

## Spanglish, Bilingualism, Culture and Identity in Latino Children's Literature

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**Abstract** This paper examines the ways in which Latino children's literature portrays cultural models of bilingualism and identity affiliations based on language and cultural practices. We focus attention the messages in seven children's books about practices of and attitudes toward Spanglish, standard Spanish, and individual and societal bilingualism. In addition, we analyze how characters construct their cross-cultural identit(ies), based their language use and engagement in local and transnational cultural themes. Using assertions based on cultural model analyses, we show how portrayals evident in these books inform and are informed by larger cultural models of being bilingual and belonging to Latino bilingual communities in the U.S.

**Keywords** Bilingualism · Cross-cultural identity cultural models · Latino children's literature · Spanglish · Transnationalism

An increasing number of children's book authors are publishing literature that addresses issues of Spanglish, bilingualism and cultural identity affiliations that Latino bilingual children have as they grow in the United States. We argue that, through the lifeworlds constructed in the stories, characters and events convey messages to readers about the nature and value of speaking certain kinds of Spanish, of the relative value of Spanish and English, of separating and mixing language and culture, and of maintaining and severing identity affiliations with the culture of their parents.

These messages often reinscribe ideological notions of linguistic prescriptivism, cultural assimilation, the hegemony of English, as well as sometimes deconstruct these notions through moments of cultural and linguistic pluralism. That is, when main characters express their views about what is good Spanish or comment on characters who use Spanglish and code-mixing for communication with other bilinguals, they communicate messages about how Spanish should be spoken and used by Latino bilingual children. Likewise, in stories where characters who grow up in a bilingual community are

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portrayed as ignorant about their parents' culture, at times even resenting having to participate in it, the message to readers is that complete assimilation is the way to become American. We are interested in the ways these stories contribute to or resist cultural models about restricting young people's language use and identity development toward larger social and economic goals of Americanization and assimilation.

### **A Qualitative Text Analysis**

In this article, we seek to unpack the messages embedded in the language and cultural practices, as well as metatext about language and cultural practices, of children's literature that focuses on being bilingual in the US, particularly the use of Spanglish, a variety of spoken Spanish that includes words and phrases appropriated from English, but not accepted as "real" Spanish by educated native Spanish speakers (Valdés, González, López García, & Márquez, 2003). We find these messages communicated through implicit and explicit representations of characters' lives in the selected children's literature, in the form of ideologies—values, attitudes and beliefs—about language and its social contexts (Woolard, 1998). For Sutherland (1985), these values reflect views and assumptions about "social organization and norms of behavior, moral principles, questions of good or evil, right and wrong, and what is important in life..." (p. 143). While there are multiple, complex layers to the imagined worlds in children's literature, we focus on that of language ideology in order to understand the representations that young readers are exposed to as they build their own identities as agents of language and culture.

We analyze the characters' discourse and practices using a combination of Erickson's (1986) method of analytic induction, moving from each text's world as a whole to its parts and back to the whole again and Gee's Cultural Models analysis (1999). We began with Erickson's recursive method of generating and testing assertions based on the "data corpus", looking for confirming and disconfirming evidence about the ways that bilingualism, cultural and identity affinities were portrayed in selected Latino children's literature.

Working with three doctoral students in language and literacy as outside readers of the texts, we coded every comment on or allusion to Spanglish, Standard Spanish, language use, culture(s), geographical and social spaces, home, family, and identity affiliations in seven Latino children's books. Next, we identified key linkages and themes related to these topics, writing descriptive, narrative and interpretive commentary in the midst of analysis. Then, we reviewed our assertions and evidence based on interim findings. We continued this process to analyze data anew considering any new assertions that might arise.

Using the assertions, we then identified and refined cultural models that represent the messages about language, culture and identity that were embedded in the stories. Cultural models are the "images or storylines or descriptions of simplified worlds in which prototypical events unfold. They are our 'first thoughts' or taken-for-granted assumptions about what is 'typical' or 'normal'" (Gee, 1999, p. 59). In cultural models, the complexities of life that fiction portrays are reduced to simplistic normative storylines about ways of being and thinking in the world. Once we identified the cultural models, we rechecked them against the assertions and the coded data we had collected from the children's books.

