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Language as Resistance: An Exploration of The Use and Implications of Spanish in Three Memoirs by Female Chicana Authors

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Introduction

Language is all around us. Communication is being facilitated constantly, through countless modes, and in ways we may or may not understand. The limitations of language present unique challenges, and many people speak at least one language besides their native one with some level of proficiency, either by choice or out of necessity. For people who speak different languages, the choice to use one over the other can come with certain considerations. It might feel like an unconscious decision for a bilingual person to slip between Spanish and English with a close friend, and it may feel more intentional to speak differently to a coworker than one would to a family member. When an author chooses to represent this exchange, often known as code-switching (CS), in narrative form, they have certain implications to consider and choices to make. They consider who their audience is, and what languages they expect their audience to understand. They might choose to, by their own volition or pressure from publishers, provide translations or a glossary of the secondary language, so that they can ensure that the audience, for the purposes of this exercise one that is English speaking, has uninterrupted access to the text. If they choose not to provide translations, do they trust that the audience can understand contextually what is happening, or do they simply risk ostracizing this demographic? They must also consider whether they are going to otherize the secondary language by italicizing or placing quotation marks around it. The use of code-switching or other language strategies often appears in memoirs by authors from language minority backgrounds. For this scope of this investigation, I will be exploring the function of these strategies in memoirs by Chicana female authors published in the last ten years. I will primarily be working with María Dolores Gonzales’s *Atop the Windmill: I Could See Forever* and will supplement my investigation with examples from memoirs by Cherríe Moraga and Sandra Cisneros. The presence of CS and other
forms of Spanish language in memoirs by Chicana female authors can be read as an act of political resistance and a reclamation of language and identity as a form of self-preservation.

**Note on Researcher Positionality**

*Chicano* is a term that is broadly used to refer to people of Mexican descent who were born in the United States. The conceptualization of this is complicated by the fact that many Chicanos live on land that once belonged to Mexico. The term has strong political connotations, as many people use it in rejection of Latino, Hispanic, or other titles, and to recognize indigenous heritage. According to some activists, “Chicano is more of an aggressive, proud and assertive political and cultural statement than Mexican American,” (Tezcatlipoca). This investigation will reference the work of three female authors who self-identify as Chicana. I have chosen to work with primary texts written by female authors in order to understand the intersection of race and gender and how it manifests in the use of language as resistance. Those who self-identify as Chicana may prefer its implication of intersectional identity, as “The word Chicana… simultaneously expresses a woman’s race and gender” (Garcia 232). I will adopt an intersectional approach throughout this analysis. Intersectionality is the concept that articulates that a person’s experiences are compounded by the different aspects of their identity, including (but not limited to) race, gender, class etc. Therefore, I will use the term Chicana throughout this work, unless another term, such as Latina, is more appropriate given the context. I identify as a white, cisgender, feminist woman, and I am pursuing degrees in English and Spanish. I do not share the identity this investigation is based on, and I recognize that my own internal biases and privileges will impact my analysis.

**Definitions**
Much of this analysis relates to the presence and use of code-switching in written, literary form. CS is generally defined by many linguists as “the alternate use of two or more languages in the same utterance” (Carvalho 139), however there are many ways to define the different manners in which it manifests. Code-switching can be inter-sentential or intra-sentential, in other words, changes that occur between sentences or within the same sentence. The latter can be interpreted as an indication of increased bilingual proficiency and comfort with both languages amongst users (144). In *Bilingual Speech: A Typology of Code-Mixing*, Pieter Muysken proposes a different, continuum model of CS and defines insertion, alternation, and congruent lexicalization as different forms of intra-sentential CS. Insertion could be interpreted as lexical borrowing, where a noun or phrase is inserted “into the given structure” (Muysken 3). Alternation implies a kind of “compatibility or equivalence” of the two languages (4). Congruent lexicalization involves the two languages adopting a shared grammatical structure. Muysken prefers the term “code-mixing” to CS, as he argues that the phenomenon is better defined as a mixture than a switch of codes. The setting and situational implications of a conversation may also impact what kind of code-switching is being used. Situational code-switching refers to language alternation or mixture depending on setting and metaphorical code-switching refers to “when the switch itself evokes a change in formality or topic” despite no apparent change in setting (Carvalho 147). All these distinctions are important factors in understanding the often-subconscious way in which code-switching happens conversationally, but authors must make a more conscious choice when determining how to represent code-switching in a written form.

