

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE IN IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ENGLISH COMPOSITION AND DISCOURSE

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The notions and conceptualizations of individuals' self-understanding continue to be transformed as the process of globalization accelerates and brings individuals from across borders to the forefront of the global stage. Self-awareness is complicated once the individual faces the arduous process of finding his or her voice through written composition and discourse. In my case, when I first came to the U.S. after September 11th, 2001, I did not have a basic grasp of what forces compelled people to move from one place to another, or how societal contexts shape the identity or the knowledge that individuals have about themselves. I brought with me the colonial vestiges that influence the psychological development of those individuals who reside in what is now called Mexico. I was shaped by cultural practices that were cultivated through the millennia before the year 1492. One of those is the sense of community that still stimulates my thoughts, actions, and spoken utterances. In addition, during the last five hundred years, the continuous blending or accommodation of ideas—whether through force, repression, or the massacre of masses—reshaped the identity of the collective. I brought with me the vague idea of seeing myself as *mestizo*—not so much through miscegenation, but rather through a mixed definition of what it meant to be a blend of European and Mesoamerican values. Paradoxically, this idea was strengthened during the post-revolutionary period in Mexico through the *Indigenismo* movement.

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla states that through *Indigenismo* Mexicans glorified their shared indigenous past and simultaneously emphasized their European values adopted during and after the conquest. Colloquially speaking, the mainstream conception went: “We are proud of being descendants of the Aztecs, but now we are *mestizos*.” The redefined perception of the indigenous people was implemented through the public education system in Mexico. This set of policies, which I will not go into in detail, can be an example of institutional racism; that is, the ostracizing of certain practices (e.g., language, customs, beliefs) of a specific group of people through the implementation of rules at the institutional level, which can be either conscious or unconscious. Via *Indigenismo*, policymakers and anthropologists first attempted to learn about indigenous people's customs and ideals. Then, they began the process of “Westernizing” the indigenous communities (115–20).

This hegemonic project embraced a nationalistic sentiment that developed along with *Indigenismo*. This nationalism was and continues to be taught at many public schools in Mexico. In my classrooms, I was obligated by such policies and other forces (such as internalized oppression—the belief that dark skin color made a human being inferior, a colonial vestige embedded within the population where I belonged) to adopt the belief that all indigenous cultures in my country demeaned our societal identity and did not allow us to be European-like. Bakhtin asserts, “Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces” (“Discourse in the Novel” 270). Such centralization was somehow grafted upon my identity. When I came to the U.S., I thought of myself as a stranger. I was extremely aware of my cultural values, and how these, juxtaposed with other “unstatic forces”—

deeply ingrained beliefs about sexual, class, gender, and racial roles I was supposed to play—were challenged as I lived in this country and began to learn English.

In this essay, I will attempt to demonstrate the difficulty that I, as a second-language learner, encountered in the process of developing a “new” identity through my different social experiences in this country. It is crucial to emphasize the role of language, because it is through this process that I became acquainted with a sense of alienation, which led me to become consciously aware of the outside “voices” that dictated who I was supposed to be. Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia helps explain the transformation of my identity. Specifically, I will use the ideas surrounding centrifugal and centripetal forces as they collide to create a synthesis of language. In this context, I will try to explain how internal struggles, in regards to my identity in this society, clashed with the social influences of those who belong to the dominant group in this country, while at the same time this clash itself added to my struggle to attain a second language. This essay is a simplified self-introspective discourse of the psychological development I experienced during my first few years in this country. I make an effort to offer a basic understanding of my identity as it was shaped by outside forces and internal struggles.

The Multiple Social Forces and the Alienation of the Self

Meanings are multiple, based on the societal context in which they are applied. Bakhtin states, “The wealth and diversity of speech genres are boundless because the various possibilities of human activity are inexhaustible, and because each sphere of activity contains an entire repertoire of speech genres that differentiate and grow as the particular sphere develops and becomes more complex” (*Speech Genres* 62). When I began learning English, I struggled with multiple “speech genres”—the language of my surroundings (both English and Spanish), and the abstract notions that I had made of them (this is, of course, bounded by the different social roles that I played at different times and places). Most of the time, one tends to act upon the perceived social roles that our societies prescribe to us. We learn to behave based on the context of the situation and the available discourses that we have at hand. As for many other immigrants facing a new set of values, this way of proceeding was not available to me. The discourses were not accessible because I lacked the requisite verbal communication skills and cultural awareness. Here in the U.S., to this “new” set of values, with its respective discourses, I added the numerous “speech genres” developed within my previous spheres of activities that had shaped my oral expressions during my years in Mexico. The resulting process was a constant clash of ideologies, which was reflected in my general discourse. Bakhtin stresses that language can be “conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a worldview, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a *maximum* of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life” (“Discourse in the Novel” 271). Thus, when I spoke to white “Americans,” there was not only a mutual exchange of words, but also of ideologies, meanings, and self-understandings. This did not only happen with white Americans; it also applied to my relationships with my peers who spoke Spanish. For instance, when my Spanish-speaking friends from Mexico in the U.S. and I attempted to communicate, we did not fully understand each other because of the way in which our histories differentiated. The geographic, socioeconomic, cultural, and historical diversity of Mexico shaped our speeches and with it our identities—with an individual and collective understanding of how these forces shaped the latter in a conscious or subconscious manner.

