Spanglish and the Negotiation of Latina Identities in Sandra Cisneros's *Caramelo*

By Silvia M. Peart and Dale C. Lescher

Introduction

Chicano/a literature is an essential medium for Mexican-American writers to share their experiences using Spanglish as a tool to enhance their work, and explore a fluid identity. While linguists and others in the field of literature receive Spanglish both positively and negatively, conscious code switching is a verbal display of Mexican-American's shared identity. Mexican-Americans use Spanglish and have produced Chicano/a literature as a way to create solidarity a sense of community. This article attempts to analyze different contemporary perspectives on Spanglish, and will focus particularly on its use by the Chicana author Sandra Cisneros in *Caramelo*. Through her stories, Cisneros creates a powerful message celebrating Mexican-Americans' multilayered identities through characters that readers can empathize with, and language that is more realistic to the characters and appealing to the readers.

Spanglish and Code Switching in the Construction of Identity

Spanglish represents the Anglicized dialect of U. S. Spanish. Most linguistic researchers refer to Spanglish as "Spanish-English code-switching" (Martinez 124). The label Spanglish is often used derogatorily to stigmatize U.S Latino Spanish speakers. In doing so, condemners create the false impression that the varieties of Spanish used in the U.S. are so "entangled" with English that the resulting language becomes entirely different from both English and Spanish—establishing a third language altogether (Lipski 223). However, no varieties or code-switched versions of Spanish constitute as lower forms of Spanish, regardless of the number of Anglicisms. Code switching is merely the use of two language varieties in a single conversation. U.S. Spanish, or Spanglish, is used as an identity marker for Mexican-Americans that help them shape conversations and culture. Mexican-Americans see "the hyphen in their heritage as a metaphor for two coexisting worlds" (Alvarez 483), and they use Spanglish as a way to express this identity. The term Spanglish has become a badge of pride and courage for the community (Lipski 240).

Some Latinos' views of themselves are shaped by using English more frequently than Spanish and also having more formal education in English than in Spanish. U.S. Latino Spanish is easily identified from other Spanish dialects in the United States due to its influx of Anglicisms. Latinos who were raised in the U.S. or have lived here for an extended period of time tend to mold false or partial cognates into Spanish words relating to the urban or educational setting. Commonly heard Anglicisms on the Mexican-American border are words like *güelfer* (welfare), *yánitor* (janitor), *sobgüey* (subway), and *grados* (grades). These cognates infiltrated the Spanish language from the urban environment many Latinos live in (Lipski 225). The English words convey what the Spanish-speakers sought to say when they needed a word for something not included in Spanish culture. These Anglicisms begin as pragmatic gaps where the speaker substitutes the single word or expression into the conversation in the other language. Known as the practice of lexical borrowing, this happens more with casual language learners and students. However, these

Anglicisms and Spanglish as a code choice, manipulating the words as part of an ethnic code, occurs more often with fluent bilingual speakers.

The amount of Anglicisms used when speaking Spanglish largely depends on the group of speakers. A non-standard dialect becomes the unmarked choice for conversation in the community that is most associated with this language variation. For Spanglish, that would be Mexican-Americans living near the border. Whether to use Anglicisms when speaking Spanish, which Anglicisms to use, and how often to use them in a conversation is settled by the members of the group individually and collectively. It is an individual issue because using too many Anglicisms could result in the exclusion of some members from that community (Lipski 225). It is also a group issue because there are associations between non-standard dialects and the qualities of their speakers. If Mexican-Americans speak English in situations calling for informality, they may appear snobbish, too full of themselves, and out of place. Others outside of their speech group interpret their language choice as social messages, portraying how their community thinks they "are." Using Spanglish is a clear choice for the speaker who sends a message to their community and to those outside of it. The use of Spanglish sends a social message that can be equivalent to the choice they make in clothing or in the style they decorate their room (Myers-Scotton 145).

