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〈論文〉

A Sociolinguistic Approach to Representations of Identities in Contemporary American Ethnic Women's Writings

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Introduction

Many contemporary ethnic American women writers see the significance of language in relation to the body in the construction of ethnic identity, and they strategically use them in their writings. The experiences of women are considerably influenced by the environment that surrounds them, especially in the United States, where the meanings of bodies are constantly (re)written because of intersecting cultural differences in nation, race/ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality. These contemporary American ethnic female writers use language to present identities and reveal how language is reflected in cultural representations associated with transformation, subversion and resistance. Maria Lauret, writer of *Wanderwords: Language Migration in American Literature* (2014) finds, English accommodates other languages in different ways and levels in hybrid and dynamic world of migrant literature and writers belonging to cultures of different languages constitute transnational and global connections (p. 8).

This trend of bilingual/multilingual writings began with the influence of feminism and multiculturalism in the 1970s, which encouraged women to discover and raise their voices. One of the most prominent writers of the time was Mexican-American writer Gloria Anzaldúa, who used her own experiences as bases in emphasizing the importance of the association amongst language, the body and identity. Japanese-American writer Lois-Ann Yamanaka also recognized the relevance of language in identity and wrote a first-person narrative that features a Japanese-American female protagonist who speaks Pidgin English. These writers demonstrate creative ways to use language as an effective means of embodying their cultures, highlighting identity issues and connecting with readers.

Dohra Ahmad, editor of vernacular literature *Rotten English: A Literary Anthology* (2007), claims that the bilingual/multilingual writers challenge linguistic hierarchy by underscoring the

strength, coherence, and communicative capacity of their languages and thus Standard English is positioned as merely one of many dialects in these works (p. 17). Another significant feature of these vernacular works is that they often deals with difficult issues that originate from specific historical events. The literature evinces links to colonialism, slavery, nationalism, decolonization, and immigration and thus brings history to life. They involve issues of language and power, with their explicit purpose being to restore and legitimize codes that had been labeled as substandard (Ahmad, 2007, pp. 28-29).

As Lauret (2014) suggests, global English's imperialism leads to an intersecting paradox, in which an increasing number of writers write in English, but more of them tend to represent their cultures using multiple languages. Bilingual/multilingual writing could thus be one of the prominent characteristics of future global literature. However, the past few decades have seen comparisons of the influence of global migration on the basis of economic, cultural, social, and political change, but the issue of language shifts as deriving from geopolitical relocation has yet to be fully explored despite the recognition that such shifts greatly affect one's construction of identity (Lauret, p.6). Therefore, from a sociolinguistic perspective, this study looks into the ways by which Anzaldúa and Yamanaka represent language in their autobiographically based works. It likewise examines their experiences with language use and linguistic identities.

Contemporary American Ethnic Women's Writings: Sociolinguistic Perspective

Sociolinguistics investigates language as a social and cultural phenomenon (Trudgill, 1995), which factors considerably in the construction of ethnic identity. Variations in languages reflect people's demographic, geographic, sociological, educational and religious backgrounds. Language not only constitutes identity and solidarity amongst speakers but also manifests attitudes towards power and prestige. The fact that the names of an ethnic group and that of its language are often the same indicates that most ethnic populations regard language as a meaningful component of their identities and traditions. Amongst other elements, language is key in the construction of ethnic identity because it organizes thought and helps people establish social relations (Spolsky, 1998).