For authors of memoirs, the consideration of authentically narrating and representing conversations might present unique challenges. Recent linguists are increasingly interested in the difference between literary and oral CS, and resist analyses that suggest written manifestations
are not of any significant linguistic pursuit. Weston and Gardner-Chloros suggest “one of the main reasons why literary CS has been ignored by linguists is its lack of spontaneity, and thus its presumed incompatibility with the sociolinguistic modus operandi” (203). Critics continue to ponder, “…whether or not, or at least to what extent, literary code-switching is “authentic,” that is, reflective of mimetic, of what is taking place in the “real world” of the bilingual Hispanic communities in the United States” (Dumitrescu 357). Gary Keller established the difference between the mimetic code-switching referenced in this example, and literary CS. By his definition, literary code-switching has “other goals of aesthetic nature,” whereas mimetic code-switching “tries to mirror society” (Keller, qtd in Dumitrescu 357). The socio-pragmatic functions of natural oral CS, first established by Gumperz, have been well documented and validated by further studies. These functions are widely accepted to be direct or indirect quotations, emphasis, clarification, or elaboration, focus or topic constructions, linguistic routines and/or idiomatic expression, and stylistic purposes (Montes-Alcalá). Other sociolinguists have sought to use this model to test the legitimacy of literary CS, by documenting the appearance of similar functions. Cecilia Montes-Alcalá redefined Gumperz’ functions as quotations, clarification, emphasis, lexical or cultural switches, and stylistic functions. The results of her analysis of fiction, theatre, and poetry written by bilingual Latino authors suggests that lexical or cultural switches were the most common manifestation of literary CS (Montes-Alcalá). She defines this function as “isolated switches that occur at the word level, mainly nouns, but may also encompass idioms, discourse markers, and linguistic routines, all of which can easily be inserted into the other language – usually inadvertently” (274). By this account, she also seems to disprove Keller’s suggestion that literary CS is purely of an aesthetic value, and rather that it follows practically the same considerations as Oral CS. Further studies also
support the suggestion that literary examples seem to authentically prescribe to the same understandable linguistic and grammatical conventions as oral forms. These studies largely refer to conversational literary CS, with little reference to narrative CS, that is, literary CS that could be functions as a retelling of a conversation versus the less conventional examples of CS in the narration. Gumperz suggested that CS is often triggered by quotations or reported speech but did not argue that this is always the case (Weston and Gardner-Chloros 200). This is a consideration that may warrant more attention from sociolinguists.

Often, Code-Switching is conflated with other terms, such as Spanglish, or related to the concept of “translanguaging.” While all these terms relate to the alternating use of two or more languages (in the context of this analysis, almost always English and Spanish), the terms have important contextual differences. In the simplest of terms, CS is one of many features of Spanglish. The conflation of these two forms is perhaps due to the fact that “one of the most noticeable features of Spanglish” is code-switching (Casielles-Suárez 152). Despite being perhaps the most salient example of Spanglish, CS only accounts for one of the linguistic phenomena that is at work. Casielles-Suárez argues that “Spanglish is in fact the result of the bilingual’s use of borrowings, calques, semantic extensions, nonce borrowings, and the skillful mixture of two grammars in cases of code-switching and code-mixing” (154). While some may use the terms interchangeably, CS is a distinct and legitimate separate entity. It is increasingly important for linguists, educators, and policymakers to understand and be able to define these terms correctly, as misrepresentation can have consequences in bilingual education and policy.

**The Politicization of Spanglish and CS in Education and Other Public Spheres**

It must also be noted that CS is as commonly used as it is misunderstood. In a day and age when language is incredibly politicized, code-switching is “frequently perceived by both
insiders and outsiders as indicative of disfluency or an inability to speak only one language at a time” (Carvalho 139). This is especially salient in academic English as a Second Language Classrooms, where instructors might misinterpret code-switching as defiance. Calls to speak English are flung at bilingual speakers in public spaces, especially as anti-immigration sentiment and policies persist internationally. Bilingual speakers of English and Spanish face pressure from both sides of the idiomatic spectrum, where “Monolingual speakers of Spanish from other Spanish-speaking countries like Argentina, Colombia, Mexico and Spain often criticize Latinos for not speaking so-called “pure” Spanish, but speaking Spanglish” (Casielles-Suárez 149). Code-switching, especially English-Spanish variations, might be directly influenced as a result.

As Martha Cutter argues in the chapter “Cultural Translation and Multilingualism in and out of Textual Worlds”:

> The tension between the official and the unofficial realms of language policy and usage animates many of the debates surrounding multilingualism in art, politics, and society, and that a zone of borderized, translated, transcoded, and transmigrated languages and ethnicities persists in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of, this tension” (Cutter 218)

By this account, CS often manifests as a reaction or result of language tension. Using English and Spanish in the same conversation could be interpreted as safer than just using Spanish in certain situations and political climates. For many authors, particularly those writing in the memoir or non-fiction form, code-switching can be a form of resisting and calling attention to this tension and language politicization.

