

IDENTITARY NEGOTIATIONS THROUGH LANGUAGE IN JULIA
ALVAREZ'S *HOW THE GARCÍA GIRLS LOST THEIR ACCENTS AND*
¡YO!

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RESUMO: Este trabalho mostra o caminho a ser traçado por minha dissertação de mestrado que propõe uma análise dos livros *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* e *¡Yo!*, da escritora Dominicano-Americana Julia Alvarez, como representações literárias da constituição do sujeito através da língua. Tem-se como ponto de partida a hipótese de Benjamin Lee Whorf que diz que a língua determina nossa percepção da realidade e leva-se também em conta a premissa de Martin Heidegger que diz que a língua estrutura nosso acesso ao mundo. Pretende-se mostrar que esses processos são dialéticos, isto é, existem possibilidades de agenciamento para as personagens bilíngües de Alvarez a medida que elas entendem o papel da língua na construção de suas identidades. Suas múltiplas identidades são negociadas no momento da fala e são proeminentes nas suas escolhas de palavras, erros lingüísticos, interferências entre suas duas línguas assim como momentos de silenciamento, seja este silêncio real ou a supressão de dizeres por outros. Este trabalho aponta ainda para formas com que a língua contribui para definir categorias tais como raça, nacionalidade e gênero, definindo então o próprio ser. A escrita e a linguagem corporal são vistas aqui como alternativas a fala na comunicação das identidades, devendo assim, ser mencionadas. Pretendo demonstrar que cada sistema lingüístico (seja ele o inglês, o espanhol ou qualquer outro) não somente impõe identidades pré-construídas como permite a criação de novos espaços identitários para aqueles que fazem uso dele.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Julia Alvarez; língua; identidade.

ABSTRACT: *This work shows the path chosen for my Master's dissertation in which I pursue an analysis of the novel How the García Girls Lost Their Accents e ¡Yo! By the Dominican American writer Julia Alvarez as literary representations of the constitution of the subject through language. Its starting point are Benjamin Lee Whorf's hypothesis that language determines our perception of reality, and Martin Heidegger's premise that language structures our access to the world. I aim at showing that these processes are dialectical, that is, there are possibilities for achieving agency for Alvarez's bilingual characters as they understand the role of language in constructing their identities. Their multiple identities are negotiated at the moment of speaking and are prominent in their word choices, linguistic error, interferences between their two languages as well as moments of silence, being the silence a real one or when one group of words silences one another. Yet, this works points out to ways language contributes to define categories such as race, nationality and gender, defining the very self. Writing and body language have to be mentioned since they can be seen as alternatives to speech on communicating identities. Thus, my intention is demonstrating that in both novels each linguistic system (either English, Spanish or any other for that matter) not only imposes pre-conceived identities but also allows the creation of new identitary spaces for the ones who use them.*

KEYWORDS: *Julia Alvarez; language; identity*

To tell you the truth, the hardest thing coming to this country wasn't the winter everyone warned me about – it was the language. If you had to choose the most tongue-twisting way of saying you love somebody or how much a pound for the ground round, then say it in English.

Laura García (*¡Yo!* 21)

While reading works by contemporary US Latinos, one cannot help noticing the great occurrence of language as a theme. Such occurrence might owe to the fact that these writers watched their parents struggle with English and had themselves a hard time with the new language. Because they often draw from personal experience, you may come across characters like Julia Alvarez's Laura (the one from the epigraph) who constantly makes remarks on how hard it is for her to deal with English; who also in many moments and not always at will mixes up some of her native tongue with the new one, in a way Nuyoricán poets would envy. In *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and its sequel *¡Yo!*, a certain need in accentuating language (in both senses of the word) is always there, not only in the figure of Laura but in most bilingual characters. Such accentuation hints to the much one's identity is constituted by language. Despite the years apart in publication I analyze the two selected novels as a whole; given my interest in the linguistic development of the characters and the forging of their identities, it is crucial, to access the full chronological line of progression of the characters offered by the sequel.

