

Voices, Discourse and Identity in Chicano Narrative

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In this essay I analyze the different narrative voices and ways of presenting characters' speech and thought in Chicano fiction. The corpus of data used is from Sandra Cisneros' novels: *The House on Mango Street* (1984, 1991¹), *Woman Hollering Creek* (1991) and *Caramelo* (2002) and the theoretical framework applied is the 'new stylistics' approach proposed first by Fowler (1975) and developed later by Leech and Short (1981), Fowler (1986) and Simpson (1993). This approach basically consists of applying techniques and concepts of modern linguistics to the study of literature (Leech & Short 1981: 1). In particular, with this analysis I demonstrate how narrative techniques evolve in complexity as Cisneros' novels emerge over time, specifically, how narrative voices and discourse presentations in her fiction run parallel to one of the key concepts in Chicano literature: identity conflict.

The concept of identity in Chicano narrative

One of the first Chicano novel written in the twentieth century, *Las aventuras de don Chipote, o cuando los pericos mamen* [The Adventures of Don Chipote, or When Parrots Suckle their Young] written by Daniel Venegas, was published in 1928. Since then, many other Chicano novels have been published. Yet, there is an essential difference between Chicano narrative written before the 1970s and after that decade. As Moreno (2002) states, the tendency of the first Chicano narrative was to portray Mexican American characters who longed to return to their homeland, Mexico. However, Chicano novels written after 1970 present Mexican American characters who experience a process of bicultural identification in a different country.

Despite differences in orientation, Chicano narratives share a common factor: the concept of the 'frontier', which since the 1980s gave rise to 'border studies'². The book written by the Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), marks a crucial starting point in this sense. There is a related notion linked to this concept of the 'frontier' and that is the dual or multiple identity which is best manifested in the Mexican-American or Chicano community in the U.S.

In Cisneros' narrative, the identity conflict is always present either implicitly or explicitly in the characters' speech: "We're Mericans, we're Mericans" (*Woman Hollering Creek*, 20) or "I am Mexican. Even though I was born on the U.S. side of the border" (*Caramelo*, 353). In several interviews, Sandra Cisneros herself has expressed publicly the same Chicana feelings as her characters. In this sense, her novels, although they are fiction, are also, to a certain degree, autobiographic. The following fragment is taken from an interview with Cisneros: "We're always straddling two countries, and we're always living in that kind of schizophrenia that I call, being a Mexican woman living in an American society, but not belonging to either culture.

In some sense we're not Mexican and in some sense we're not American" (Madsen, 2000: 108).

Narrative voices in Cisneros' novels

According to the new stylistics model of analysis, the first level one should distinguish when studying discourse situations in literature is that between the author and the reader or, more precisely, the 'implied author' and the 'implied reader' since the author cannot assume that a particular reader will necessarily have specific knowledge and likewise, the reader cannot automatically ascribe the views expressed in a text to the author himself (Leech and Short, 1981: 260).

The second level of analysis in literary discourse situations is the one between the author and the narrator/s. According to Leech and Short, there may be two main types of narrators in a novel: the I-narrator and the third-person narrator. The former usually is a primary character in the novel, and therefore sometimes there is a merging of roles between narrator and character, the latter, however, is generally an omniscient narrator and thus, this type of narration tends to separate the level of character discourse from that of narrator discourse at the same time that it merges the implied author and the narrator. Authors such as Fowler (1986) and Simpson (1993) include these two types of narrators in what has been called 'internal narration', the I-narrator being Type A and the third-person (usually omniscient) narrator, Type B.

As Fowler points out generally no text uses just one type consistently and it is the shift, contrast and tensions between various modes of observation within the text that make them interesting (1986: 134). Accordingly, in Cisneros' novels, although the type of narration will always be internal, the use of this internal narrative mode will sometimes be either Type A or Type B or both types at the same time. The combination and merging of different types of narrators is one of the things that make her fiction so meaningful, rich and unique.

First, in *The House on Mango Street* (hereinafter, HMS), Cisneros uses an internal narrator Type A in the person of the character Esperanza. Some of the linguistic features of this first-person narrator are a prominent use of first-person singular pronouns, use of the present tense, and a foregrounded modality stressing the narrator's judgments and opinions. One way to convey the character-narrator's feelings and thoughts is the use of *verba sentiendi* – words denoting feelings, thoughts and perceptions as we see in the examples below (underlined).