Spanish-English bilinguals in the United States are typically part of very stable bilingual communities, but the practice of language separation and the asymmetry of acceptance continues to be passed on from generation to generation. This difference in social status between languages is very apparent and is further exacerbated by schools and work environments (Lipski 230). As Lipski explains, "Spanish has never been on an equal footing with English in the United States, and in the immigrant communities where sentence-level code switching has been most frequently studied, Spanish has definitely been under siege by the dominant society" (Lipski 240). The use of Spanglish is a method of resistance to this siege.

Fluent bilingual speakers often switch between Spanish and English within the confines of a single conversation. This fluid code switching is only seen with fluent bilingual, bicultural individuals. The phenomenon of intrasentential code switching[1] occurs when there is a favorable combination of grammatical structure, typological hierarchy, and sociolinguistic factors, as is the case between Spanish and English (Lipski 52).

This interchange between the two languages with no apparent external triggers creates a large amount of criticism from within the bilingual speech communities, specifically from the traditional members who believe that speakers should strictly use one language or the other in a given interaction. Literary critic Roberto González-Echeverría (1997) believes that Spanglish "poses a grave danger to Hispanic culture and to the advancement of Hispanics in mainstream America" (1) He explains further:

> Spanglish is an invasion of Spanish by English. The sad reality is that Spanglish is primarily the language of poor Hispanics, many barely literate in either language… Educated Hispanics who do likewise have a different motivation: Some are embarrassed by their background and feel empowered by using English words and directly translated English idioms. Doing so, they think, is to claim membership in the mainstream. (González-Echeverría 1)

[1] Intrasentential code switching is the mixing of two or more languages within the confines of one sentence. (For a more detailed analysis of intrasentential code switching see Lipski 230-31)

González-Echeverría's assumption that Latinos use Spanglish either for lexical borrowing due to a lack of knowledge, or to be mainstream, is considered off the mark to many. Spanglish is perceived to be the conscious choice to be seen as abnormal in society, which some view as harmful to Hispanics' progress in American society.

Isis Artze, columnist in the *Miami Herald* asserted, "teach [Hispanics] Spanglish, and teach them to settle for substandard English and menial jobs" (Artze 11). However, Mexican-Americans in the United States have sought a new, proud identity in connection to the Spanglish label, and "life on the hyphen" (Lipski 240). Author Ed Morales claims that "at the root of Spanglish is a very universal state of being. It is a displacement from one place, home, to another place, home in which one feels at home in both places, yet at home in neither place… The only choice you have left is to embrace the transitory (read the transnational) state of in-between" (Morales 7). Spanish-English bilinguals along the border switch languages midsentence so frequently because they use Spanglish as a form of pride, rebellion, and a combination of remaining loyal to their Mexican roots and their nationalism for America. Their use of language changes between standard, formal conversations using only one language, and non-standard, comfortable conversations using both in order to fully express themselves (Cortés-Conde & Boxer 137). Being anything but mainstream in the U.S., Mexican-Americans use intrasentential code switching as a basis for this powerful and culturally-influenced new identity. Concurrently, Mexican-Americans seek to find a source to express their struggle of being "in between" cultures since they are neither dominant nor assimilated in the U.S.—they have solidarity within their community, but no support outside it.

Like oral Spanglish, a written version of Spanglish has become widespread through computer technology and Internet communication, which has led to the prevalent formation of code switching as a written discourse. In addition, written Spanglish is an example of deliberate manipulation of code switching that can be twisted creatively to portray specific cultural ideas (Cortés-Conde & Boxer 50). This is a pertinent development in how code switching is viewed because most linguists believe that spoken code switching is mostly spontaneous and below the level of conscious awareness of the speaker. Ilan Stavans, a well-known Mexican-American lexicographer, cultural commentator and author, asserts that "[Spanglish] has been moving from the purely oral to the written realm. There are novels, poems, stories, essays available in it already… But Spanglish is also something else: a state of mind. It allows us an opportunity to appreciate the creation of a new minority culture in the United States" (qtd. in Albín 209). The literary expression of bilingual identity allows authors and readers alike to explore what it means to be part of an "in group" that shares a common dialect.