The way language determines our perception of reality has already been studied by Benjamin Lee Whorf. The idea that language influences habitual thought came from his observations of fires caused by human errors led by, what he calls, 'linguistic conditioning of behavior'. One of the cases he presents takes place in a wood distillation plant. There, nobody thought of protecting a cover of limestone which received a great amount of heat during the distillation process. That resulted in the cover overheating and burning. All thanks to the non-combustible quality implied by the termination "-stone" (limestone is actually highly combustible). His interest in language conditioning behavior, developed to a contrastive study of a native American language (Hopi) to Standard European ones. By comparing the cultures, he learned that language, besides influencing habitual thought, creates a "thought world" which "is the microcosm that each man carries about within himself, by which he measures and understands what he can of the macrocosm" (WHORF, 1957, p.147).

Alvarez's characters' word associations do not set fire to a building like in Whorf's example but, cost them much embarrassment and some psychological trauma too. To my view, her two selected books are great literary representations of Whorf's and other theories that point to one's dependency on language to understand one's surroundings and oneself like her characters do. That can be seen in the episode Yolanda García sees snow for the first time. At age ten, in their first year in the United States and attending school during the Cold War, she is first introduced to the word bomb. Her teacher goes on in a very detailed explanation that includes a drawing of the mushroom-like explosion on the board, full of white dots representing the dusty fallout, that "would kill [them], all" (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.167). A little later that morning the girl screams in despair when she

sees the first flakes falling from the sky, for she fears they were the disastrous effects of a bomb. This episode does not have as serious implications as the one lived by her sister Carla. Also at school age, on her way back from school, she is harassed by a man who masturbates inside his car right before her eyes. She hurries home terrorized, but fails to explain what has happened to her mother and to the police officers that are called to her house. She is taken for granted because the adults ignore that when she saw the harasser “not one word English or Spanish, occurred to her”(ALVAREZ, 1991, p.157). That is, Carla could not master that vocabulary in her second language because she simply did not master it in any language at all; for Carla had been exposed to sexuality in such lascivious way before she had learned about puberty and such. These two examples are reinforced by the members of the García family always blaming their lack of understanding of the world, consequently of themselves, to a lack of words. When a social worker comes to talk to Laura about how Yolanda has been telling her classmates stories, she realizes she envies her “daughter, who is able to speak of what terrifies her” while she could not “find words in English – or Spanish” (ALVAREZ, 1997, p.34). In college, Yolanda’s boyfriend “Rudy [tells] his parents he was seeing a Spanish girl” but she thinks she “didn’t have vocabulary enough to explain even to [her]self what annoyed [her] about that remark. Thus, the characters themselves feel that they cannot apprehend the macrocosm if language is not there to help them grasp the idea of what is going on in their own thought world.

The novels’ titles are already in and by themselves very telling of these immigrants’ constitution in language and have called the attention of many critics. For Maria López Ponz, it is clear from the moment one reads the title *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* that language is going to play a major role in the novel and that every word, linguistic error, interference between English and Spanish, as well as every silence, mean more than they might seem to (2010, p.50). For Julie Barak, the first title is quite ironic, because the García girls “may have lost their accents, literally, but they can never completely lose or erase the memories of their island pasts or, of their first language and the world view that supports it” (1998,p.176). Lucía Suárez adds that the title of the novel works as a warning from the very “beginning that even if an accent (presumably a Spanish accent in English) is lost, the name, García, which has an orthographical accent, cannot be erased. [Thus] even if the girls become American, they cannot escape the Spanish name that identifies them” (2004, p.129). The second title, *¡Yo!*, which is one of the many nicknames attributed to the novel’s main character, Yolanda, has been considered “a complexly symbolic choice for a title, as in Spanish, [the first person pronoun] *yo* can only occupy a subject position” and because it can also be translated as ego, it can be considered “a literal telling of the ‘I’ [or self]” (SUARÉZ, 2004, p.136). Even more symbolic is the fact that, in the second book, Yolanda never has a chance to speak for herself being the focalized but never the focalizer, in all fifteen chapters.