From a sociolinguistic view, switching from one language to another is viewed as always motivated and meaningful; and therefore, their appearance is significant. These writings contain ideological implication that incorporates cultural difference into the American literature and thereby contests the hegemony of English (Lauret, 2014, pp.5-6). Lauret (2014) refers to the strategy of switching from one language to another in their works as follows:

> […]words and phrases in other language that disrupt, enchant, occlude or highlight the taken-for-granted English of American literature and can thereby perform wonders of poetic signification as well as cultural critique. Usually marked in italics, as if to emphasize their strangeness, wanderwords are freighted with other-cultural meanings wrapped up in their different looks and sounds. (2)

She contends that multilingual signification is becoming even more common in twenty-first century world literature and highlights the importance of focusing on wanderwords. The Americanization of migrant cultures in the twentieth century resulted in the erasure of a nation's multilingual past. Bilingual/multilingual writing therefore restore the history of languages other than English and connect such literature with the transnational cultures and diasporas in twentieth and twenty-first century American literature (p. 4). In the contemporary ethnic and immigrant writings of American female writers, the body is a site of creative imagination and transcultural negotiations of differences (Katrak, 2006). Language experience as embodied experience, these writers counteract cultural imperialism and contribute to relativizing and decentralizing contemporary American literary history by representing border identities and constructing communities of memory through their creations. Next, by focusing on Anzaldúa and Yamanaka's strategic use of language to represent identity, this study explores the diversity and complexity of contemporary American identities.

Representations of Language and Ethnic Identity

Gloria Anzaldúa: Multilingualism and Border Identity

Gloria Anzaldúa is one of the writers who successfully demonstrate the effectiveness of addressing feminist concerns by representing linguistic identity (Ahmad, 2007, p.23). In her imaginative autobiographical work, *Borderland/La Frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa asserts that '[e]thnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language' (p.81). She explores internal and external borders through mixed language and the reinterpretation as well as recreation of traditional folklore, with the author combining forms of anecdote, prose and poetry.

She underscores the importance of language in her identity, which she illustrates as diverse and complex, and reveals that she uses multiple languages and engages in code-switching to adjust to different people and situations. In Chapter 5, 'How to Tame a Wild Tongue', Anzaldúa recounts her experiences, the social conditions to which she is exposed and identity with respect to language

and explores her 'tongue' in inventive ways. An example is her experience of being punished by a teacher for speaking Spanish in school.

> I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for "talking back" to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. "If you want to be American, speak 'American'. If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong". (p.75)

In admonishing Anzaldúa for her failure to speak English, which the teacher calls 'American', and directing her to return to her homeland, the teacher communicates that speaking the language of Anzaldúa's origin is inappropriate and that she cannot be American unless she speaks the language of that country. Anzaldúa's mother also wishes for her to speak 'proper' English—that is, one without an Mexican accent—so that she can secure a good job in the future. These memories reflect language education policy in the United States at the time. During Anzaldúa's study at university, Chicano (American of Mexican descent) students were required to take two speech classes that are designed to help them 'get rid of' their accents (p.76). On the basis of these experiences, she creatively explores her language use and declares that '[w]ild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out' (p.76). Being instructed to speak English in schools, Anzaldúa is often caught between cultures; as a Chicana from the Texas-Mexico border, she is blamed for being a 'cultural traitor' for using English when she talks with Latinos/Latinas: "'*Pocho*, cultural traitor, you're speaking the oppressor's language by speaking English, you're ruining the Spanish language', I have been accused by various Latinos and Latinas". (p.77)

In reality, she identifies with neither English nor Spanish but is most familiar and comfortable with speaking 'Chicano Spanish', which she calls a 'border tongue' (p.77). Chicano Spanish is commonly considered 'deficient, a mutilation of Spanish' (p.77), and the use of *Anglicisms* (words borrowed from English) is viewed as a product of the pressure on speakers to accommodate English. As Anzaldúa explains, Chicano Spanish arose from the demands of people who are non-Spanish and living in a country where English is the first language and non-white who could not identify themselves with Standard Spanish or Standard English. She states that those who speak Chicano Spanish can connect their identities and communicate those realities and values with not only Spanish or English alone but with both languages. She refers to Chicano Spanish as a 'secret

language' generated from people's need for a language and identity of their own (p.77).