The demographic composition in Idaho influenced my identity. I was a minority within a minority. Most of the Mexican population in this state came from a different region in Mexico, and they

shared a different cultural reality from mine. This is due to the complex sociohistorical diversity of Mexico. Thus, not being able to stimulate my cultural values encouraged me to assimilate to the way in which my friends in the U.S. spoke. As stated above, my utterances were the reflection of the socio-historical construction of a unitary language. Bakhtin states that “a unitary language is not something given [*dan*] but is always in essence posited [*zadan*]—and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia” (“Discourse in the Novel” 270). According to Bakhtin, *heteroglossia* is that which activates the connotation of any utterance that is compelled by certain situations—cultural, political, social, etc.—at a specific time and place and everything else that might influence its meaning. Bakhtin stresses that heteroglossia is “the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text” (428). Furthermore, heteroglossia entails an “internal stratification” where numerous languages coexist at the same time (262–63). This internal stratification conveys a sense of power struggle where individuals’ self-understanding is shaped through their respective experiences. Moreover, Bakhtin asserts that the unitary language “makes its real presence felt as a force for overcoming this heteroglossia, imposing specific limits to it, guaranteeing a certain maximum of mutual understanding and crystallization into a real, although still relatively, unity—the unity of the reigning conversational (everyday) and literary language, ‘correct language’” (270). It happened that I found myself adopting some of the emotions, values, and utterances that my new friends used in certain contextual situations, such as the use of *Spanglish*. My conservative values in regards to language obliged me not to use such “aberrancies” of Spanglish, and to correct anyone who used those “linguistic distortions.” This behavior was compelled by a multiplicity of social forces, which I had developed since the beginning of my early socialization in Mexico.

The idea of my linguistic “properness” was bounded by the time and place where I was raised. These ideas came from the blending of multiple sources during my early socialization and later through my experience with different institutions, which reinforced my previous understandings about me and others. This is similar to what James Paul Gee stresses about “primary discourses.” According to Gee, discourses are “forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes” (6–7). Thus, our first forms of life come from our primary discourses, which are the ones that we “use to make sense of the world and interact with others.” Later, Gee explains how primary discourses are influenced by a combination of secondary discourses, which are “non-home based social institutions—institutions in the public sphere, beyond the family and immediate kin and peer group” (7). My complex experience in Mexico—the development of my identity through my perception of the institutions and my social roles, mixed with internal struggles—led me to create an internal repression that rejected some of my Mesoamerican values (community) and welcomed Western values (individuality). Rooted in my self, I tried to impose these conflicting values upon my peers in the U.S. With these actions I was creating a sense of oppressive behavior in my daily dialogue with them. I did not allow my friends to use what I thought to be broken words that dominant institutions such as the Real Academia de la Lengua Española did not approve. I would always “correct” them. This gradually changed as I realized that our linguistic differences were caused by our dissimilar histories. For instance, the inequality of opportunities in Mexico privileged some students over others. I went to private schools where the curriculum was more rigorous. This is due to the colonial vestiges that determined the political, economic, societal, and cultural landscapes of the different regions in Mexico. This is not to say that the opportunities given to me and mirrored through my identity mean that I am the full expression of an

“educated Mexican.” Rather, I am merely the expression of the hegemonic order that is strengthened through the variety of institutions in Mexico. This order manipulated the sphere of activities within our own environments, and with it the definitions of my and my peers’ utterances. This understanding forced me to put aside those individualistic values to allow my friends’ verbal manifestations to be part of my ideological and rhetorical self-expression.

Fighting against the New Set of Voices

Throughout these years, I had to assimilate myself not only to the English language but also to the cultural connotations that it encompasses. I was learning from the different voices coming from the dominant society in the U.S. The media, public education system, businesses, police, and their respective settings are some examples of these voices. A major influence came from my school experience before and during college. Keith Gilyard describes how the public education system failed black Americans during segregation. He stresses that after desegregation black children learned their social role of “lower-class” status through the school system. He states that they were taught something very important: “how not to remain eligible for middle-class life. They learned very well how to play their roles as lower-class citizens. Through contact with their White teachers, virtually their only contact with mainstream America, they learned in what terms they would be viewed by the larger society” (64–65). In a similar way, I was faced with the social stereotypes created in the U.S. toward Latinos, which were reinforced through the public education system.