The influence of Spanglish continues to increase, especially in written forums. Chicano literature is an essential medium for Mexican-American writers to use Spanglish as a tool to relate back to Mexican-Americans' identity in society and enhance their work. One of the most respected authors of today's Chicano literature, Sandra Cisneros, demonstrates in her writing how the choice of language, and the choice to mix the two languages, embodies the speakers' views of themselves and how they interact with others.

Sandra Cisneros: Language and Migration in *Caramelo*

Instead of conforming to the style of more traditional authors, Chicana writer Sandra Cisneros uses her family history, her childhood (she was constantly moving between Mexico and Chicago), and both English and Spanish to give her community a voice that had not been heard

before. Chicano literature stresses "the phenomenon of a transnational sociocultural system" (Alonso 17) that is a living organism among communities which speak Spanish, English or a mixture of both. That is why immigration is a common theme in Chicano literature because "the change in physical location conditions identity" (Alonso 18). Cisneros has experienced this firsthand and understands what it feels like to be a Mexican woman living in the United States, and not belonging to either culture.

Images of border crossing are abundant in Cisneros' novel *Caramelo*. The Reyes family visit Mexico City every year, Eleuterio Reyes migrated to Mexico from Spain, Narciso Reyes was sent to the U. S. by his mother during the Mexican revolution, and later Inocencio Reyes joins his brother in the U. S. These are some of the geographical border crossings that the novel presents to the reader. In this constant movement, Cisneros plays with multiple border crossings while at the same time she aims to reconstruct the Reyes' family history. First, it is Celaya's grandmother's ghost who needs to cross over to the other side. In her own words, she explains: "It's so lonely being like this, neither dead nor alive, but somewhere halfway, like an elevator between floors. You have no idea. What a barbarity! I'm in the middle of nowhere. I can't cross over to the other side till I'm forgiven" (Cisneros 408). Second, it is a story of multiple crossings, not only geographical borders, but also linguistic and cultural boundaries. With this migration story, Cisneros creates a "migratory narrative voice that has the ability to cross supernatural, spatial, and narrative boundaries" (Alumbaugh 54). In this context, it is language itself, both English and Spanish that stretch their own limits, pointing to a new third space in-between. Cisneros uses Celaya Reyes and Soledad's multi-voiced story to subvert traditional ideas of narration, language and nationality. Cisneros subverts not only the manner in which the main story is being told (with a mixture of two narrators one of which is a ghost), but also the medium in which the story is told. Language in this story is pivotal, and represents the reality of Celaya's bilingual and bicultural family. In her analysis of Cisneros's novel, Lourdes Torres underscores how the use of code switching and calques[2] are artistic choices but also political statements. According to Torres,

> In the United States, the presence of large and small Latino/a communities across the country, increasing numbers of Latino/a immigrants, and the US/Mexican border means that code-switching in literature is not only metaphorical, but represents a reality where segments of the population are living between cultures and languages; literary languages actualizes the discourse of the border and bilingual/bicultural communities (Torres 76).

In *Caramelo*, Cisneros focuses on two women who have crossed over and who use language themselves in different manners. Soledad, Celaya's grandmother, frequently uses Spanish and Cisneros does not translate what she says because Spanish is Soledad's first language. Soledad sees herself as a Mexican who lived most of her life in Mexico. However, multiple identities inform

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[2] Calques are loan translations, which involve the importation of foreign patterns or meanings with the retention of native-language morphemes. Montes-Alcalá goes further and defines calques as "literal translations of words or entire phrases from one language into the other one. Examples of syntactic calques that can be found in the speech of Chicanos or 'Nuyoricans' follow: 'llamar pa´trás' (to call back), 'está p´arriba de ti' (it's up to you) or 'correr para gobernador' (to run for governor)" (Montes-Alcalá 106).

herself. She has indigenous heritage and she moves permanently to the U.S. as an adult before she dies. When Soledad speaks, she uses Spanish and English, but Cisneros chooses not to translate the Spanish words imbedded in her story because Soledad is bringing her past, which was lived "in Spanish," to the narration and she is making it present to Celaya. On the other hand, Cisneros translates almost all the Spanish that Celaya uses, because she embodies the Chicana identity. In a way, Celaya represents the hybrid identity that Cisneros celebrates in all her works. Celaya and Soledad use Spanish and English in different manners and by creating these two characters, Cisneros is speaking to all the different members of the diasporic community who live on the border, that live in-between.