Living on the border between cultures, Anzaldúa states, is a life lived against a dominant culture that often stereotypically categorizes ethnic groups and people 'because we are a complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages' (p.77). She lists the multiple languages that she regularly speaks as follows:

1. Standard English
2. Working-class and slang English
3. Standard Spanish
4. Standard Mexican Spanish
5. North Mexican Spanish dialect
6. Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California have regional variations.)
7. Tex-Mex
8. Pachuco (called *caló*) (p.77)

With these eight languages, she formed the habit of code-switching, which is the practice of using multiple languages in accordance with a given situation. A speaker may switch to another language to signal group membership and shared ethnicity (Holmes, 2013, p.35). Anzaldúa describes her use of languages and code-switching as a process of moving 'back and forth from English to Spanish in the same sentence or in the same word' (p.78). She also details the various characteristics of the languages that she speaks with regard to grammar and vocabulary.

For everyday communication, Anzaldúa generally speaks the last five languages listed above, with the author especially identifying with Chicano Spanish and Tex-Mex. In formal occasions, however, she uses the Standard English that she learned through language education in schools and working-class English. Chicanas from New Mexico and Arizona do not understand her Chicano Spanish, and she speaks to Chicanas in California entirely in English. Most of the time, she can speak freely only with Chicanas from Texas. She speaks with her sister, brother and Chicanas from Texas with Tex-Mex (p.78). The situation that she portrays is specific to Chicanos and unshared by other Latinos. Thus, Anzaldúa believes that 'Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure' (p.78).

We oppress each other trying to out-Chicano each other, vying to be the "real" Chicanas,

> to speak like Chicanos. There is no one Chicano language, just as there is no one Chicano experience. (p.80)

Anzaldúa observes the sensitivity and the tension that language use brings, not only amongst other Latinos/Latinas but also amongst Chicanos/Chicanas. People are often unaware of their code-switching behaviours but may apologize for it when they notice such conduct. This tendency indicates anticipation of a negative response to mixing languages. As with Mexican-Americans, 'Tex-Mex' is a derogatory term; it is a language characterized by rapid code-switching between Spanish and English. Although code-switching proves proficiency in multiple languages, reactions to it are negative in many communities; such reactions reflect the attitudes of the majority of a group in favor of monolingual speaking, as is the case in North America (Holmes, 2013, p.36). Anzaldúa broaches the possibility that by the end of this century, English will be the mother tongue of most Chicanos and Latinos despite Spanish speakers comprising the largest ethnic group in the United States (p.81).

In spite of the difficult conditions surrounding her language use, Anzaldúa legitimizes Chicano Spanish as constituting her people's identity by stating that '[it] is as diverse linguistically as it is regionally' (p.81). In so doing, she presents the diversity of her linguistic identity and positively regards her code-switching abilities. The construction of identity on the basis of languages is concretized in Anzaldúa's representation as she emphasizes the significance of language in her identity.

> So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate. (p.81)

She articulates that she will never be able to accept her identity unless her languages are accepted. Her voice is as diverse as her language and body in her image, and she claims to have

multiple voices.

> I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence. (p.81)

What Anzaldúa confronts in her writing is the battle against silence. In the context of claiming a border identity, the act of writing and speaking with mixed language, as in *Borderland/ La Frontera* and other works, becomes her means of survival and a route to coalition-building amongst other women with cultural differences (Anzaldúa, 2002). Her thoughts and intentions are developed in publishing multiple anthologies by women of color, including *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation* (2002), which followed the success of the first anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (1981). The writers in the anthologies propose multicultural contemporary feminist issues, on identities and the intersecting oppression of race/ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. As editor Anzaldúa posits, her anthology-making is a form of political activism to represent contributors' voices of resistance. The anthologies address issues surrounding construction of identity and indicate possibilities for global and transnational alliance-building. These achievements were realized by the success of creative representation of self and the very act of her writing in *Borderlands*.

