Codeswitching in Picturebooks and the Representation of Spanish-Speaking Cultures: A Reader Response Approach

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As the mother of two bilingual children who switch between Portuguese and English languages regularly and as a junior scholar in language and literacy, I have examined instances of codeswitching in children's literature for several years. Auer (1999b) describes codeswitching as the strategic alternation of linguistic codes used by bilingual speakers to convey meaning. The building blocks that brought me to my study include a review of the scholarly literature on codeswitching as well as on linguistic characteristics of children's books.

Prior to this study, I did a content analysis of cultural representation through codeswitching in children's literature. For the content analysis, I selected four books recommended by the library of a state university in a large metropolitan city in the southeast of the United States. During the National Hispanic Heritage Month in 2017, the library had children's books on display by the main entrance. The selected picture books, written by Spanish-speaking female writers, contained instances of code-switching and representations of Latin American cultures. However, I realized that my study lacked the perspective of Spanish-speaking readers. Although I am a bilingual educator, I have an outsider's perspective examining cultural representation of Spanish-English bilinguals and their cultures in children's literature. The rationale for me to choose English-Spanish bilingual books over English-Portuguese books lies in the prevalence of Spanish as the second most spoken language in U.S. public schools, where English is the dominant language.

With this article, I present a small portion of a larger study where I investigated instances of codeswitching in two of the four books from a reader response perspective (Rosenblatt, 1982). The article focuses on the opinion of one participant, a bilingual Spanish-English teacher and mother of three who grew up in the Midwest during the 1980s. I sought Kay's (pseudonym) opinion about the codeswitching in an attempt to investigate whether the multilingual choices in the picturebooks are representative of the culture of bilingual Spanish-speaking readers. I use Reader Response Theory and critical theory for this study from the position of a scholar trying to fill the gaps left by my initial analysis of the texts.

Multicultural Children's Literature and Some of Their Challenges

Nodelman (2008) characterizes children's literature as a rich and complex "body of literary texts labeled as intended for an audience of children" (p. 138). Describing that complexity, he highlights the ideally didactic aim of adult writers as a critical characteristic disguised in the tendency of books "to see things from the viewpoint of innocence — as children theoretically see them" (p. 135). Despite age appropriate varieties in language density, recurring features, and topic complexity, it is impossible to disregard the ideologies of the adult writer when analyzing children's literature. Within the scholarship of children's literature, Latinx-American picturebooks have particular characteristics.

Since the 1980s, the growth in the Spanish speaking population in U.S. public schools has
prompted publishers to improve the literature selection "in the quality and quantity of books
for and about Latino children" (Schon, 1995, p. 393). Schon lists some of the popular books
published from the mid-1970s to the early 1990s that depict the sensibilities and complexities
of characters from various Spanish-speaking countries of Latin-America (e.g. Mexico, Puerto
Rico, Argentina, and Venezuela). Her list includes stories set in Latin American countries as
well as in the U.S. which reflect the various experiences of Spanish-speaking readers. More
recent statistics show that since 2015, the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC) at the
University of Wisconsin-Madison has received 446 books written by Spanish-speaking authors
and 680 books about Latin American cultures (CCBC, 2019). However, this growth brings its
own challenges, such as the laws limiting access to bilingual education in several U.S. states
(Schon, 1995).

Morales (2003) addresses the issues of linguistic varieties and language ideologies that
publishers must consider in their selections that represent Spanish speakers. In his data
collection from several publishers and specialists, Morales found some of the key questions
they must answer before publishing a book with a Spanish-speaking community in mind. The
issues include: (1) the preferences between translated and original titles — literal translations
may maintain the main ideas but often lose the nuances of the text such as rhymes and
linguistic authenticity; (2) the linguistic standards and preferences of educators — Spaniards
have often set the standards, but that does not represent the various cultures of Latin America;
(3) the Spanish variety of choice and the prejudice against certain varieties; (4) the intended
audience — Spanish speakers born in the U.S. or those born in one of the dozens of Spanish-
dominant countries; (5) the terminology used to describe the audience — Hispanic, Latino,
Spanish-English bilinguals, or Spanish-speakers; (6) the commodification of Latinx cultures
and the demands of the market; (7) the differences and preferences between bilingual and dual-
language editions; (8) the interests of adult versus child readers; (9) political and economic
controversies within the Latinx community; (10) the schools' budgetary constraints and cost-
effective choices; (11) the indisputable need of some kind of standard Spanish variety including
syntax, grammar, and vocabulary; and (12) the wide heterogeneity of Spanish-speaking cultures.