- (1) *Mamacita* is the big mama of the man across the street, third-floor front. Rachel says her name ought to be *Mamasota*, but I think that's mean (76).
- (2) Somebody said because she's too fat, somebody because of the three flights of stairs, but I believe she doesn't come out because she is afraid to speak English, and maybe this is so since she only knows eight words. She knows to say: *He not here* for when the landlord comes, *No speak English* if anybody else comes, and *Holy smokes*. I don't know where she learned this, but I heard her say it one time and it surprised me (77).

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- (3) Those boys said leave us alone. I felt stupid with my brick. They all looked at me as if *I* was the one that was crazy and made me feel ashamed (97).

Although there are some examples of evaluative expressions such as “that’s mean” (1) and explicit feelings of the I-narrator (example 3), most of the interventions on the part of Esperanza-narrator are presented through verbs of perception (“I heard”, “I know”, “I watch”). In other words, although the narration is subjective because the story is told from the main character’s point of view, in many parts of the story, Esperanza presents facts and her own perceptions and thoughts without directly revealing much of her own feelings about those facts or perceptions so that readers can draw their own conclusions. For example, in (2) she reports what others think about *Mamacita* and what she herself believes and has heard, but she really does not express her own feelings toward that woman and the situation of many immigrants who do not speak English in the US. Most of these perceptions are symbols of her own subjective search for her identity. By describing all that surrounds her, she tries to find her own space, her own place, which is the house she longs for in “A House of My Own”: “Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (108)³.

In *Woman Hollering Creek* (hereinafter, WHC) some differences can be observed with respect to HMS. First, in WHC two types of narrators (types A and B) are used although both types are not mixed in the same stories. Also, the Type A I-narrator in WHC takes different characters: it is not always the same character who talks through the I-narrator as in HMS. Second, in WHC the I-narrator talks to different interlocutors at different points of the story, unlike in HMS where, apart from the implied reader, is Esperanza’s friend Sally the only specific interlocutor. Therefore, in WHC Cisneros’ narrative technique is much more complex than in HMS, both in the types of narrators and addressees.

In the first part of WHC, “My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn”, as in HMS the narrator is Type A, that is, an I-narrator who is also a main character in the story: Rachel. However, in Part II, “One Holy Night”, though the narrator is still Type A, I-narrator, she does not take the voice of Rachel any more since Rachel is referred to as a third person in this part.

Yet, it is in the third part of the book, “There Was a Man, There Was a Woman”, where we find more complexity in the narrative techniques since the two internal types of narrators will be used and a multiplicity of interlocutors are addressed. Regarding the type of narrator, most of the stories are told by an I-narrator taking the form of different participating characters (except in the story “There was a man. There was a woman” (where a third-person omniscient narrator is used). All these characters are women (except in the story “*Los Boxers*”) trying to help other women (for example, Graciela trying to help a Mexican pregnant woman, Cléofilas, who is fleeing from her abusive husband), women suffering because of a man: in some cases they are the lovers but not the wives (such as Clemencia in “Never Marry a Mexican”), in others they are abandoned by their boyfriends (Lupe and Flavio in “*Bien Pretty*”), and sometimes their lovers marry others (Inés Alfaro in

“Eyes of Zapata”). With respect to the multiplicity of addressees, in “Never Marry a Mexican”, for example, we see how the I-narrator Clemencia addresses different interlocutors in different sections of the story: the implied reader, Drew (her lover in that story), and Drew’s son.

Finally, in Cisneros’ center piece, *Caramelo* (2002), the author uses both types of internal narration, Type A and Type B, but with a different depth and intensity than in her previous narrative pieces. It is as if the stories about her parents and grandparents told in HMS and WHC have grown now not only in size and content detail, but also in form and narrative techniques. In this sense, McCracken points out (2002) that those stories are extended in *Caramelo* to “longer biographical texts and intertwine with the stories of three generations of the family on both sides of the border” (5).

So, in Part One, “*Recuerdo de Acapulco*”, the story is told by an internal narrator Type A, that is, an I-narrator in the person of Lala who is a little girl remembering the summers spent in Mexico with her family. In Part Two, “*When I Was Dirt*”, is where the narrative techniques will become gradually more complex. Here, the internal I-narrator in the person of Lala starts a dialogue with her Grandmother about the Grandmother’s childhood, adolescence and youth. At the beginning, the I-narrator is Lala who says to the implied reader that she is now going to tell the story of her grandmother. However, in chapter 25, “*God squeezes*”, the I-narrator will switch to the Awful Grandmother who is telling the story of her life.