New studies in bilingual education seek to understand the ways in which students’ first languages can be represented as a tool, rather than a roadblock. Gonzales’s memoir *Atop the Windmill*, explores her childhood experiences with educational language suppression, a reality
all too familiar for many bilingual children. Public perception of the legitimacy and merit of CS (and Spanglish) continues to impact educational policy and practice. For children like Gonzales, who grew up in 1950s New Mexico, speaking any language besides English in the classroom would result in punishment. Translanguaging is a new theory that takes the opposite approach, and instead “supports a heteroglossic language ideology, which views bilingualism as valuable in its own right” (MacSwan 168). Not only did Gonzales lose her ability to speak Spanish, the language that connected her to her family and community, but she also experienced feelings of shame and confusion about her cultural identity. Beyond language, translanguaging seeks to establish cultural respect and humility amongst educators, because “…the way teachers, researchers, and other view children’s language ability is important because it affects their views of what children know and of their families and communities and influences the treatment children are likely to receive in school” (MacSwan 170). Bilingual education in the United States has come a long way from nuns delivering corporal punishment for language transgressions, but the politicization and misperceptions of language alternation and bilingualism continue to threaten practices that will best serve bilingual children.

Historical Context

The Chicana feminist movement gained momentum during the 1970s, at a time when Chicana women felt excluded by movements for Chicano rights as well as the broader society. D. Letticia Galindo, a contemporary of María Dolores Gonzales, writes “As a collective entity, Chicana voices have historically been ignored, silenced, deprecated, and marginalized by both in-group (nuestra Raza) and out-group (Euro-Americans – both male and female) members across ethnic, class, and sexual orientation lines” (Galindo 175). Unable to find a place amongst white feminist causes or Chicano activism, Chicana activists established their own political
agenda. They challenged ideas of femininity and race and received criticisms from all fronts. White feminists rejected issues that Chicana feminists centered, including prison reform, labor rights, and racism. While Chicano activists advocated for many of the same issues, the importance of feminist identity and ideology “detracted from the Chicano movement’s real issues, such as racism” (Garcia 225). Chicana activists also rejected the reclamation of “machismo” as a tenet of Chicano identity. They argued that this idea of heightened masculinity was a tool of colonialism enforced to control Chicano men and that “distorted gender relations within Chicano communities, creating stereotypes of Chicanas as passive and docile women (222). While they saw the sexism within their communities as a product of colonialism and patriarchy, they still chose to hold the Chicano men who perpetrated this discrimination accountable, which contributed to fragmentation in the Chicano/Chicana causes.

While Chicana feminism was gaining momentum, academic fields followed suit. Sociolinguists became increasingly interested in studying the many variations of Spanish that manifested in the United States. It was during this time that Spanish-English code-switching was observed and studied at an academic level (Carvalho 140). While writing in both English and Spanish can be traced back to the Mexican American war (Montes-Alcalá), this practice gained momentum amongst Latino writers during the 1960s and 70s, directly correlating with an increase in political activism. Chicana feminists relied heavily on written expression to transmit their ideologies and agendas, and this manifested in the publication of countless essays, articles, journals, collections of poetry, novels and autobiographical stories or memoirs (Garcia 217). Linguists and literary critics have played close attention to the role of the Spanish language in these writings and analyzed the political implications of its use. In an essay on the works of Cherríe Moraga, Christine Cloud argues that while the movement of the political ethnic
autobiography may have begun with Chicano activists who failed to include Chicana feminists, “These obstacles did not block Chicanas from using autobiographical writing as a platform upon which to draft empowering new forms of collective identity” (Cloud 85). These memoirs and autobiographical writings centered themes of identity and oppression. Their objective was largely to “address the question of the politics of multiple identities from a position which seeks to integrate ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and language” (Torres, “The Construction of Self in U.S. Latina Autobiographies” 272). Language therefore became an integral part of the political messaging of Chicana feminists. Many authors and feminists had to grapple with reaching national audiences or staying authentic to their own experiences and values. María Dolores Gonzales, author of *Atop the Windmill: I Could See Forever*, remembers, “I was familiar with many literary works by Chicana writers from my generation who, in order to get published, had to choose between English and Spanish, and if Spanish was included in the text, a translation was mandatory” (Gonzales, *Chicana Voices* 5). When it came time to write her own memoir, Gonzales felt that “As a Chicana from the 70’s generation…I had to be genuine” (5). Gonzales’s dedication to genuineness reflects conclusions made in analyses of the genre, as Lourdes Torres argues “…Latina autobiographers do not create a monolithic self, but rather present the construction of the self as a member of multiple oppressed groups, whose political identity can never be divorced from her conditions (“The Construction of Self” 274). Language suppression played an integral role in Gonzales’s personal development, and those conditions informed her decisions when it came time to tell her story. Her choice to include English-Spanish code-switching, untranslated and undifferentiated in any way, reflects her personal politics and those of Chicana feminist activists who did not have the same liberties. The choice to self-publish her
memoir allowed her to be as genuine as desired, without having to bend to pressure from publishers or editors.

