ENGL1030
Student: Jeremy Craig
Instructor: Ms. Elizabete Vasconcelos

"Linguistic Intrigue: How Bilingual Storytelling Reveals a Culture"

Language forms the basis of human understanding. Only through spoken or unspoken expression, human beings are able to communicate thoughts, feelings, fears, and hopes. Unspoken or written language is the most valuable tool used to portray a culture. By using written language, storytellers can present peoples, places, mores, customs, and values of a culture. In the realm of multicultural literature, using bilingual storytelling can confuse a reader at first, but upon further examination, the reader is able to take further insight on the culture portrayed in the story. By using multiple languages in a story, the reader is able to gain knowledge of class structure and conflict, important values of a culture, and attitudes of a culture as evidenced in Hugo Martinez-Serro's "Learn! Learn!"

When words outside the English language are placed upon the printed page of a story, they first serve to confuse the reader. In the case of Hugo Martinez-Serros's "Learn! Learn!" the heavily interspersed Spanish sentences and colorful expressions can easily force a reader to slow down as he or she ponders over their meaning. Even with a previous background in the Spanish language and footnotes, a non-Spanish fluent reader can be slowed in pace when trying to follow the meaning of each phrase. The usual speed to which the reader normally may be accustomed in reading slows down. Dealing with multiple languages in a story–especially if a person is not particularly fluent in one of them–can be a situation of frustration as strange or difficult words may appear right in the middle of a sentence. However, for as frustrating as it is to have to negotiate two languages in a story, without the bilingualism seen in "Learn! Learn!" much of the meaning and insight into the Mexican-American barrio culture would be lost. The use of Spanish along with English forces the reader to slow down from a moderate clip of skimming as the confusion the of reader has forced the reader to look for the meaning of the phrases in footnotes or other references. Because the reader *must* slow down, the passage obtains emphasis because he or she is forced to find its meaning. Once the meaning is found, this phrase or sentence may linger due to the effort that must be used to understand it–which goes beyond the effort required for normal reading in English to which most Anglophones are accustomed.

All languages contain words and idiomatic expressions that cannot be fully grasped or contained in another language. The way a language comes across, even if words correspond directly in another language, is totally different from another. In a literary situation, having the characters (who are Mexican-American and native Spanish speakers) speak in their original language has a stronger effect than having all dialogue in English. For example, in "Learn! Learn!" as the narrator explains Rivera's hatred of the local parish priest, Spanish phrases are used to give emphasis upon this hatred: "The author of that bulletin was the *párroco* [parish priest], Father Tortas, a Spaniard whom Chema [Rivera] called, 'that overstuffed *gachupin* [Spaniard],' adding gleefully, '*Cuervo cargado de carnes y de cagada*, a crow bursting with flesh and shit'" (Martinez-Serros 261). By using the Spanish phrases, Martinez-Serros makes the reader pay particular attention to Rivera's dislike of Father Tortas, thus giving emphasis to the characterization of Rivera. By showing the native language of the character, the Spanish phrases enable the reader to know immediately that Rivera is from a Hispanic culture and the added dimension of heritage is added. The phrase *"Cuervo cargado de carnes y de cagada"* does not

directly translate to what the author connotes as its meaning; as referenced with the AltaVista Babelfish Translator, the direct translation returns "loaded crow of meats and of feces." The Spanish comes across more clearly than would plain English words alone as the idiomatic meaning (provided with idiomatic translation instead of literal in the quotation) is more robust. The stronger meaning is given to the passage also by virtue of the fact that having a different language used with English allows for further emphasis by requiring the reader to slow down and to try to process the words that are in a foreign language.

An important part of most languages that becomes noticeable when comparing English to other languages is how one addresses another person, in the form of a formal or informal "you." Most major languages, with the notable exception of English, use at *least* a two-tiered system of address, having one form of "you" for usage with kinsmen, friends, and peers, and a different form of "you" for addressing someone with more status or age than the addressor. In Spanish, the singular "you" is stratified into *tú* and *usted*. *Tú* is more likely used informally and in family situations; *usted*, by contrast, is used with people one does not know, one's elders, or those who have a higher rank than oneself. Regardless of rank, however, it is more appropriate to address strangers with *usted* than *tú*. This stratification of language can also reflect upon stratification of culture. In some cultures, especially those of the Spanish-speaking world, it is considered extremely rude to address one who is not known well or is of higher status than oneself with *tú*. *Tú* can also be used in a demeaning manner when the person of higher status refuses to address the unknown (and in this case lower-class) person as *usted* as well. This is exemplified by Martinez-Serros, in a scene where Rivera and Father Tortas comes to a clicmatic argument in which anger is derived from not using *usted* in a respectful manner:

> Unruffled, José Marí a understood but kept his hands at his sides. Then the priest asked, "¿Eres [the verb "to be" is in the *tú* form here] *una de mis ovejas?"* all the while thinking whether you're mine or not you're a sheep.
> *"Soy hombre*, I'm a man. *Vivo en este barrio*, I live in this neighborhood," he [Rivera] answered coldly, offended by the other's use of *tú*. Fucking priests, he thought, they're all alike." (267)

The class disparity between Father Tortas and Rivera is made apparent through the use of Spanish. By addressing Rivera with *eres*, the singular familiar form of the verb "to be" instead of the *usted* form, ***son,*** Tortas has insulted Rivera, as Rivera is a stranger. Protocol of courtesy would call for the use of the *usted* form, but Tortas shows his indignant attitude to someone he believes is common by using *tú*. Despite the fact that Tortas is "higher" in cultural "rank" than Rivera, Rivera's constant and persistent attitude is again revealed by this passage. Through the use of two languages, the reader is able to understand cultural structure and custom as well as gaining a better characterization of Rivera. If no Spanish was used, the meaning would be totally lost as English uses only one form of "you" for all cases in forms of address. The added dimension of characterization would be lost without using Spanish in the story.

The use of two languages within a story gives a reader a confusing yet intriguing picture of characterization and culture. Bilingual storytelling forces the reader to slow down and gain further emphasis upon the phrases that are in the minority or foreign language, but once the reader has learned to process the foreign words, the reader gains an invaluable picture of cultural setting and characterization. The views of idiomatic expressions, cultural attitudes, and class conflict derived from the use of two languages are useful for the reader to gain meaning that one could not gain if only one language was used throughout the story. As the power of language is used to reveal a culture, a greater understanding is afforded the reader.

Works Cited

AltaVista Translations. AltaVista Company and Systran S.A. 20 Feb. 2000.

Martinez-Serros, Hugo. "Learn! Learn!" *New Worlds of Literature*. 2nd ed. Eds. Jerome Beaty and J. Paul Hunter. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1994. 260-69.