Another very interesting switch in the type of narrator is that in some sections of this second part the internal narrator adopts the form of a Type B, that is, a third-person omniscient narrator who does not only tell external facts about the characters (example 4), but also penetrates inside characters’ minds (double underlining in example 5). This change in internal narration produces the effect of separating the level of character discourse from that of the narrator discourse in order to present the story of Soledad Reyes not as Lala’s grandmother, but as a woman with her own story: “the ‘awful grandmother’ is now given the dignity of a name—Soledad Reyes” (McCracken, 2002: 5).

- (4) Soledad Reyes was a girl of good family, albeit humble, the daughter of famed *reboceros* from Santa María del Río, San Luis Potosí, where the finest shawls in all the republic come from, *rebozos* so light and thin they can be pulled through a wedding ring (92).
- (5) When the Grandmother goes to the market, she samples from each vendor, pinching, and poking, and pocketing their wares. She makes believe she doesn’t hear them cursing when she walks away without buying anything. The Grandmother couldn’t care less. It’s *mijo’s* birthday (47).

In Part III, “*The Eagle and the Serpent or My Mother and My Father*”, the implied reader is presented with the same I-narrator as in Part I, the difference being that Lala is not a little girl any more. She has grown up and knows about herself and her own family much better than at the beginning of the novel. So, she portrays her inner world of experiences and feelings (example 6) and that of the rest

of the characters with a higher degree of emotional perception and detail. Accordingly, the reader can perceive a difference in the type of voice of the narrator who now is more 'intrusive' (Prince, 1982) than in Part I. Some of the views and thoughts of her family presented in the first part are again presented in the third part, but from a more elaborated point of view. For example, in (7) and (8) the topic is very similar: the Grandmother's concern about the way her grandchildren are being raised "on the other side of the border". However, whereas in Part I (example 7), Lala simply reports what the Grandmother sees and says (underlined), in Part III (example 8), she penetrates more inside her Grandmother's mind and reports not only words but also thoughts:

- (6) I can feel the whoosh of wind as the trucks roar past me. When the traffic lets up, I run. A pickup honks and changes lanes to avoid me, I don't care, I don't care. Que me lleven de corbata. Take me, dangle me from the bumper. I don't care, I never belonged here. I don't know where I belong anymore. And the sting from the beating like nothing compared to how much I hurt inside (356).
- (7) We try sneaking into the Grandparents' bedroom when no one is looking, which the Awful Grandmother strictly forbids. All this we do and more. Antonieta Araceli faithfully reports as much to the Awful Grandmother, and the Awful Grandmother herself has seen how these children raised on the other side don't know enough to answer, – *¿Mande usted?* to their elders. – What? we say in the horrible language, which the Awful Grandmother hears as *¿Guat?* – What? we repeat to each other and to her. The Awful Grandmother shakes her head and mutters, – My daughters-in-law have given birth to a generation of monkeys (28).
- (8) It seemed to the Grandmother the girls had too much of everything—clothes, spending money, boyfriends, and their parents indulging them further with each birthday. She tried to give them some badly needed instruction, but they were lazy, ungrateful girls, beyond reach. She wondered how much Spanish they really understood when they nodded at everything she said, even when it wasn't appropriate (288).

In relation to this example, it is interesting to compare this passage about the Grandmother with a very similar one in WHC (9). Whereas in *Caramelo*, the narrator elaborates the thoughts and words of the Grandmother in greater detail, in WHC the narrator just presents what the Grandmother does (underlined):

- (9) The awful grandmother says it all in Spanish, which I understand when I'm paying attention. "What?" I say, though it's neither proper nor polite. "What?" which the awful grandmother hears as "*¿Güat?*" But she only gives me a look and shoves me toward the door (19).

This deeper degree of intrusion in the character's minds and souls by the I-narrator is what produces the merging of voices and the effect of not knowing who is talking: it may be Lala, the I-narrator talking to the implied reader or another character like Grandmother or Father talking to us. This aspect of the narration will be dealt with in the next section.