The issues of language choice and cultural representation abound in global and multicultural
children's literature, and they complicate the choice of books that appropriately represent
Spanish-speaking communities. The use of Spanish words within some English-dominant
picturebooks may reproduce a stereotyped image of Spanish speakers based on cultural bias
and the commodification of Spanish-speaking cultures (Martínez-Roldán, 2013, 2017). Chappell
and Faltis (2007) analyze the ideologies embedded in multilingual books where Spanish words
are added as an effect to English texts. During my content analysis of the children's books for
this study, this theme of authenticity and cultural representation through codeswitching kept
arising.

Codeswitching in the Research Literature

Conversational codeswitching between English and Spanish was initially described in the
literature in the early 1970s (Gumperz & Hernandez-Chavez, 1971). The understanding of

codeswitching has evolved in scholarly fields, such as sociology, anthropology, linguistics, education, neurosciences, communication sciences, and psychology. Twenty-five years later, Nicoladis and Genesee (1996) explained that the early research on bilingualism assumed monolinguals as the norm and bilinguals as the users of two separate linguistic codes and competencies. Such assumptions led to the misconception that code-switching was triggered by carelessness, interference, or lack of ability to differentiate the two languages. The most often used definition of codeswitching, especially as supported by linguists, refers to the use of two or more divergent linguistic codes during one same conversation (MacSwan, 2004).

More recent research shows that codeswitching embodies complex sociocultural functions. Bhatt and Bolonyai (2011) have identified 130 different functions of codeswitching described in the literature. Their analysis includes textual codeswitching as opposed to conversational codeswitching, and they explain that in both cases it establishes the speaker's position in society according to sociocultural circumstances. MacSwan (2004) identifies ill-formed (ineffective) and well-formed instances of code-switching and proposes two main classifications of well-formed codeswitching: intra-sentential and inter-sentential codeswitching. Both types occur in the selected texts as I include in the methods section. In the analysis of several types and functions of codeswitching, Auer (1999a) states that the right language is that which offers the best possibility for interaction as perceived by multilingual interlocutors. In my conversation with the reader-informant, I investigated if the codeswitching present in the picturebooks reproduces that possibility in accordance with bilingual English-Spanish cultures.

The Critical Role of the Reader

Louise Rosenblatt (1982, 1995) defines reading as a transactional process between the text and the readers. Based on her reader response theory, the full meaning of the text is constructed through the reader's interpretation of the text, which is specific to the time and socio-cultural context when the reading occurs (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 295). In this study, I use critical multicultural theory as the scholarly approach to examine how a bilingual reader responds to codeswitching and cultural representation in two bilingual picturebooks. Critical multicultural theory examines the power dynamics, sociocultural authenticity, historical accuracy, and sociopolitical contexts expressed in children's literature (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). I observe the reader's response attentive to instances of those elements of critical multicultural theory. They serve to inform the academic community of critical language representations and cultural authenticity used in multicultural children's literature (Johnson & Gasiewicz, 2017).

Research Methodology

For this study, I selected two books intended for an audience of children between ages 3 and 8 years and written by the award-winning Cuban-American author Meg Medina: Tía Isa Wants a Car (Medina & Muñoz, 2011) and Mango, Abuela, and Me (Medina & Dominguez, 2015). The author's relationship with the culture depicted in the text as well as the assumed audience may affect the authenticity of the cultural representation in picture books (Johnson & Gasiewicz, 2017). Both selected books have Spanish editions published in the U.S. However, for the purpose of this study, I have used the English-dominant editions which present instances of English-Spanish codeswitching.

When a language other than English is used in multicultural texts published in the U.S., those words are often surrounded by contextual clues that clarify the meaning for the majority English readers. This characteristic speaks to the issues of authenticity of the multicultural representation (Johnson & Gasiewicz, 2017). The occurrence of Spanish words is sparse in the two selected picturebooks. Here are some examples of codeswitching coding in the texts:

(1) Inter-sentential codeswitching: at the beginning or at the end of sentences
1.a. She leaves two pink lip marks on my forehead from her **besíto**. (Medina & Muñoz, 2011)
1.b. **Mi español** gets faster and Abuela and Mango learn the days of the week. (Medina & Dominguez, 2015)

(2) Intra-sentential codeswitching: in the middle of sentences
2.a. Help me stack those oranges nice and pretty, **niña,** and I'll pay you. (Medina & Muñoz, 2011)
2.b. I tell her about my **buen día** and show her my best **pintura** of Mango. (Medina & Dominguez, 2015)

The original project had five participants, and three were interviewed, but this article tells the perspective of only one participant. Kay and I have been friends for several years, which made for a smooth conversation about the books. I chose to tell Kay's story because she has the most multicultural lived experience among the other participants. She was born in Wisconsin to her Ecuadorian mother and American father. When she was 11, her Ecuadorian grandmother came to live with her family. She grew up bilingual, and upon high-school graduation, she decided to move to Florida to develop her connection with Spanish-speaking communities. She is married to her Argentinian husband, and they have three young children, who speak only Spanish at home and are exposed to English in other social contexts. Kay currently lives in a large city of the southeastern United States where she teaches in a dual-language immersion program at a private school. I sent Kay electronic copies of the two books. After a week, our conversation about the books happened in English through Skype web-conferencing (because we reside in different states).

