does the same when explaining to his Latina girl-friend the reasons of the date cancellation. However, they both do not base their judgments on facts and reality, but are guided by the «crucial strategy» used in «*model building* for ethnic situations» which is qualified by Teun van Dijk as *negative extension*. Van Dijk calls *negative extension* «a very flexible strategy» which is «often part of the attribution process» [Dijk T.A. P.31]. The negative extension in the utterance quoted above lies in unjustified criticism and attribution of generalized exaggerated insulting characteristics without any reason in a groundless way.

Incorporation of Spanish

It is believed that no minority language has faced a better fate in the U.S. than Spanish. Despite suffering continuous attacks, it is the most wide-spread and best maintained minority language in North America [Balestra 2008, p. 35]. The use of Spanish in the U.S. is sometimes characterized as ‘a patriotic duty’ [MacNeil, Cran 2005: 90-91, 102-103].

The role of Spanish in English writing of Hispanic writers is particularly interesting for this research. The analysis of Cofer's discourse shows that she is against the home culture and against the heritage values. Rejection of Puerto Rican traditional values can be traced via “positive” to Puerto Rican culture descriptions which though turn out to be inadmissible and unacceptable for the female rebel representing dual culture. The lexeme *barrio* better conveys the local coloring and shut-in nature of latina(o) ghetto. It is sometimes negative, sad or bitter and even ironic (*good Catholic **barrio** woman*) [My Rosetta, p. 71]. *Barrio* is a word of high frequency in the written English discourse of Latina writers.

The results of the research show that *Spanish words* incorporated in Hispanic writing in English serve as certain code-switching to emphasize alienation (*la gringa, Los Estados*); describe the specificity of Hispanic life in ghettos (*barrio, El Building*); reflect the Latina humility, submissiveness and subservience to men (*Así es la vida, Niña*); show rebellion against patriarchal

values (*Why did I have to advertise my sexual status by the color of the **mantilla** I was told to wear: white for **señoritas** and black for married women?* [*My Rosetta*, p. 74-75]; serve as indicators of patriotism and loyalty to one's own Latina(o) community, and affectionate love for certain aspects of home culture (*mi casa es su casa, Compadre/Comadre patria, compañeros*); hostility of the adopted culture (*la lucha*), create playful linguistic hybrids (*barrio-as-island* fantasy) [*My Rosetta*, p. 75].

Conclusions

Assimilation is invariably accompanied by clash of cultures. First generation immigrants' authenticity has to pass through adjustment to the mainstream. The study of Latina English written discourse shows the following mechanisms and steps of identity transition: 1) clash of cultures and the analysis of cultural values; 2) rebellion against Latina cultural values, which are mainly focused on gender inequality and religious issues; 3) turbulent transition from home culture to the adopted one; 4) acquiring the status of a dual culture person; 4) fight with the adopted society, which is full of hurting stereotypes and prejudice (both failures and successes)

First-generation Latina immigrants in the U.S. while adjusting to the mainstream culture are unlikely to retain their heritage gender ethic, but rather act as rebels demonstrating a newly generated outlook, feministic views, and reflect the concept of women's empowerment. The indicator and result of the reconsidered and deconstructed authenticity is the newly generated *dual culture discourse*. The *negative extension* strategy is used by Euro-Americans with reference to Hispanics as part of the attribution process.

The observed sprinkles from Spanish are increasingly incorporated into Hispanic authors' English writing. Spanish words and phrases are mainly used as foreign sprinkles in English; in addition Spanish vocabulary is used in combination with English words in order to create playful linguistic hybrids of Spanish and English.

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