Discourse presentation in Cisneros' fiction

One of the main tools that authors have to show different narrative voices in a novel are different types of discourse to present the characters' speech and thought. Following Leech & Short's model (1981), there are at least three main types of discourse presentation: direct, indirect and free style. The most usual ways of presenting characters' speech and thought are direct (DS/T) and indirect (IS/T) styles. The former is a verbatim quotation of someone's speech or thought and the latter involves reporting what a character says or thinks in the narrator's own words. However, there are also freer ways of presenting the characters' discourse so that they seem to speak directly to the reader without the intermediate presence of the narrator, the so-called 'free direct speech/thought' (FDS/T) and 'free indirect speech/thought' (FIS/T). Sandra Cisneros uses these three main styles of presenting characters' discourse in different ways in each of her novels. Each style allows different degrees of involvement on the part of the narrator and produces different effects in the narration.

Cisneros uses mainly direct (dotted) and indirect (underlined) styles of discourse in HMS and some parts of WHC to report the characters' words or thoughts (see examples 1-3 above and example 10 below). However, the author uses a free style of speech and thought presentation when she wants to give a sense of immediacy to the characters' thoughts and words. This sense of immediacy is hard to achieve with the direct and indirect styles because of the constant repetition of the reporting clause. The FD style is used in the third part of WHC and in *Caramelo*, however the FI style is just used in *Caramelo*. The FD style is like the direct style but with the reporting clause removed such as in "It's *mijo's* birthday!" in (5). Here, the narrator does not include the reporting clause "the Grandmother thought to herself" to give more prominence to the character of the Grandmother and less intervention to Lala as a narrator. However, the FI style shows a backshift of the tense and a change from the first person to the third person as well as in the absence of a reporting clause. Some examples of FIT can be found in (10) below (double underlined).

- (10) The Grandmother was strangely quiet the rest of the tri Mars' string of buildings impressed her. She thought about how she might invest the money from the sale OF the house on Destiny Street.(IT) She didn't have to ask permission from anyone now, did she? (FIT) She busied herself looking through the classifieds of the newspaper Mars had given her and ignored the chatter of her grandchildren. Since they spoke to each other in English most of the time, this was easy to do. Was it true one could become rich in San Antonio? (FIT) Not that she had any intention of moving to San Antonio. Why, of course, she wanted to live near her sons and be with them in Chicago.(FIT) But it doesn't hurt to look, she thought to herself.(DT) (282).

One of the main effects of this free style presentation of discourse is the merger of the characters', narrator's and author's levels of discourse in the novel. The interweaving of narrative voices in the story makes it difficult to tell whether one is reading the thoughts of the character, the voice of the narrator or the views of the

author. In the examples of FIT in (10), it could be the voice of the Grandmother herself taking distance from her own situation or it could be Lala as an intrusive I-narrator taking the position of her Grandmother and thinking through her mind. The same fusion of voices happen in (11) where the author uses different modes of discourse presentation in order to make Lala tell the story as a first person narrator who merges with the thoughts of one of the characters: her Father. Here, also, the code-switching (hereinafter, CS) plays a very important role in giving voices to the narrator and the characters (see García Vizcaíno, 2005).

- (11) (a) Father was putting up a series of shelves for his fabric sample books, but now he's talking to a walk-in customer. (b) Some of the people who come in are downright rude. (c) Not the Mexicans. (d) They know to be polite. (e) I mean *los güeros*. (f) Instead of calling Father "Mister Reyes," they call Father "Inocencio". (g) What lack of respect! (FDT). (h) Qué bárbaros. Pobrecitos (FDT). (i) Father says we have to forgive the ignorant, because they know not what they do (IS). (j) But if we know enough about their culture to know what's right, how come they can't bother to learn about ours? (FDT) (308).

The use of CS in Cisneros's narrative is another important linguistic tool used to present different styles in the speech and thought of the characters. It is precisely by the type of code-switching that we can frequently distinguish the different narrative voices in her novels. In many of the cases of free direct and indirect style, the reader can infer who is talking by identifying the type of CS that is being used. For example, in (31g) above, the expression "What lack of respect!" is a type of calque from Spanish into English used only by the immigrant characters in the novel, not by first generation Chicanos such as Lala or her brothers. So, in that utterance we recognize the Father's voice through the narrator. With respect to the use of CS in Cisneros' narrative, it should also be said that it becomes increasingly complex over time: CS is almost inexistent in HMS, her first novel, much more frequent in WHC and a key element in the writing of the most recent of the three works, *Caramelo*, due to its profuse and constant use. In any case, the role of CS in Cisneros' fiction is a topic that deserves special attention and a separate chapter that we cannot develop here due to obvious space constraints.