### The Books We Selected for Analysis

We began the selection process by interviewing experts, Dr. Sarah Hudelson and Dr. Carmen Martínez-Roldán, both of whom have taught Latino children's literature for more than a decade and have published widely on this topic. We asked them to recommend Latino children's book that are by well-known authors and in frequent use in the schools. We also reflected on our own experiences as educators in language and literacy education. We wanted to analyze literature that is in the hands of young people and making an immediate impact on educational practice. Based on our discussions with Hudelson and Martínez-Roldán and our own experiences, we selected and read 15 books that implicitly or explicitly dealt with bilingual and cultural themes related to languages and cultures in contact. From these, we narrowed the selection to seven books that had a clear presence of the interrelationship of language, culture and identity as displayed both in the actions and discourse of characters and in metatext discussions about these topics. The books were also chosen because they are English editions with Spanish inserted as text effect (rather than Spanish texts or translated texts from Spanish to English). This allowed us to analyze the messages communicated through the deliberate insertion of Spanish as a marker of bilingualism and bilingual community membership. A summary of the seven books used for this study, as well as the language and cultural group they represent, are as follows:

Ada (2002) *I love Saturdays y domingos (Mexican)*. A young girl visits her grandparents on both sides of the family, and experiences everything in Spanish with one set of grandparents and everything in English with the other set.

Alvarez (2001) *How Tía Lola came to stay (Dominican)*. A mother, sister and brother have moved from New York to a suburb where they are the only Spanish-speaking family. A visit by the mother's sister, Tía Lola, causes the family to question their cultural identities, language, and sense of community.

Bunting (1996) *Going home (Mexican)*. A family travels from their home in the United States to their relatives' village in Mexico. This visit causes the young girl protagonist to ask questions about home and happiness.

Martel (1976) *Yagua days (Puerto Rican)*. A young boy in New York learns about family cultural traditions through a visit with his extended family in Puerto Rico.

Montes (2003) *Get ready for Gabí: A crazy, mixed-up Spanglish day (Puerto Rican)*. A young girl struggles with mixing Spanish and English in a world where her family insists on Spanish-only at home, and people at school understand her only when she speaks English.

Sáenz (1998) *A gift from Papá Diego (Mexican)*. A young boy living in the US wishes to see his grandfather, who lives in Mexico. A birthday wish leads to a surprise visit.

Soto (2000) *Chato and the party animals (Chicano and Mexican)*. Chato, a neighborhood cat, organizes a party for his friend, Novio Boy, who has never had one. The town joins together to celebrate. (Complete citations are presented in the references below.)

### Messages in Latino Children's Literature

One of the more contested issues in Latino communities addressed in children's books is the use of Spanglish among Latino bilingual children, especially among those who grow up bilingually in the U.S., but become literate only or mainly in English. Narrowly

defined, Spanglish is a hybrid form of Spanish that has been infused and combined with English at the lexical and syntactical levels of speech (Stavans, 2003). A wider definition of Spanglish includes reference to code-mixing between Spanish and English within utterances (Bernal-Enríquez & Hernández-Chávez, 2003; Zentella, 1997) to reflect the bicultural experiences of Latino bilinguals living in the U.S. (Morales, 2002). Linguistically speaking, both cases are rule-governed like any variety of language, and children who acquire and use Spanglish are capable of expressing complex ideas, of making use of social and historical contexts to construct meaning, and of creating identities to express their cross-cultural experiences (MacSwan, 2000). This ideological stance views Spanglish as a legitimate variety of Spanish that is acceptable for multiple venues of communication (Pedrasa, Attinasi, & Hoffman, 1980).

Many Spanish speakers in the U.S. and elsewhere, however, view Spanglish as a deviant, macaronic form of Spanish, invaded with English and *lleno de barbarismos* [full of barbarisms] (Acosta-Belén, 1975; González-Echeverría, 1997), as belonging to the uneducated and lower classes. For those of this prescriptive persuasion, Spanglish represents a real threat to the purity of the mother tongue, a sloppy version of bona fide Spanish, and people who use Spanglish are considered incapable of speaking either English or Spanish well (Valdés et al., 2003; Zentella, 1997).