Cisneros creates a common language and culture that reunites the diverse groups trying to surpass the fragmentation of the border, fostering a sense of communal experience, a sense of belonging to a diasporic community that usually feels out of place.

Cisneros is not only redefining the use of language, but also the process of narration as well. Soledad and Celaya's "conarration irreverently redefines the form of a typically monolingual bildungsroman" (Alumbaugh 61). It redefines the narration in the sense that the story is not told by an individual. Particularly in Part II, there are two different voices telling the narration. They talk to each other, and in a dialogue, they both reconstruct the family history. This generational dialogue between Celaya and her grandmother brings to light the encounter of two generations with very different views. It demonstrates how they both negotiate their differences, particularly through linguistic exchanges.

It is not only the narration that Cisneros re-defines in this novel; it is also the use of both Spanish and English. The cross over between languages, mirrors the crossing over in other areas of these migrant stories. According to Jacqueline Stefanko, "Latin American (migrant) women writers question and reject the assumption that a unitary, synthesizing narrator is capable of telling the stories they have to disclose, instead opting for a narrative stance that includes multiple voicings" (Stefanko 51). Cisneros not only wants to bring the reader's attention to this multivocal narration, but also according to Torres, Cisneros uses both Spanish and English in her writings to "doubly reward the bilingual, bicultural reader" (Torres 4). For example, some of the characters in *Caramelo* have names that sound odd in English but they are common if you think about them in Spanish; for example "Aunty White-Skin." A bilingual/bicultural reader can easily catch the real meaning of this name, which in Spanish is Titi Blanca. A monolingual reader probably understands that there is a reason for this odd naming, but cannot completely appreciate the subtext behind Cisneros' writing.

The author always keeps her Chicano audience in mind when she is writing because this community is the one "who can catch all the subtexts and subtleties that even my editor can't catch" (qtd. in Torres 85). This is the multifaceted community that Cisneros belongs to and through a multilayered narration, she brings to life this constant negotiation that Chicanos and Chicanas experience with their heritage, and particularly with their identity which in Cisneros stories are expressed in a playful use of Spanish and English. Going a step further, Johnson González states that some of Cisneros's translations from Spanish to English "create interpenetrations between the two languages" (González 4). Stretching the borders of both Spanish and English, Cisneros is focusing the attention on the contact zone of both languages, speaking to the experiences of those who live on the border of two languages and cultures. Cisneros understands this place "in-between" as neither Mexican nor American but as a member of a border culture which does not represent completely Mexico or the United States.

Cisneros' language choice reflects her experiences as a Mexican-American woman who traditionally has been marginalized by the Anglo mainstream and –like other Chicanas– by her male-dominated community. Her main characters are typically female, and they resist both Anglo and Mexican stereotypes. In a close analysis of linguistic manifestations of bilingual identity in the literary narratives of Sandra Cisneros, Florencia Cortés-Conde and Diana Boxer emphasize that "If her characters resist gender and ethnic classification, their linguistic repertoire does as well" (Cortés-Conde & Boxer 137).

Cisneros pays particular attention to language. For example, in *Caramelo* the *rebozo* (caramel-color shawl) symbolizes language, both Spanish and English, which connects the Chicano/a community. The use of code switching and the playful use of both languages in the novel "express the ambivalence of both languages in the linguistic context" (Alonso 23), which is a reflection of the in-between status and cultural adaptation of the Mexican-American community. Language is a net that connects the history of this community to its present, the story of multiple migrations within and outside of the U. S. Cisneros explains the symbolism of the *caramelo rebozo* stating: "The rebozo was born in Mexico, but like all mestizos, it came from everywhere. It evolved from the cloths Indian women used to carry their babies, borrowed its knotted fringe from Spanish shawls, and was influenced by the silk embroideries from the imperial course of China exported to Manila, then Acapulco, via Spanish galleons" (96). Celaya's family history exemplifies all this mixture: Amerindian and Spanish, Mexican and American.