The Choice to Use Spanish

Each of the authors discussed in this analysis made intentional and political choices about how to best represent their bilingualism. They had to decide whether to provide translations, to use literary CS, or to use what might be considered a safer approach of loanwords and calques. Each choice suggests who the author perceived their audience to be, and what languages their audience could reasonably understand. It has been well determined that the Chicana autobiography is inherently a political work, and that authors have been known to reject language and literary norms. These authors, especially Gonzales, “insist on their right to use the language that best speaks to their experience, without having to translate for those who cannot or will not understand. Readers, then, especially English monolingual readers, are shaken from their linguistic complacency” (Torres, “The Construction of Self” 281). Both Gonzales and Moraga included brief explanations of their choice to use Spanish in the introductory materials of their autobiographical works. These explanations may leave monolingual readers feeling challenged or frustrated, but they are important moments where the authors reclaim the narrative and languages of their lives.

The research interests attributed to Gonzales in her biographical information directly align with themes from her own life that she discusses in her memoir. Among her research interests are “language and gender, New Mexico Spanish, politics of language and linguistic insecurity among Spanish heritage speakers” (“Chicana Voices” 7). As a sociolinguist, she is attuned to the implications of how Spanish is represented in literary form and has her own opinions on best practice. She would go as far as to say, “Choosing one language over the other
or having to translate was not acceptable to me” (5). She dedicates much of the introduction to her memoir on her choices surrounding language, and even addresses those who would prefer she provide translations or use less Spanish. She first acknowledges the discomfort; “To honor the storytellers in my life, their spirits and their voices appear in Spanish, English, or Spanglish. For some of you this may be disconcerting” (Gonzales, *Atop the Windmill* xi). In speaking directly to the audience, she is rejecting a tradition of conceding to the demands of publishers and editors to appease the monolingual reader. A memoir is one of the most personal forms of literary expression, and Gonzales’ insistence on using language how and when she chooses, rather than the way that may be most comfortable for audiences, reflects this. She continues, “I chose to continue to write from the heart, to allow the stories from my world to exist, to write in whichever language I prefer, and to feel pride for my mother tongue (New Mexican Spanish) and my authentic self” (xi). The emphasis on ideas of preference, pride, and authenticity demonstrates Gonzales’s unrelenting commitment to claiming her stories, and the language they appear in, as fully her own.

Cherríe Moraga is an iconic fixture of Chicana feminist theory, and her autobiographical work demonstrates her devotion to its tenets. Her memoir *Native Country of the Heart* details her complicated relationship with her Mexican American mother, and explores ideas of identity, gender, race, and language. Through code-switching and creative uses of mostly untranslated Spanish, Moraga intends for readers to challenge themselves, both in their understandings of language, but also in their understandings of Mexican American, or Chicana, identity. Moraga’s other more notable work *Loving in the War Years*, a collection of poems, essays, and stories, discusses similar themes, and references some of the stories she elaborates on later in *Native Country*. The first publication of the book in 1983 included a Spanish-English glossary, likely at
the insistence of her publisher, yet Moraga skillfully omitted certain words (Cutter). The subsequent edition included no glossary, which critics suggests is “asking the reader to do even more of the arduous work of translation,” (Cutter 203). Including a glossary at the end of the book, rather than providing in-text translations may be a creative political statement. The physical turning of pages means that Moraga “asks her readers to develop a radical bilingual practice of translation that moves back and forth between languages or produce (or “write”) the meanings of the text” (204). Moraga briefly addresses the use of language in Native Country in the Author’s Note. She writes, “On Language: The Spanish in this work emerged when the writing naturally evoked it. Not that much, but enough, I hope, for the reader to experience this writing as a Mexican American work” (Moraga 5). Her use of Spanish pays tribute to her mother, who felt pressured to assimilate and to minimize her ethnicity in order to give herself and her children what she thought would be an easier life.