A second contested issue for Latino communities that shows up in children's books is the ability of characters to Americanize the way other immigrants in the past have done, by giving up their cultural practices in the process of becoming Americans through assimilation. This issue speaks to the life experiences of Latino characters as portrayed in Latino children's literature. Akin to the controversy over Spanglish, the manner in which the characters' cultural knowledge and actions are portrayed depend on the cultural model the author relies on for depicting what being American means for Latino children. Some authors depict Latino children in their books as uninformed of their cultural heritage and unaware of cultural practices affiliated with their cultural heritage. This depiction reinforces the cultural model of assimilation. Some portray Latino children as questioning the transnational identities that their parents hold on to, a cultural model of Americans as having allegiance only to the U.S. And some limit the cultural knowledge and practices of Latino children who grow up in America to culinary and kinship terms, reinforcing cultural models that romanticize culture as endearing, but not widespread or complex (Barrera & Quiroa, 2003). And finally, some question the value of maintaining improper Spanish in light of the prominence of English as a world wide, and powerful language, a widespread language ideology among many educated native speakers of Spanish (Valdés et al., 2003).

### **Cultural Models and Messages in Latino Children' Books**

Two of the books (Montes and Ada) we analyzed construct a prescriptive notion of bilingual language use as diglossic, in which Spanish is spoken in separate social and geographic spaces than English. For example, in *Get Ready for Gabí* (Montes, 2003), Gabí says, "I always talk to Tippy [the cat] in Spanish. That's all he speaks. Not like me or my family. We speak English *and* Spanish. But at home, we speak *only* Spanish. That's why Tippy doesn't understanding anything else" (emphasis in original, p. 36). Gabí's message is that mixing languages is unacceptable in educated Latino homes. This perspective is derived from a the cultural model that:

Educated bilinguals do not mix Spanish and English; they compartmentalize their two languages, using only Spanish at home and only English in school. Bilinguals who mix the two languages and use English-sounding Spanish are uneducated and not really true Spanish speakers.

This cultural model is based on the construction of societal bilingualism first introduced by Fishman (1967) that the strict separation and departmentalization of Spanish and English is a *high* form of bilingualism, while mixing the two languages is a *low* form of bilingualism. These constructions of bilingualism held only for the two books (Montes and Ada) that clearly represented characters as belonging to educated, middle class bilingual families whose adult members asserted strictly controlled separate social and geographic spaces for the children's language use and cultural experiences. Moments of ambiguity about using both languages at home occur in both books (e.g., "Everyone sings 'Happy Birthday.'" Then, they sing 'Las mananitas'" (Ada, p. 26). However, these exceptions occur when cultures and geographies momentarily intersect and are permitted by the adult characters. In every other instance, the characters maintain a strict compartmentalization of their two languages.

Our analyses revealed that a desire for diglossia [the functional distributions of languages across separate domains (Fishman, 1967)] was supported by a related cultural model about the superiority of pure Spanish and the importance of speaking standard English. For example, Gabí reflects, "...I realized I was speaking Spanish to a non-Spanish speaking teacher. I was so upset, I was crossing my brain wires... There's only one thing I can't stand more than Johnny Wiley: And that's mixing up Spanish and English. I only do it when I'm super stressed. I'm very proud of how well I can speak both languages. And I don't like making mistakes" (Montes, 2003, p. 20). Here, Gabí communicates the message that represents the following cultural model:

There are good varieties of Spanish and there are poor varieties of Spanish. People who are well educated and bilingual speak "pure" Spanish; uneducated people who are bilingual speak Spanglish, a lesser variety of Spanish that has been corrupted by English. These people are either in a confused state, or they are negligent in their responsibility to speak "pure" Spanish.

From our perspective, this cultural model has the power to convey that Spanish speakers who use "pure" Spanish and speak English untainted by Spanish are culturally and socially superior to bilinguals who use Spanglish when they are speaking Spanish or English.

The cultural model favoring uncontaminated Spanish over Spanglish was not evident in stories in which the characters belonged, lived (or grew up in) in largely working class bilingual communities. In the books by Alvarez, Bunting, Martel, and Soto, the use of Spanish mixed with English was considered to be a regular means of communication among bilinguals, often conveying intimacy and ethnic connections (See Pedrasa, 1980; Zentella, 1997). For example, in *Chato and the Party Animals*, Novio Boy the cat tells his friends, "Simón! You guys are mi familia" (Soto, p. 13). Here the characters communicate the cultural model that:

Bilinguals who are socialized into bilingual communities with other bilinguals mix the two languages when interacting among bilingual friends and acquaintances.