Key Themes Related to the Picturebooks

"It makes for a nice story, but maybe it is not realistic."

Eleven themes emerged in the conversation with Kay. In alphabetical order, the themes address the book characters, codeswitching, critical multicultural analysis, cultural representation, differences between the books, family history, gender, home-language use, personal connections with the stories, social interactions, and Spanish language varieties.

Kay drew personal connections with the texts. Excerpt 1 shows her response to the storylines.

> *Excerpt 1* – about *Mango, Abuela, and Me:* "Obviously I made a lot of connections with that one, thinking of my grandma. I could relate to trying to communicate. I remember my grandma sitting down and telling us, el tenedor. She had a really big strong personality and she was going to make sure that we spoke Spanish. When the grandma [in the book] first arrived, she was kind of a stranger to [the child narrator] and not only did they not know each other but they didn't know how to connect with one another, and just kinda growing up and growing that relationship, and grandma developing a connection with her granddaughter. I think that was very realistic. I can really connect, you know?"

The excerpt shows the relevance of the texts for the reader. Kay considered the two stories "cute," and said she would read them with her children as well as her students. The narratives seem authentic and relevant to her. However, she did not connect to the two stories at the same level. She could not directly connect with Tia Isa's story because it took place in an urban setting, while she grew up in a rural Midwest setting. From a reader response perspective (Rosenblatt, 1995), this is indicative of the transaction between the reader and the text.

When asked more specifically about the codeswitching, Kay pointed out a significant difference between her experience and that presented in Mango, Abuela and Me. She stated that the grandmother switching from Spanish to English "makes for a nice story, but maybe it is not realistic," and added, "I do know quite a bit of families where that's not really the case." This essential observation shows the misleading representation of codeswitching in the voice of a relative who arrives in the U.S. at an older age. The codeswitching in Kay's case is not as common as depicted in the picturebook, which speaks to issues of sociocultural authenticity. In excerpt 2, she explains how codeswitching typically happens in her bilingual household:

> *Excerpt 2* – I think, especially with [the younger children], if they are talking about school, they have their vocabulary that they learned at school. When they play school, they play in English … It sounds more natural for them. But if they are hurt and crying, they go straight to Spanish. For me, it speaks larger to their heart, so it's partly the context. It is one of the things, thinking about the Tia Isa Wants a Car, and maybe that more urban environment where you're going to have more of a community... that's just a natural way for things to happen. I think [the codeswitching within the bilingual communities] is very authentic.

Here, I noticed that Kay did not mention the insertion of random single words within English-dominant sentences. Rather, she describes what seems a complete shift from one language to the other as functional for socio-cultural purposes within her family.

As for the dominant cultural values, excerpt 3 shows Kay's interpretation of the occurrences of Spanish words in the two books. She deepens the discussion of cultural representation and addresses the plethora of cultural backgrounds of Spanish speakers in the U.S.

> *Excerpt 3* – [initially about *Tia Isa Wants a Car*, but extended to multicultural books in general] "Each book is one cultural perspective, right? And that's just true of any book, but we need to remember that...no matter what, you are part of a mix of the cultures that you bring. You know, to me sometimes, when I look at children's literature with Spanish, I'll find it hard to find things that represent a wide range of experiences. For example, like I said, my mom was the only Spanish speaker in the county for a really long time. I come from dairy farm country, and most of the dairy farms in the area now are all run by people mainly from Central America and Mexico, so there's a huge [Spanish speaking] population now. There are a lot of kids growing up in dairy farms in the Midwest now, who have a different cultural experience [than mine]. They also can't relate to a book written in the Bronx, for example."

Considering that Kay believes that each book contains one cultural perspective, it is understandable why she explained that the codeswitching as depicted in the books did not represent her personal experience. Because she lived in a rural community and her mother was the only Spanish speaker in the county at that time, she did not live within an extended bilingual community. Kay either spoke Spanish only to her relatives, or she spoke English only to everyone else. That is to say, other readers who live in extended bilingual communities might relate to the use of Spanish in these English texts. Nowadays, children in that same area live a very different linguistic and multicultural experience. Because of Kay's perception that each picturebook can only capture one culture representation at a time, she questions which culture will be more strongly represented (Botelho & Rudman, 2009). That representation can be subtle sometimes, but we must examine it critically.