**Justification of Literary Interpretations of CS**

An important consideration to make before beginning the literary analysis portion of this investigation is to discuss the tension between linguistic and literary readings of CS. As I have analyzed in “Definitions,” sociolinguists previously disregarded literary CS as an authentic representation, and instead referred to it as aesthetic (Keller), or denounced it as premeditated rather than spontaneous. Subsequent analyses (Montes-Alcalá, Weston and Gardner-Chloros) have argued that literary CS is a valid linguistic representation of CS, that follows most of the conventions and grammatical rules as Oral CS. What these studies do not center, is the merit of literary CS as a literary tool. Some studies include brief discussions of this, such as how Weston and Gardner-Chloros argue that “CS can even serve as a literary resource in its own right, conveying liminality or states of transition,” (209) but little other analysis is found amongst
sociolinguistics. The question becomes; can literary CS have an aesthetic value, that can be scrutinized using close reading and analysis of the author’s choices, that does not negate its linguistic authenticity? This tension is what makes studying the use of CS in autobiographies interesting. It is perhaps the goal of the author to represent real conversations and moments as accurately as they can, but without a photographic memory that effort might be futile. Additionally, the authors may be making intentional choices to “undermine linguistic norms by using a mixture of English, Spanish, and Spanglish” (Torres, “The Construction of the Self” 272). Therefore, the bilingual autobiographical non-fiction writer must make some of the same decisions as the bilingual fiction writer about how to represent both languages in their writing. It is my belief that an author can include authentic and linguistically sound examples of literary CS, while also making intentional aesthetic and political decisions through their use of language.

Throughout this literary analysis, I will be analyzing CS as an intentional choice of the author, while employing the linguistic strategies and definitions of Spanglish and CS. I will often discuss what form of literary CS is being used, as well as adopt a literary analysis to interpret the larger meaning behind the words. My hope is that, in doing so, I will be able to marry these two schools of thought, rather than put them into more tension.

**Examples in *Atop the Windmill: I Could See Forever***

The intersection of language and gender is a consistent theme throughout Gonzales’s memoir of her childhood, as well as in her research as a sociolinguist. Her autobiography and research detail her relationships with each of her parents but pays special attention to her relationship with her mother. The repetition of this theme across memoirs might suggest that there may be reason behind the term being “mother tongue” rather than “father tongue.” Gonzales suggests, “Seldom have studies focused on women’s language use. Since women have
historically been the guardians of language and culture (Zentella 1987), it would seem appropriate that studies focus on women’s linguistic behavior” (Gonzales, “Crossing Social and Cultural Borders” 13). Gonzales and her family moved between Mexico and New Mexico during her childhood, and both of her parents spoke to her in variations of Spanish, English, and Spanglish. However, her mother presents an anxiety about language that is not demonstrated by her father. Having grown up in poverty, her mother carries deep insecurities about public perception, and this manifests in her role as a mother as well as a schoolteacher who experiences hiring discrimination based on her ethnicity. She also code-switches between English and Spanish far more than her husband. When her daughters express anxiety about moving back to the United States from Mexico, and having to use English, she recounts her experiences with language as a child, telling them, “You girls are lucky. You speak Spanish and English. When your father and I started school, we didn’t know any English at all. To avoid getting hit with the ruler or standing in the corner with the dunce hat, we kept quiet. I felt so stupid. No entendía nada de inglés” (Gonzales, Atop the Windmill 42). In switching from English to Spanish intersententially in this conversation, her mother underscores to her daughters that they are competent and can speak both languages.

While her mother suggests that her father also struggled with English as a child, her father does not share the same insecurities. Gonzales writes, “My father learned English in grade school, spoke it most of his life without an accent, and then returned to Spanish, his mother tongue, in his old age” (66). Her father’s ability to speak unaccented English, as well as his ability to move between languages with greater ease, grants him certain privileges that her mother did not share. When they are crossing the border, the girls are warned to only speak English, and her father is responsible for speaking to the agents (44). Later, after Dolores (as she
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refers to herself in the memoir) begins class at her New Mexican school and faces similar punishments as her parents would have, her mother is the one who tries to console her anxieties. Gonzales recounts the scene, in which her mother has asked her to run an errand for her grandfather, “I don’t want to go, Mama. I can’t speak Spanish.” With a puzzled look on her face, she replied, “Ay m’ija, claro que hablas español!” (63). Just as her mother reassures her, it is clear that Dolores does still understand Spanish, but the threat of punishment has created a mental block she struggles to overcome.

The discrepancy in language abilities between the men and women in Gonzales’s life also has generational implications. While her grandparents always exclusively use Spanish to communicate with their families, her grandfathers and uncles had more access to opportunities that supported (or required) English language acquisition. For Dolores, her relationship with her grandparents serves as an incentive to preserve her Spanish language skills. Of her many cousins and sisters, she is told “You’re his favorite nieta,” my mother told me. ‘It’s because you speak Spanish, y los otros nietos solo hablan inglés con él’” (49). This use of alternation demonstrates Dolores’s bilingual competency. Her ability to understand both languages easily, allows her mother to communicate effectively in either. Gonzales also creates an interesting juxtaposition by having her mother use the English word “Spanish,” and the Spanish word “inglés” when discussing the opposite language. This could be an example of what is referred to as Metaphorical CS (Carvalho), and the use of opposing languages to refer to the language itself evokes a change in formality, therefore creating an interesting tension.