This cultural model directly refutes the messages presented by characters in Montes and Ada that proficient bilinguals necessarily separate their two languages into specific

domains. Indeed, the way the characters use Spanish and English in these books implied that people who mix two languages while communicating with other bilinguals are also capable of speaking each language well with monolingual speakers of the two languages.

Finally, some characters (in Soto and Alvarez) mix languages as performances of youthfulness and trendiness.

The characters in his *Chato* series call themselves *hombres*, *carnales*, and *suavecitos* who live in the *barrio*. Terms and tone hail representations of urban youth who align themselves with images of gangsters, cholos, and inner city life where Mexican culture is fused into a new way of expression that is neither Mexican nor White American. Although this particular cultural model may be authentic for some bilingual Chicano and Nuyorican youth, it does not represent all bilingual youth (see Schecter & Bayley, 2002; Ramírez, 1992). In *Tía Lola Comes to Stay*, for example, Miguel struggles with the presence of his aunt visiting from the Dominican Republic until he learns that his friends enjoy her 'eccentricities,' In her high heels and a dress with flowers whose petals match the color of the porch stands Tía Lola, painting broad purple strokes. For a brief second, Miguel feels a flash of that old embarrassment he used to feel about his crazy aunt. "Awesome," his friend Dean is saying. "Cool!" Sam agrees. "Qué cul," José echoes. They wave at Tía Lola, who waves back" (Alvarez, 2001, p. 95). These characters draw on the cultural model that:

Urban bilingual youth who aspire to be hip and cool use Spanglish as a way to express and mark their unique membership in both Spanish speaking and English speaking worlds.

Through our analysis of these Latino children's books, we found assertions about culture and language made through the literature that are in line with traditional theoretical frameworks about immigration and bilingual language use. With the exception of Soto's *Chato* series, these children's books construct the experiences of immigrant assimilation into Anglo American culture as a common, naturalized end state. In *Yagua Days*, for example, elementary-age Adán is unaware of his family's Puerto Rican cultural heritage, even though traditions and language may be common knowledge to Puerto Rican (or Nuyorican) adults in New York. The story's premise is that Adán will take a trip to Puerto Rico in order to gain the cultural knowledge and discourse he needs to understand an element of his heritage (what a *yagua* day is). His parents' daily role in acculturating Adán as a Puerto Rican is ambiguous if not absent. In Adán's Americanized nuclear families, extended family may become a bridge to cultural heritage, but cross-cultural/transnational identities are discouraged, absent or presented as problematic. This message about the nature of assimilation into American life is captured in the following cultural model:

Immigrants become Americans through a linear process of giving up their old beliefs, patterns of behavior, and language abilities, which are considered to be counterproductive, and over time take on new ways of thinking, believing and acting to become prosperous, loyal Americans.

This cultural model is what Suárez-Orozco (2005, p. 70) refers to a "mythico-historical" record, a combination based partly on fact, but mainly on myth, and fantasy. This cultural model is especially evident in the stories by Alvarez, Bunting and Martel, and hinted at in Ada and Montes. In these stories, the message is that children of Latino immigrants become successful Americans to the extent that they relinquish their

parents' language and cultural practices. The main character in *Going Home* (Bunting, 1996), for example, corrects his father when he talks about his legal status, and laments that his parents have not learned English. His father states, "...We are legal farm workers. We have our papeles. Papers, Papá, I say quickly...Papá speaks always in Spanish. He and Mamá have no English. There is no need for it in the fields. But I'm always trying to teach them" (Bunting, 1996, p. 4). Later in the story, the boy visits Mexico with his parents and finds Mexico to be a magical place, but one with no opportunities. The only chance for success in life is to stay in America.

We suggest that the cultural model assuming that Latino immigrants make a clean break from their home country—and that their children grow up and assimilate to an English speaking, middle class world—is no longer accurate. As Suárez-Orozco (2005) points out, "The relative ease and accessibility of mass transportation and the new globalized communication and information technologies make possible a more massive back-and-forth movement of people goods, information, and symbols than ever before" (p. 73). From this perspective, the children of many Latino immigrants do maintain cross-cultural identities, ways of being, thinking, acting, and using language within their local communities, ways that also connect them to their home countries. This reality is largely absent in the books we analyzed. Some characters with a command of their family's home language are largely unaware of their parents' home cultures and disconnected from extended family members. Others characters have a strong cultural heritage or family connections but weak command of, or exposure to, their heritage language.