Conclusion

Through the analysis presented, it can be concluded that the Cisneros' use of type A and B narrators, multiple addressees, and different discourse presentations develops gradually in complexity as her novels emerge over the years. Although the type of narrator is always internal, this internal narrative mode evolves differently in each novel. First, in HMS, we find an I-narrator in the main character of Esperanza who is more perceptive than evaluative. Second, in WHC, narrative techniques start getting more complex since in all stories, except one, multiple I-narrators are used in the form of different female characters who address multiple addressees. Third, in *Caramelo* narrative complexity is even more outstanding since not only two different types of narrators are used (I-narrator and third-person narrator), but also the degree of intrusion on their part is deeper than in any other novel.

The modes of discourse presentation in Cisneros' novels also undergo a progressive evolution that runs parallel to the progression in the types of narrators. Hence, in *HMS*, the I-narrator presents the speech and thought of the characters mainly in direct and indirect styles. This type of discourse presentation is directly related to a type of narrator who mainly presents facts, ideas and words and does not give us explicit evaluations of them, unlike the narrators in *WHC* and *Caramelo*. However, in *WHC*, apart from direct and indirect styles, we find some instances of free direct style. This also has a connection with the gradual degree of complexity in the development of the narrative voices in this novel, in particular in the third part. Finally, in Cisneros' last novel all types of discourse presentations are used, especially free direct and indirect styles in consonance with the freer narrative technique that *Caramelo* employs.

This gradual complexity in narrative and discourse presentation techniques has an impact on the reader and affects the way Chicano identity is portrayed in Cisneros' novels. So, in *HMS* and in the first and second parts of *WHC*, the I-narrator is an eleven-year-old girl who tells the implied reader mainly facts about the world that surrounds her. Nevertheless, in the third part of *WHC* and in *Caramelo*, this I-narrator in the person of the main characters (different women in *WHC* and Lala in *Caramelo*) has grown up and presents a more complex and detailed world around her. In other words, narrative styles seem to grow at the same pace as the age of the narrator. In particular, as the narrative and discourse presentation techniques evolve, the concept of Chicano identity also develops gradually and in different layers of meaning.

Accordingly, in *HMS* the concept of Chicana identity is focused on Esperanza who observes and reflects upon what is around her to find her own place in the world: her own identity. In *WCW*, different female voices try to find their status in society and their own self-realization in a patriarchal Chicano culture. Finally, in the third part of *WHC* and, especially, in *Caramelo*, the alternation of first-person and third-person narrators and a more profuse use of FD and FI styles of discourse allow characters "speak for themselves" without the direct intervention of the narrator. This presents the reader with two different voices, two different ways of living characters' identity: as Chicanos of first generation such as Lala or as immigrants such as her parents and grandparents. The narrator not only presents the reality and search for identity of first generation Chicanas, but also shows the identity conflict of other Mexican female immigrants such as the Awful Grandmother.

These two different perspectives represent two different generations and two different types of conflicts. On the one hand, the reader may perceive the perspective of Chicano female characters such as Lala, being Mexican but "born on the U.S. side of the border" (353) with their own struggles to find out who they are, where they belong: "I never belonged here. I don't know where I belong any more." (356). On the other hand, we find the perspective of the Mexican immigrants in the U.S having their own concerns (especially the Grandmother) about a new generation of Chicanos who are adopting the American way of life and seem to forget about Mexican traditions and values (see examples 7 and 8 above) So, the

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conflict of dual identity that pervades Chicano narrative is presented through different narrative voices, different discourse presentations and different codes in Cisneros' narrative.

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Notes

- ¹ *The House on Mango Street* was published in 1984. However, the publishers made some corrections that Cisneros was not able to revise until the fourth printing in 1988. The book was reissued in 1991. (de Valdés, 1998: 222).
- ² See Gewecke (2001) for more about the concept of 'frontier' and territories in Hispanic literature.
- ³ For a detailed analysis of Esperanza's search for her own identity through writing and what the House represents in this book, see Olivares (1987) and De Valdés (1998).