Celaya Reyes herself adds another layer to this mixture with her Chicana heritage. In addition to mirroring the main character's family history, the *rebozo* also represents language itself, particularly the mixture of Spanish and English. As Ian Stavans argued: "Only dead languages are static, never changing" (Stavans 1). In his piece "The Gravitas of Spanish," he argues that Spanish has evolved and in its evolution has nurtured itself from multiple influences: Arabic, the languages spoken in the Iberian Peninsula, and all the indigenous languages in the Americas. Today, the mixture of Spanish and English coined as Spanglish, is celebrated by some and criticized by others for its lack of purity, for being a "bastard jargon" (Stavans 1). At times, Celaya feels the same way about her family and her heritage. However, Cisneros shows how this hybrid, fluid identity is full of possibilities. This mixture has the potential of a multivocal production that embodies this diverse community. According to Alumbaugh, Cisneros invites her readers to cross multiple borders, and re-think other hierarchies that usually are fixed. She argues: "Any reader of *Caramelo* has to be willing to traverse linguistic, cultural, and epistemological boundaries in order to fully reckon with the complexity of the migratory narrative" (Alumbaugh 72). Through this multigenerational, transnational and multicultural story, Cisneros celebrates diversity and particularly those characters like Celaya who are bridges among generations and cultures. The *rebozo* represents the rich mixture of cultures and heritages, the "cultural continuance born of heterogeneity not policed cultural purity" (Szeghi 177). In the same manner, those who defend Spanglish note the multiple linguistic and cultural influences that Spanish had along its history and is still having today in its contact with English. As the *caramelo rebozo* preserves in itself the different historical and cultural makings of the Reyes family, Cisneros's playful use of Spanish and English in her novel brings together the multiple influences that Chicanos and Chicanas negotiate in constructing their own identity. The *caramelo rebozo* as an artifact preserves the Reyes history. In the same manner; Cisneros uses language to call the readers' attention to the multiple markings of both Spanish and English and the endless possibilities of the creative combination of both.

Conclusion

As an author, Cisneros is unique amongst her peers, particularly because Cisneros breaks with the tradition of silence among young Chicana writers. She gives voice to women who have traditionally been denied the opportunity to tell their story. In *Caramelo*, Celaya recreates her own story and by telling it, she brings her family, community past and present together. Like the *caramelo rebozo*, Celaya's voice weaves together a fragmented community into one voice pushing the monolingual readers to the brink of understanding, appealing to both the "in group" and "out group."

Through her stories, Cisneros creates a powerful message celebrating Mexican-Americans' multilayered identities through characters that readers can empathize with and language that makes readers think about the "in between space." Cisneros uses language to focus on the mixture of both Spanish and English, celebrating the diverse nature of the Mexican American Community, bringing to the readers' attention how her characters negotiate their identity through multiple dialogues with their present, their past and both Spanish and English.

Latino writer Ed Morales confirms this connection between writing style and identity when he argues that:

> There is no better metaphor for what a mixed-race culture means than a hybrid language, an informal code; the same sort of linguistic construction that defines different classes in a society can also come to define something outside it, a social construction with different rules. Spanglish is what we speak, but it is also who we Latinos are, and how we act, and how we perceive the world" (3).

Spanglish, like Cisneros's storytelling, challenges rigid binaries definitions and fixed truths. *Caramelo* advocates for a dynamic understanding of language and identity. Both are spaces of flux, and entire communities contribute to their constant reconstruction. It is hoped that the deliberate code switching used in written Chicano/a literature will help bridge the gap between the Mexican-Americans' roots and Americans' celebration of diversity. Authors like Sandra Cisneros are helping make this a reality by creating empathy for the Mexican-American culture from an increasingly large and diverse audience. In order for the Mexican-American community to grow in pride and acceptance, Chicano/a literature needs to continue being written, and Spanglish needs to continue being heard.

Cisneros and her female characters help re-define America as an inclusive nation. Her production and her use of Spanglish and code switching points to a diasporic group that is still seeking to redistribute power from the center to the marginal voices in today's immigrant America.

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