The chapter “Bolitas de Lana” is the first occurrence in the memoir in which the narration, and not just the dialogue, begins in and is sustained in Spanish. The story discusses her relationship with one of her grandmothers, and her memories associated with her grandparents
have a more salient connection with Spanish than English. The chapter begins, “Ay! Cómo me gustaba despertarme temprano y ver los rayos del sol entrar por la ventana” (53). This sustained use of Spanish is an example of what Lourdes Torres has dubbed “radical bilingualism,” in which an author makes the deliberate choice to write in a way that can only be understood by a bilingual audience (Torres 86). The bilingual New Mexican town in which her family has settled encouraged men of the older generations to learn English, whereas “the Mexicanas, like my grandmothers, understood some English, but as far as speaking it…they primarily spoke Spanish. Rather than interacting con los americanos, reference made to white folks, or learning English, we grandchildren were responsible for running errands for our abuelitas” (97). While older Mexicana women were relegated to the home without these language skills, the men learned English through education, serving in the military, or through interacting with the English speakers in order to do business.

Gonzales’s exploration of identity in her memoir also extends to what it means to be Mexican, or Mexicano, or Chicano, and how society’s perceptions of identity might influence self-identification. In one of the stories in the memoir, she recounts visiting town with her father. An English-speaking acquaintance of her father refers to him as a “Mexican,” which Dolores cannot understand. In her mind, Mexican had a negative connotation, as the only times she heard it were usually pejorative. Instead, she interpreted “Mexicano” to be positive, as she heard her family members self-identify as such, and creates an association of pride rather than shame. Her father explains to her, “Los Americanos call us Spanish because we speak Spanish, but they don’t know better. Acuérdate m’ija, your ancestors are Mexicanos, Indios, and Spanish” (99). This quote is an example of congruent lexicalization, but it could almost have easily been identified as insertion, had her father used “Españoles” instead of “Spanish” for the last word.
The concept of diglossia may account for this, a phenomenon in which “certain languages perform H(igh) functions such as literary expression, scientific enquiry, government administration and religious worship, and other languages L(ow) functions such as trade and speaking to friends and family” (Weston and Gardner-Chloros 203). The H and L languages can be created based on conceptions of colonialism and power. Even though people from Spain speak Spanish, her father chooses to use the Spanish words for Mexican and Indigenous and the English version of “Spanish.” In their current reality, English is the H language, and it might have felt more appropriate to refer to the colonizer in the H language and the colonized in the L.

In the scope of the memoir, her father uses code-switching significantly less than her mother or grandparents do. The context of this conversation warrants his use of code-switching. Using Spanish in this way supplements the importance of this discussion of identity. According to Torres, this is common amongst Latino authors, because “their language represents a culturally specific Latinidad – they use Spanish to reference their particular histories, experiences, demographic realities, and ways of being Latino/a” (Torres 79). It is fitting then, that her father chooses this conversation about identity and ethnicity to code-switch English-Spanish.

The language suppression Gonzales experienced through her Catholic education demonstrated some of the issues that feminists of that time were fighting against. Hearing only English at school and facing punishment for speaking the language of her parents and grandparents left her confused and unsure of her identity. She recounts, “After watching other Spanish-speaking children get disciplined, I buried, deep within me, the language that connected me to Abuelito; I started speaking only in English at home. I refused to speak Spanish” (62). Her colleague D. Letticia Galindo reinforces this phenomenon in her chapter “Caló and Taboo Language Use Among Chicanas.” Galindo demonstrates the dizzying consequences of language
regulation on bilingual speakers, arguing “Educational institutions coerced us to make lifelong
linguistic choices either retain Spanish and acquire English or lose Spanish and acquire English”
(Galindo 175). Gonzales’s childhood moving between Mexico and New Mexico, her desire to
connect with the older generations and women in her family, and the forces of nationality and
religion that regulated language use all created a cacophony of forces impacting when and how
she could speak. While the memoirs of the 70s and 80s discussed issues and testimonies of
gender, racism, and language, Gonzales contests that similar issues continue to persist. Her
advocacy for bilingual institutions and freedom extends beyond Chicanas. She writes in her
tribute to Galindo, “Today in the times of Covid-19, the Black Lives Matter Movement has
exposed the reality of how those hegemonic forces from the 1950s continue to silence, exclude,
and disempower Brown, Black and Indigenous women’s voices within society as well as
academia” (Gonzales, Chicana Voices 5). Gonzales’s own experience with language suppression
and regulation informs her activism and advocacy for women who may find their voices and
language being discredited today. Her memoir, published in 2020, serves as a beacon for
women’s rights to language, and bilingualism as an act of political resistance.