Botelho, Young, and Nappi (2014) explain that teachers "must consider who is represented, underrepresented, misrepresented, and invisible" in the books they select for their classrooms (p. 42). Kay examined, for example, the choice of words in the Spanish language insertions. Her observation speaks to the matters of hegemony among Spanish varieties, which must be taken into account carefully by children's authors and publishers as well as by teachers. Anecdotally, she exemplifies in excerpt 4 how difficult it is for her to find books that will depict accurately the wide range of linguistic backgrounds of all her students. In order to represent a variety of cultures through codeswitching, the publishers of children's books must take into consideration that words are used differently in each of the nineteen Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. Any individual book that depicts bilingual or monolingual Spanish-speaking communities will not represent all children who speak Spanish.

Excerpt 4 – "I was talking to my teaching assistant the other day, and she's from Puerto Rico. Puerto Ricans mix a lot. They go back and forth. They use a lot of Spanglish, and they have a lot of [English] words that they have incorporated into Spanish. She asked my class if they wanted [inaudible] and I said, 'I have no idea what you're saying to me,' and finally it occurred to me that she was saying popcorn. And, I said, 'we use a different word for that. We say **canguil.** That's our word for popcorn.' There is a lot of that in Puerto Rico, where they will take an English word and they pronounce it differently.

Me: In which country [do you say **canguil**]?

Kay: In Ecuador.

Me: Is it the same in Argentina?

Kay: No. He [her husband] calls it **pochoclo. Y en Mexico** they call it **palomitas.**

In the short excerpt, Kay mentions Spanish language variations in four different countries (Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Argentina, and Mexico). That, again, points to the multicultural challenge of selecting the contextually accurate variety of Spanish language for codeswitching in children's books.

Implications

I looked at the English-Spanish codeswitching in picturebooks from a reader response perspective, investigating whether it is used as a form of cultural representation. Morales (2003) explains the issues of cultural authenticity in the storylines as well as in the choices of words in bilingual books, which can be challenging for the representation of codeswitching. There is a wide range of cultural backgrounds, linguistic experiences, and linguistic varieties among bilingual English-Spanish children. As Kay stated, teachers must be aware that each book depicts only one reality which may or may not be equivalent to students' experiences.

It is very important to notice that the insertion of Spanish words in an English text, in the way it is done in the two books analyzed here, is often not intended for a Spanish-speaking population (Botelho & Rudman, 2009; Johnson & Gasiewicz, 2017). As I have illustrated in this article and in my larger study, the Spanish-English codeswitching in the books I used in the study has a didactic function (Nodelman, 2008) for U.S. English-dominant readers to get a small sampling of Spanish rather than actually representing Spanish speakers.

Listening to the considerations of the reader was eye opening to me as I realized that, being an outsider to many U.S. Spanish-speaking communities, I had a partial understanding of the codeswitching I found in the books. I initially thought that the codeswitching in the two children's books represented the actual language use of Spanish-English bilingual children. Now I realize that, although bilingual children do alternate codes in their communication, the instances of codeswitching in the literature may not be authentic to the codeswitching

functions in bilingual communities. Having a cultural insider can inform educators and scholars about the actual critical multicultural representations in the books. Morales (2003) recounts the experience of a publisher in regards to a book about the Mexican Day of the Dead, which was written by a transnational Colombian author. Because the author was Colombian and the editor Cuban, she requested the book be edited by a Mexican editor to ensure the authenticity of the cultural representations. This is the approach that educators should take, if possible, when selecting books that represent Spanish speaking communities.

In the case of this study, Kay is my cultural-insider informant. Although she is not of Cuban origin like the author of the selected books (Meg Medina), she comes from a bilingual upbringing with her Ecuadoran mother and grandmother, she is married to an Argentinian man, and she raises her children bilingually in the U.S. (similarly to the children in the books). Kay has also taught in bilingual programs for over a decade, which immerses her into the diversity of Spanish-speaking families. Kay is aware of the cultural heterogeneity and the nuances of the Spanish language in various regions. As Morales (2003) discusses, the research informant in this study is critical about not only the issues of culturally relevant storylines but also the culturally accurate linguistic choices in the books which contain hints of codeswitching.

Chappell and Faltis (2007) argue that educators must examine critically the constructions of bilingualism in picturebooks, knowing that not all the uses of words in a foreign language, Spanish in this particular case, are representative of linguistically diverse students.

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