During high school, many times my teachers reminded me of how badly “Latinos” behaved in this society. “Mexicans are always getting in trouble,” many of them would say, and they would try to prove this by showing the names in the newspaper of the people most wanted for committing crimes in Treasure Valley, Idaho. Throughout this time, I learned to say that I was not like the other Mexicans, because I knew how to “behave.” These voices were encouraging me to ostracize the people with whom I shared something in common, such as my language and culture. These centripetal forces clashed with centrifugal forces coming out of my rejection of the social role that was given to me.

These types of experiences with teachers in high school taught me the social perception of what role I was “doomed” to play. It was difficult because I was trying to learn English, and I struggled against these oppressive centripetal forces. I looked at the voices of the ethnic group that best described my culture, in this case what I thought to be “Latinos.” I fought against those voices that were dominated by the mainstream idea of how Latinos “have” to behave. Some of the forms of assimilation that I tried to fight are the ideas that Latinos are illiterate, disease carriers, criminals, gangsters, drug dealers, and many other negative stereotypes that are portrayed in the mainstream U.S. It was difficult to accept, but I did not have any other choice. My only option was to assimilate to these voices; otherwise I was not going to learn English. But I did not like it. I was not all those things that they were saying about Latinos; neither did I want to be. I do not like to act in accordance with the social stigma that the media and other forces have created in relation to Latinos. It was hard because I wanted to continue developing my English, but the voices that were before me, portrayed by the dominant society, were not the best representations of my cultural values.

Institutions and Norms as a Shaping Force of the Self

The strength of the laws, values, and norms of a specific society, and how able they are to exclude outside forces, will determine how a language is conceived and changed within a territory.

According to Bakhtin, “stratification and heteroglossia, once realized, is not only a static invariant of linguistic life, but also what insures its dynamics: stratification and heteroglossia widen and deepen as long as language is alive and developing.” Moreover, he stresses that “alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward” (“Discourse in the Novel” 272). Other forces that added to my linguistic struggle were that when I was living in Mexico, where monolingualism is emphasized, I adapted myself to the social norms that were presented to me, and how these influenced the articulation of my thoughts through writing and discourse. Throughout my life in Mexico, I had many struggles; one of them was at the beginning of my early socialization—in the stage where I was acquiring the dominant language—I was taught to think and express myself in just one logical way. I had adapted to the norms of the “Mexican culture,” without taking into account any other form of self-expression. This emphasis on speaking one language is a form of institutional racism. Recently, here in the U.S. English-only laws have begun to be implemented. This monolingual emphasis, attaching its contextual emotions, comes out of the fear felt by the dominant ethnic group in this society. It can be argued that these laws are unconstitutional because according to the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, people have the right to freedom of expression. Such amendments are made to protect the rights of minorities. The multiple hegemonic orders reflected in myself clashed when I moved from one place to another.

English-only laws will add to the conflict that people have when learning another language, because the struggle is not only about learning to translate, but also learning to communicate emotions that you learned in other places. When speaking or listening to my native language, I not only listen to or hear the words that come from the mouths of others, but also I can feel the emotions that I have attached to my language—those emotions that have been created by us as a result of our practices. We have been able to put strong meanings to the words that we use to articulate our abstract thoughts and feelings. For instance, I feel very passionate when speaking in Spanish about how society has influenced my life, but if I do this in English my entire passion blows away; I do not feel connected to the language. This is because I do not understand the connotations or emotions in English words that people in the “English world” have learned to attach to them.

For example, I have learned a new set of values in my job with community organizing. In this job, we often use the word “justice” in our daily dialogue. This is similar to what happened to Min-Zhan Lu with her experience in switching from Chinese “red” to English “red” (437–48). She describes how one day she would be glorifying the red Chinese flag in school, and at home she would juxtapose the color red to her “love,” which, it can be said, was influenced by the sociopolitical sphere of the Cultural Revolution in China. In my experience with the word “justice,” I accustomed myself to use it in just one context, which is fighting for social justice. I have fallen into my own biases. If I use this word in Spanish I feel disconnected to the meaning that I have learned to attach to it in English, because of my experience with corrupt politicians using this word in Spanish. Similar to Lu, I have learned to give different meanings to a word when switching languages.

This becomes more complicated because when I speak in English I must use the set of values that I have learned through the attainment of this language. It is difficult because I have learned just “one” set of values, which is in the context of fighting for social justice, and this creates many biases, and sometimes I am not able to use this word in other contexts of the language. The issue does not end there: when I speak with Spanish-speaking people, I also do not feel connected to the things that

we say, because they have learned a different set of oppressive values throughout their linguistic assimilation.

Conclusion

Although this essay lacked more detailed examples of how my identity has changed since I immigrated to the U.S., it does serve as a foundation for a self-introspective analysis of how social forces, battling with individual internal struggles, influenced the way in which my utterances and the connotations that I attached to them become part of the shaping force of the self. It is difficult for me to grasp how this evolved throughout these years. However, a basic knowledge of colonial vestiges, current events, culture, politics, and society as a whole can give us a hint of how centripetal and centrifugal forces play a role in the psychological transformation of individuals within their own collectives.

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