Lois-Ann Yamanaka: Language Stigmatization and Social Stratification

In an interview, Yamanaka expressed her commitment to her brand of storytelling thus: 'I am devoted to telling stories the way I have experienced them—cultural identity and linguistic identity being skin and flesh to my body' (Takahama, 1996). In the same vein as Anzaldúa's work, Yamanaka's *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* (1996) recognizes the significance of language in identity construction. Yamanaka's work is a first-person narrative that features a Pidgin English-speaking Japanese-American female protagonist. Here, language is an important marker of the protagonist's social status as a working-class individual and as a Japanese-American in Hawai'i—an experience that severely stigmatizes the protagonist.

Yamanaka is a third-generation Japanese-American writer who was born and raised in Molokai Island in Hawai'i. *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* is the first bitter and humoristic coming-of-age trilogy, whose specific theme is a Japanese-American girl's experience of growing

up in Hawai'i. The protagonist, Lovey Nariyoshi, struggles under intersecting oppressive systems of race/ethnicity, class and gender that compel her to internalize Standard English ideology. Her anxiety about language therefore becomes anxiety over her identity (Young, 2002). In a state of self-exile and self-denial, she longs desperately to change her life. Constantly aware of whiteness and its privileges, she is criticized for blindly admiring whites and having a severe inferiority complex. Language and the female body, especially the Asian female body, are culturally stigmatized in the novel. Under these circumstances, the protagonist undergoes great struggle in positively accepting her body and identity.

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1963) discussed the relationship between identity and stigmatization. Stigma was originally used to refer to bodily marks that point to abnormality, with such marks were created by cutting and burning the skin or body of a slave or criminal, who is then to be avoided in public places. Although the word is now meant to communicate 'disgrace' rather than signify bodily marks, society continues to classify people into categories on the basis of attached characteristics that reveal personal attributes, social statuses and identities. When a person is reduced to an inferior position by categorization and its attributes, the resulting social identity can be considered a 'stigma' (pp.1-3). Yamanaka's work illustrates how the formal education system in Hawai'i stigmatizes people's languages and identities. Mr. Harvey, Lovey's schoolteacher, reminds his students repeatedly that they will be disadvantaged unless they stop speaking Pidgin English and learn Standard English.

> No one will want to give you a job. You sound uneducated. You will be looked down upon. You're speaking a low-class form of good Standard English. Continue, and you'll go nowhere in life. Listen, students, I'm telling you the truth like no one else will. Because they don't know how to say it to you. I do. Speak Standard English. DO NOT speak pidgin. You will only be hurting yourselves. (p.10)

Because language is related to social structure and value systems, Standard English is a highly valued language that enables its speakers to acquire economic, social and political advantages. Language is also therefore used for social stratification, which pertains to the hierarchical ordering of groups within a society; language is stratified in accordance with the social classes of speakers (Trudgill, 1995).

Mr. Harvey emphasizes that Standard English is 'our Standard English', but Lovey

evaluates it otherwise, asserting that 'nobody looks or talks like a *haole* [white]' and '[n]obody says nothing the way Mr. Harvey tells us to practice talking in class' (p.11). The teacher instructs them to introduce themselves and talk about what they would like to be in the future using 'complete sentences', but his students, including Lovey, fail to follow his instructions (p.12).

> "My name Lovey. When I grow up pretty soon, I going be what I like be and nobody better say nothing about it or I kill um".
> "OH REALLY", he says. "Not the way you talk. You see, that was terrible. All of you were terrible and we will have to practice and practice our Standard English until we are perfect little Americans". (p.13)

Mr. Harvey indicates that becoming 'perfect little Americans' is achieved by learning to speak Standard English, though he becomes irritated and finds them incapable of responding to his instructions.

> And I'll tell you something, you can all keep your heads on your desks for the rest of the year for all I care. You see, you need me more than I need you. And do you know what the worst part is, class? We're not only going to have to work on your usage, but your pronunciations and inflections too. Jee-zus Christ! For the life of me, it'll take us a goddamn lifetime. (p.13)

Despite the explicit display of frustration, Lovey submissively sympathizes with the teacher and offers explanations, such as '[s]ometimes I think that Mr. Harvey doesn't mean to be mean to us' and '[h]e really wants us to be Americans' (p.14). We can assume that Lovey and her classmates do not consider themselves Americans because of Mr. Harvey's criterion that an American is one who speaks Standard English. Notwithstanding Lovey's recognition of the importance of English, however, she finds it impossible to speak in the language.