Examples in Native Country of the Heart and other works by Cherrie Moraga

Cherrie Moraga’s autobiographical work offers a deeply personal glimpse into the
author’s complicated relationship with her Mexican American mother, and crafts bold arguments
on the role of gender and language in Chicano families. Born Elvira Isabel Moraga, her mother
anglicized her name to Vera, and “refused to teach her [Cherrie] and her siblings Spanish in hope
that they would become less affiliated with their ethnicity” (Cloud 87). Cherrie’s father, a white
man, exclusively would refer to his wife as Vera. Despite her efforts to anglicize herself and her
children, Elvira was still undoubtedly Mexicana, and her daughter’s memoir masterfully plays
with the Elvira-Vera dichotomy, exploring the implications of both sides of her mother’s identity. She poetically writes of her mother’s strength, “La fuerza de Elvira. I cast the character of my mother in Spanish because all that I understand as strong, as capable, as having principled values, resides first in the one-hundred-pound mestiza body of my mother” (Moraga 51). She masterfully explains her choice to use Spanish while providing a convincing character analysis of her mother.

While Elvira encouraged her children to embrace their whiteness, in the hope that their lives would be easier than hers had been, her daughters, especially Cherríe, took after their mother. Born Cecilia Lawrence, Cherrie changed her name and adopted her mother’s maiden name to reclaim a heritage she felt had not been afforded to her (Cloud). Moraga’s brother, James, was treated by their mother with a more conservative Chicano approach to gender, as has since been rejected by Chicana feminists such as Moraga. Even so, her brother married a white woman and moved away from the family, much to the distress of his mother who revered him as the only and eldest son. Moraga discusses the impact that her mother’s unequal treatment of her children had, and how it is a systemic issue rather than one unique to her family:

> The amazing efficacy of patriarchy is that it is a covert operation. It is entre nos, just between us—man and woman, sister and brother, father and daughter, queer and not so queer. It takes place behind closed doors, inside la hacienda and back there in the slave quarters. It is so seamlessly woven into the fiber of our lives that to pull at that dangling thread of inequity is to rip open an entire life” (Moraga 223)

The use of intra-sentential insertion (“It is entre nos” “Inside la hacienda”) in this passage serves to identify the issue as one relating to their Chicano heritage, and to make clear that Elvira
prescribed to the ideas of machismo and patriarchy that had been used as a tool of colonialism against Chicanos and Latinos.

Elvira treated her daughters much differently than her son. Whereas her son was placed on a pedestal, her daughters were the subjects of her occasional anger. In a story about her sister, Moraga recounts how her mother beats her sister with a wooden hairbrush after she hears her complaining: “Elvira can hear her eldest daughter through the bathroom vent complaining como si fuera una reina, like money grows on trees” (72). Her daughter’s complaints trigger Elvira, and “it is the moment our menopausal mother has been waiting for – a reason, any reason, really, to explode from the bathroom and let la ingrata have it” (72). Referring to her daughter as “la ingrata,” or “the ungrateful girl,” (even if just in her other daughter’s interpretation of the event and not out loud) directly relates to the strategy discussed by Galindo and Anzaldúa of assigning women a pejorative or “derogatory” label. Just as Elvira uses “ingrata” to condemn her daughter, “this strategy originates within the infrastructure of la familia and extends to la vencidad and la comunidad” (Galindo 175). Using the examples of malcriada, chismosa, and malhablada, Galindo iterates that the effectiveness of this strategy, one that is used most often by the Chicana women and communities around the girl, is to ensure that Chicana girls will not step out of line. Rather, “the profile of a traditionally raised Chicana shows her to be prudent in her use of language (don’t use it to whine, complain, question, gossip, lie, etc.); it shows her to be cognizant of the social and cultural norms of language use based on age, gender, and social class and to speak accordingly” (176). Elvira’s own upbringing and challenges had taught her society’s expectations of how a Chicana girl must comport herself, and using this Spanish-language strategy, she takes it upon herself to discipline her child. Despite her disproportionate
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treatment of her children, when Elvira is elderly and suffering from dementia, the burden of care inevitably falls on her daughters, and her son is largely absent.

**Examples in *A House of My Own* by Sandra Cisneros**

I do not intend to present Cisneros’s memoir as “lesser” than the other texts in this analysis. Rather, I mean to compare the texts in terms of their use of more political presentations and uses of language. Cisneros is a well-regarded titan of the Chicana literary canon, yet her fictional work tends to play with language more-so than her more autobiographical work does. In Cisneros’s *Caramelo*, there are “instances of ‘calques,’ which are creative English renditions of Spanish words and phrases translated literally or figuratively” (Torres 78). The names of her characters “are translations of common Spanish names; for example, “Aunty White-Skin” is recognizable to the bilingual as Titi Blanca” (78). Calques, along with CS, are amongst the linguistic components defined by Casielles-Suárez that make up Spanglish. These whimsical translations and wordplays add a deeper layer to the text for the bilingual reader, whereas the uninformed monolingual English reader might be left somewhat confused, but not enough to question Cisneros’s strong narrative style.