In a way, in my research, neither Yolanda nor her family speak. It is language that does all the talking. Taking Martin Heidegger’s words, “Language speaks Man speaks only as a response to language” (HEIDEGGER, 2001, p.1134). The German scholar sees the linguistic code as the house of being because “ [t]he perceptible traits or qualities proper to various things in the world are manifested, made present, and brought into their own being, solely through the inaugural granting of language”(HEIDEGGER, 2001, p.1122) . Speakers’ utterances call into being categories inexistent in the real world but rather socially constructed, being race one of them.

Race was already constructed by language in the Dominican Republic due mostly to Rafael Leónidas Trujillo. Trying to create an escape for an economical and political crisis between his country and Haiti, he started to enforce the discourse of black as inferior and undesirable. In 1937, he altered drastically the way race was going to be seen and spoken on the island, in a massacre that has inhabited Dominicans' imaginary, writing and language ever since. Sofia García is the one who tells us this sad part of their history, "Trujillo had decreed that all black Haitians on our side of the island would be executed by dawn. There's a river the bodies were finally thrown into that supposedly still runs red to this day, fifty years later." (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.218). The most intriguing part of this incident is that since there were many black Dominicans, the dictator's men would test their victim's nationality by their ability to pronounce correctly, the name of the sprig of parsley shown to them. The right answer should be *perejil*, but both sounds expected for the *r* and the *j* are too difficult for Haitians to produce in the way Hispanics do. Failing the test meant being Haitian therefore led to extermination. At that time, Natalie Carter points out, "sounding 'too black' is quite literally a matter of life and death" (CARTER, 2010, p.331).

Trujillo's racist discourse and his way of materializing it, made the islanders want to separate themselves from what being black represented. That is noticeable in the name and background of one of the many servants who worked for the Garcías back on the island. The "black-black" laundry maid, had her name, Nivea, chosen after the American moisturizer rubbed on her, by her mother in hopes of lightening up her baby's skin (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.260) Black was used twice by Laura whenever she talked about her, "to darken the color to full, matching strength" (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.260). It is vocabulary defining these individuals. Both the proper name and the adjective black, are used to establish one as whiter. The former marks the mother's vain attempt to have a lighter daughter, the latter reaffirms Laura's whiteness opposed to Nivea's blackness. Ironically enough, the man who ordered the Parsley Massacre was from Haitian background (his grandfather was Haitian) and was said to wear make up to look fairer.

Whenever Dominicans speak about race or nationality the dictator's bloodshed speaks for them, anticipating their personal experience. It is Heidegger's and Derrida's 'always already' ¹shaping and producing these subjects experiences through previous discursive forms. In the United States, they do not have time to realize they go through this process in when they speak (I say so because Yolanda later develops a certain awareness of that), the Garcías have to struggle with a second language. For the girls, especially, speaking two languages is going to work in a two-folded way: at the same time that their fluency in English promotes their sense of belonging, their Spanish reminds them of their origins and reinforces their 'otherness' in comparison to the White English-speaking society. The reader has the impression that are actually excluded mostly because of their speaking. That can be seen in their downstairs neighbor's insults, according to whom the Garcías should be evicted because, on the top of things that bothered her, was their speaking loudly and not in English (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.170). Carla's teenage stalkers would also remind her of her position as not American. Her classmates would throw stones at her feet and call her 'spic', among other pejorative words used to refer to Latinos

¹ Heidegger's notion of 'always already' is extremely useful to my study, especially when talking about speech which for him anticipates any human experience. Derrida's notion of 'always already' converges in a sense with Heidegger's, one can never get to the original meaning of any sign, there is always a previous meaning that anticipates it.

(ALVAREZ, 1991, p.153). The nickname comes from their mocking on many Latino's inability of differentiating short and long vowels thus, pronouncing the word speak that way. She and her sisters might have had the false impression that all their problems would have been solved once they spoke perfect English. Problem their father tried to address by "pay[ing] to straighten their teeth and smooth the accent out of their English in expensive schools" (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.36). Although that was something Carlos García says at old age when he thinks that after all he has done for them, he does not get the attention he deserves, the two measures may not have been put together so naively. Both are measures to make the mouth fitter, in a aesthetic and social sense. Both in a way interfere with the act of speaking. And if Carlos did not think of that at first (and I believe he did not), it just reinforces my point that we do not own language.