> But I can't talk the way he wants me to. I cannot make it sound his way, unless I'm playing pretend-talk-haole. I can make my words straight, that's pretty easy if I concentrate real hard. But the sound, the sound from my mouth, if I let it rip right out the lips, my words will always come out like home. (p.14)

Lovey regards herself as physically unable to pronounce English words, such as ‘Americans’, in the manner that Mr. Harvey demands, while recognizing that the language she speaks as ‘home’ (14). Thus, even though the protagonist is third-generation Japanese-American, she cannot identify herself as such only because she is unable to speak Standard English.

Even as a child, Lovey sharply observes that all Japanese-American women marry white men to acquire new identities by changing their surnames and thus obtaining upward mobility in a hierarchal social structure. Lovey also secretly wishes to gain a Western surname through marriage out of a desire that indicates her perception of being Japanese-American as a stigma. The deeply stratified social structure in Hawai’i that Yamanaka depicts in her novel exerts harmful effects on marginalized children, such as Lovey, who at 12 years old is perceptive of and frustrated by social stratification and its disadvantages.

> I don’t tell anyone, not even Jerry, how ashamed I am of Pidgin English. Ashamed of my mother and father, the food we eat, chicken luau with spinach and tripe stew. The place we live, down the house lots in the Hicks Homes that all look alike except for the angle of the house from the street. The car we drive, my father’s brown Land Rover without the back window. The clothes we wear, sometimes we have to wear the same pants in the same week and the same shoes until it breaks. Don’t have no choice. (pp.10-11)

Above all, Lovey harbors feelings of inferiority because of her Pidgin English and any other factors that symbolize a working-class life. The protagonist clearly has a difficult time accepting her social identity, which is shaped by her working-class lifestyle and cultural differences. Yamanaka’s work not only illuminates issues of postcolonial oppression through language stigmatization and social stratification in identity construction but also demystifies commercialized images of Hawai’i, thereby revealing a complex and diverse sociocultural reality.

Conclusion

Both Anzaldúa and Yamanaka write about experiences of being forced to speak Standard English at school. The schoolteachers, as representative of social institutions, insist that ethnic groups need to learn to speak Standard English to be considered and accepted as American. Recognizing the significance of language for agency and control, these contemporary writers creatively pursue the issues of language in relation to the construction of their identities.

Anzaldúa explains the diversity of her language use as a Chicana and creates an imaginative story with language at the forefront, and Yamanaka illustrates the manner by which the protagonist in her novel descends into a state of self-exile because of the shame that she feels over her working-class lifestyle and cultural differences, particularly her Pidgin English. Facing difficulties with linguistic identification, Anzaldúa speaks up against oppression, whereas Yamanaka's protagonist seems to be prevented from exercising resistance because of the low self-esteem and depression due to stigmatization and social stratification. Still, we can argue that even though Yamanaka's protagonist appears submissive, the fact that the author wrote the novel in Pidgin English and with humor can be interpreted as resistance to marginalization. Their works, characterized by multicultural voices, provide the courage to live under intersecting oppressive systems of race, ethnicity, gender and class amongst people in the United States and around the world.

As discussed in this study, many contemporary American ethnic women writers foreground the significance of their languages in relation to the body in the construction of ethnic identities, and they strategically use them in their writings. These works become a highly imaginative and creative space in which they can exercise agency and control. Their representations of identity have denied the power that tries to essentialize American identity from the margins. In so doing, these contemporary American female writers contest hegemonic and homogenizing forces of Americanization, continuously offering and adding different perspectives to issues of identity and representation. By resisting marginality and claiming new American spaces, these writers continue to redefine contemporary American literature and build a postcolonial American female literary tradition.

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