Cisneros utilizes what Torres refers to as “the most common strategy used by Latino/a prose writers published by mainstream presses” (77) which is to only include Spanish “loanwords” that are easily identifiable to English audiences, either through the context or through cultural familiarity. Cisneros relies more on context than familiarity in *A House of My Own*. The chapter “Huipiles” discusses a trip to Mexico, and includes contextually appropriate Spanish words and phrases, which present as italicized and are usually followed by translations. She writes, “In Chiapas, homes are heated with wood, and their inhabitants smell of *leña*, fire and smoke” (76). *Leña* is the word for firewood, and non-Spanish speakers could probably
deduce that from the context of the description. Later, Cisneros writes, “Some still gave off a scent of leña” (78). In not repeating a translation or providing clear contextual definition, Cisneros relies on her audience to have remembered the word, and to have added it to their vocabulary. Different critics have different interpretations over the effectiveness of this strategy in the ethnic autobiographical genre. Some might argue that “From this perspective, cushioning Spanish in this way may allow the reader to sense that they s/he is entering the linguistic world of bilingual latino/as without having to make any effort” (Torres 81). The monolingual reader may relish that they have gained a new Spanish vocabulary word, but it does not change the fact that the author gave it to them with no discernable effort on their part, other than their choice to pick up the book. Conversely, other linguists would argue that the use of loanwords has legitimate merit and serve a purpose in familiarizing audiences with words that they are encouraged to adopt into everyday vernacular. They would argue that loanwords “are of interest to sociolinguists as they distil the cultural motivation for what is often considered one of the commonest forms of CS. Loans are by no means an uncomplicated, discrete category” (Weston and Gardner-Chloros 197). The use of loanwords, as opposed to strategies such as alternation or congruent lexicalization (Muysken), provokes relevant questions about efficacy and authenticity.

Some linguists would argue that Cisneros is not in fact code-switching in her memoir, but rather utilizing a different linguistic strategy. Linguists disagree on the difference between CS and lexical borrowing, which can present as “the intrusion of a single word from another language” (Carvalho 142), whereas CS is more widely accepted to be a relatively mutual alternation. Lexical borrowing may be the Latina or Chicana author’s answer to the tension between how “a writer’s linguistic choice can be a political act, but it also speaks to the reality of the marketplace” (Torres 77). The title of the memoir, A House of My Own, harkens to rhetoric
used by Chicana feminists in the 70s and 80s, in addition to the more obvious reference to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Garcia writes of these feminists, “they entered into a dialogue with each other that explicitly reflected their struggles to secure a room of their own within the Chicano movement” (Garcia 219). Cisneros’s memoir is not necessarily unpolitical due to her less radical use of Spanish linguistic strategies, but rather reflects the realities of social pressures placed on Chicana writers from editors and publishers.

**Conclusion**

Code-switching and other uses of Spanglish have been long misunderstood, regulated, and censored. Educational policy and literary publishing practices both have a long history of discouraging bilinguals from utilizing tools from both of their languages. While CS has been relatively accepted as a legitimate, spontaneous linguistic phenomena, sociolinguists have disagreed on the authenticity of literary CS as linguistically sound, rather than purely aesthetic or mimetic. Some sociolinguists have dedicated research to disproving this, and there is a growing consensus that literary CS follows most of the same conventions as its oral counterpart. However, choosing to analyze literary CS through a literary analysis might seem to contradict this research. Appreciating literary CS for both its linguistic and aesthetic importance to the text can provide readers with a greater appreciation for the text and the author’s choices towards language.

The memoir itself is a deeply personal form of literature, that offers readers a view into stories from the author’s life. Chicano and Chicana activists discovered that this style of writing, referred to as ethnic autobiographical style, could be used to transmit political and feminist ideologies. They faced pushback from editors and publishers, who barred publication of texts that featured Spanish code-switching or passages that remained untranslated or unclear from
context. Authors included translations and glossaries or omitted Spanish all together. For author and sociolinguist María Dolores Gonzales, this was unacceptable. Her self-published memoir, *Atop the Windmill: I Could See Forever*, features English-Spanish code-switching and passages of sustained Spanish without translations. This radical literary choice directly contradicts the linguistic discrimination and regulation she experienced as a child in New Mexico. Recent memoirs by Cherríe Moraga and Sandra Cisneros supplement Gonzales’s text and demonstrate the unique nature of her memoir. All three texts indicate that Chicana authors may face less pressure from editors than their predecessors, yet Gonzales’s choice to self-publish opens a new pathway for authors who do find themselves facing criticism for choosing to represent their identity and stories from a point of authenticity, using Spanish language unabashedly.
Works Cited