Gender and gender roles are also going to be greatly impacted by language in the novels. Laura is the one who profits the most from moving from a more patriarchal society to a more liberal one. Going back a little to Whorf, he affirms that the Hopi experienced time differently because their language had different forms of expressing temporality, or even lacked adverbs for doing so. When it comes to gender, women whose first language is Spanish, experience the change of speaking from a very sexist thought world to a more neutral one in English. That is one of the reasons why Julia Alvarez asserts in *Something to Declare* that she landed in another world, not the United States but "the English language" (ALVAREZ, 1999, p.29). Therefore, mastering the language of the new country would represent a sign of independence and female emancipation, a weapon that could free women from the strict social conventions of their home country and a way of invading the public sphere which is forbidden to them in Dominican society (LÓPEZ PONZ, 53). Laura develops linguistically much more than her husband, which affects the way her daughters see her: "Mami was the leader now that they lived in the States. She had gone to school in the States. She spoke English without a heavy accent" (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.176). Their father's English, on the other hand, is never praised and *thick* is always the adjective used to described it. In the new environment he seems to be shrinking, which is made clear by frequent remarks on how uncomfortable he is among Americans, especially women.

It does not take long for Carlos himself to realize he is losing also the power of head of the family. He starts to get concerned when Yolanda does not accept his ideas for a speech she has to write as an school assignment. Even more worrisome for Carlos is his wife's loyalty to the girl and not to him: "his daughter was rebelling, but here was his own wife joining forces with her, soon he would be surrounded by a house full of independent American women" (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.146). The narrator captures the Dominican male imaginary in which 'independent' and 'women' are words that should not be put together, nevertheless the word American bridges the two terms. Symptomatically, if they are women who are independent they must be American, for the reason, that in the Dominican Republic there is no such thing as independent women.

As the girls grow older, they learn the words they need in both languages and use them the way they please. An example of this is that the girls never called her female parent "Mom except when they wanted to tell her how much she had failed them in [the US]. She [thought herself] a good enough *Mami*², fussing and scolding and giving advice, but a terrible girlfriend parent, a real failure of a Mom" (ALVAREZ, 1991, p.135). The

² My italics.

subtle difference between the Spanish informal and affectionate way to refer to mother and its English equivalent is something the García sisters already master. While they code switch and modulate, these speakers experience different subject positions that are explained by Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré:

A subject position incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights for those that use that repertoire. Once having taken up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. At least a possibility of notional choice is inevitably involved because there are many and contradictory discursive practices that each person could engage in. (DAVIES; HARRÉ, 1990,46)

The positions described are practiced by any speaker; however, bilinguals, I dare say, live two times more positions because they undergo these processes in their native tongue and in their second language. But it is not always about speaking, sometimes it is about what is not spoken. Despite having two different codes to help them out sometimes that does not seem enough as we have seen. They have then, to resort to other codes. A critical reading of the novels suggested has to take into consideration not only spoken language and the moments of utterance and silence, but also writing and other forms of language like body language. The latter has to be included in this analysis if language is to be taken in a broader sense. Angela Bruning claims that body language constitutes an alternative to the spoken one in *How the García Girls Lost their Accent*, and develops on Sandra's anorexia, the way her body and herself were able to speak up. The critic sees the body as a social construct the same way I consider all kinds of language in this research. Moreover, written language is also of key importance in the novels. Yolanda, becomes a writer to piece 'together her cultural identity, made of a multicultural reality like the Spanish Caribbean, while confronting her anxiety for identity through her act of writing' (BADOS CIRIA, 1999,p.115). These are some examples of how the two selected novels by Julia Alvarez are literary representations of the constitution of the subject through language. I hope to have been able to demonstrate that each system of communication, besides imposing pre-conceived identities, allows the creation of new identitary spaces for its user. If Barak proposes a "A Second Coming into Language in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*" I want to keep on "Turning and Turning the Widening Gyre" proposed by her as many times as language allows me in the two selected Alvarez's works in order to see how linguistic identity operates like a series of expanding circles that never cease.

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