These representations are in concert with a hegemonic stratification of social and economic spheres in which immigrants are supposed to shed, reject, or ignore cross-cultural identity and community affiliations in favor of reproducing ideologies of assimilation and work. The moments of agency, even resistance to these inauthentic or disempowering portrayals of cross-cultural and hybridized linguistic identities were the exception rather than the rule in the books we analyzed. Further research might explore how constructions of bilingual families and communities in literature converge with larger global and political activities, ideologies and systems, particularly in relation to new scholarship on transnationalism (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landholt, 1999; Pries, 2001; Roberts, Frank, & Lozano-Ascensión, 1999; Schiller, Basch, & Szanton Blanc, 1995; Suárez-Orozco, 2005) and its impact on understanding grass roots cultural actions.

## Conclusion

The child characters of these Latino children's books inhabit both lived and imagined communities. They construct community membership through identity affiliation with family, including parents and siblings, and friendships as well as engagement of physical location, including border crossing and experiences in parental countries of origin. The child characters' interactions and conversations with parent characters often communicate that Americanized assimilation is a naturalized state of being (actions and dialog show this is "the way things are"), while affinity for grandparents and other extended family members in the family country of origin represent imagined, even romanticized, notions of cultural heritage.

In these stories, siblings and friends of the child characters often more overtly questioned cultural models of language and culture. In *A Gift from Papá Diego*, Diego's

sister does not accept Diego's fantastical idea that he can fly to see his grandfather in Mexico, telling him to "get real" (Sáenz, 1998, p. 26). While Diego believes like his grandfather that "a border is nothing for people who love" (Sáenz, p. 34), his sister is perhaps the voice grounded in more material concerns. Can love erase a border or the tensions and violence in border crossing? Which perception is more real? The siblings and friends often 'read against the grain' of individual and community identities, belief systems and folk models.

We wonder about the books' treatment of social and geographic space in relation to cultural identity (both in the minds of the characters and the readers), such as: What is home? Where do I belong, and to/with whom? Where does my family belong? Why can't we be together? What language(s) should I speak? How does my cultural heritage relate to me and the world I inhabit? How do I navigate this complex world of cultures and languages as I grow into myself and learn to be me?

While the characters engaged in individual journeys that relate to these abstract social and cultural concepts, they do not through their journeys engage with structural or institutional causes or effects relating to issues of language prescriptivism or geographic and cultural border crossing. In our minds, the story lines often smoothed away complex problems in exchange for simple, emotional narrative plots. These endings often include clean resolutions to questions prompted by issues of social and geographic space.

Many of the books present an inconsistent, paradoxical, even confused relationship among language, culture and identity, in which the child characters have command of their family's home language but no cultural heritage knowledge or connection to extended family members. Others have strong cultural heritage or family connections but weak command of or exposure to the first language. These cultural models are in concert with a hegemonic stratification of social and economic structures that Latino families shed, reject, or ignore cross-cultural identity and community affiliations in favor of reproducing ideologies of assimilation.

These messages about bilingualism, Spanglish and cultural assimilation show up in children books as competing ideologies that children, teachers and family members may reinforce in literature discussion and rely on them in daily practices (Martínez Roldán & Malavé, 2004). While children's literature is clearly more than a set of ideologies strung together to be reproduced in lived experience, we cannot ignore the presence of these messages or their potential impact upon school classrooms and young readers (Sutherland, 1985). How can we become active readers of these texts, "talking back" to messages that may inform inaccurate, misleading, or incomplete portraits of the lives of bilingual children and their families?

### **Educational Importance**

The educational importance of this research lies in its cultural model analysis of children's literature, exposing messages about the relationship among bilingual language, culture and identity. The research demonstrates the necessity of building critical scholarship and readership of children's literature. As Fox and Short (2003) assert through the title of their essay collection on cultural authenticity in children's literature, "stories matter." The impact of stories lies both in their ability to create imagined worlds of experience and to craft messages about the values, attitudes and beliefs people embody in both imagined and, via reader response, lived worlds.

We advocate that teacher education programs and K-12 school district professional development programs use cultural model analysis with teachers as they review current curriculum and propose the adoption of new texts. Cultural modeling might also be used as a literary tool in the classroom. Analyzing literature's constructions of bilingual childhood and asking how we critically negotiate these constructions with bilingual students are crucial processes for educators to consider.

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