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Eds.: Raquel Merino
J. M. Santamaría
Eterio Pajares



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Code-switching, Metalinguistics, and Translation
in a Bilingual/Bicultural Novel:
Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo or Puro Cuento*

Fritz G. Hensey

The University of Texas at Austin

In 2002, Mexican-American author Sandra Cisneros' second novel, *Caramelo or Puro Cuento* (Cisneros 2002a), was published along with Liliana Valenzuela's Spanish version (Cisneros 2002b). By year's end, Cisneros' original English version had been listed by the London **Guardian** of 21 December 2002 as the year's best selling Latino work. In 2003, author and translator visited Madrid and Barcelona to promote the Valenzuela translation, which also achieved best-seller status and favorable reviews by numerous Spanish media. *Caramelo* is the chronicle of three generations of an immigrant family and their yearly journeys between Mexico and the United States. It is a first-person narrative in which Cisneros assumes several voices, those of a pre-school child and of a teenager before and after puberty. The author herself provides an impressive performance of her new novel in the audio version (Cisneros 2002c).

One of the topics that attracted much media attention was Cisneros' frequent use of Spanish words, phrases, and passages throughout the novel. This essay will address such **code-switching** and related uses of the author's bilingual and bicultural knowledge and skills. Code-switching (hereafter CS) has been described by François Grosjean (2000) in terms of a receptor or «host» language, which incorporates elements of a second, or «guest» language. Inclusion of one or more foreign languages in literary works is far from uncommon, but seldom is it so essential to the overall work as in *Caramelo*. Here, English is the host language, the language of narrative and dialog, while Spanish is the guest language.

A great amount of research in different language communities has shown the universality of CS in situations of language contact accompanied by bilingualism. A related process, lexical borrowing, involves individual items that may or may not be assimilated into the receptor language. According to sociolinguist Carmen Silva-Corvalán (2001:315-8), CS (*alternancia o intercambio de códigos*) is the alternate use of languages by a speaker during a

turn at speaking. Silva-Corvalán describes Mexican-American CS a communicative style characteristic of relatively balanced bilinguals. Such bilinguals, she asserts, skillfully use CS in writing for rhetorical purposes. Similarly, Miranda Stewart (1999:194) points out that while borrowing and CS are decried as a threat to the integrity of the Spanish language, these processes can also be seen in a positive light; namely, that by CS bilinguals draw on the resources of two codes just as monolinguals make use of different registers of their own single code.

The attractiveness of CS as an object of linguistic research is its role, along with lexical borrowing, as a major mechanism for language change. (Thomason 2001: 131-6). CS also has inherent interest for linguists as a sociolinguistic feature of contact situations. Ronald Wardhaugh (1998:100) sees CS as «a conversational strategy used to create, evoke, or change interpersonal relations» among bilinguals. Joan Swann (2000:164-5) cites the use of CS in maintaining or negotiating a certain type of social identity in relation to others and notes that it «allows speakers (simultaneous) access to different social identities.»

Using structural criteria, Carol Myers-Scotton and Janice Jake (2000:282-3) identify the language that the speaker believes he/she is speaking and which provides the grammatical framework for the utterance, as the **matrix** language (ML). The «guest» language is termed the **embedded** language (EL), which replaces certain elements of the ML. EL elements are not inserted haphazardly but, according to Shana Poplach (2000:227-9), are constrained by what type of units may be switched and at what points in the matrix language they may be embedded. Such constraints may be syntactic, semantic, or both. Like language in general, CS is a form of rule-governed behavior.

Using the sentence or utterance as the basic unit, we may classify CS as intrasentential or intersentential. Intrasentential switching is a more complex task than simply shifting to the other language. Proficient intrasentential switching requires a high level of switching skills in order to achieve a smooth blending of words and patterns from both languages. Intersentential CS requires adequate knowledge of the languages but no high level of switching skills. The following examples from *Caramelo* will illustrate the two types. Note: in the following examples, page references are to Cisneros (2002a).

Intrasentential CS:

- (i) That's how we are, we *mexicanas*, *puro coraje y pasión*. (274)
- (ii) This *escuincla* looks like I have to help her put on her *calzones*. (112)
- (iii) *Lo más triste* is Ernesto at parties. (369)
- (iv) —*Vieja metiche*, I hear myself muttering like my mother. (363)
- (v) I'd have a room of my own, because even he admits that I'm «*una señorita*» now. (301)

Most switches involve noun phrases, while the third example is a reduced clause fitting easily into the subject position of the ML, as example (iv) is a vocative. All EL units blend seamlessly into the basically English sentences.

Lexical insertions:

There is a large subset of culture-specific Spanish borrowings that are mostly unassimilated into English. Of the various semantic areas represented, the most frequent by far is food (*mole, pirulí, chicharrón, bolillo, café de olla* ...). Other areas include clothing (*chanclas, rebozo, huipil* ...); ethnic descriptors (*raza, bolilla, güero, morenito, gabacho* ...); and invective (*metiche, pendeja, baboso, perra, mitotero* ...). More than CS of everyday vocabulary with ready ML equivalents, lexical insertions of this sort demonstrate the speaker or writer's knowledge of concepts common to the target audience.

This is analogous to the use of technical or academic terms current in other venues and sometimes expressed in second languages. Erudite CS, like that of Umberto Eco's (1980) *Il Nome della rosa* and its many translations, tends to fall into this category. For a discussion of the Spanish and English translations of Eco's novel, see Hensey (1996).

Intersentential CS:

- (i) Think you're smart because you talk like a white girl. *Huerca babosa*. (354)
- (ii) There's a black-and-white Libertad Lamarque film. *Se ve que está buena*. (333)
- (iii) I should have let a fender take me. ¡*Te llevo de corbata!* Take me already! (363)
- (iv) That's what comes of being born in the United States. *Sin memoria y sin vergüenza*. (205)
- (v) I'm in the middle of nowhere! *Soy una ánima sola*. (406)

The switched sentences link easily with the surrounding English ones. In addition, example (iii) is an instance of repeated CS emphasizing the concept of being hit by a car and carried away hanging from the bumper: take/llevar/take. A second form of intersentential CS involves the insertion of entire texts in Spanish. These quotations range from traditional sayings to song lyrics and poetry.

Textual insertions:

- (i) (Chapter 22): *Sin Madre, Sin Padre, Sin Perro Que Me Ladre*. (97)
- (ii) Downstairs they start to sing «The Little Mornings». *Estas son las mañanitas que cantaba el rey David, a las muchachas bonitas ...* (53)
[Note: Sung by the author in the audio version]
- (iii) Toña la Negra with her beautiful night voice. *Veracruz, donde hacen sus nidos las ondas del mar* (265)
- (iv) There's a poem by García Lorca we had to memorize once in school:
¿Quién me compraría a mí este cintillo que tengo y esta tristeza de hilo blanco para hacer pañuelos? (237)
- (v) ¡Ay, ay, ay, ay! *Canta y no llores ...* This is the song the Grandmother teaches us on the trip to Chicago. (237)

A **calque** is a copy of a lexical or syntactic pattern typical of the EL inserted into the ML; the ML provides the vocabulary. The result is a «literal» translation of the EL element. A well-known lexical calque from Spanish to English is «Between and drink a chair» from *Entre y tome asiento*. An example of a morphosyntactic calque from English to Spanish would be the «bilingual» sign posted at some American airports, «Empujando puerta suena alarma», a literal rendition of the accompanying warning *Pushing door sounds alarm*.

Balanced bilinguals accustomed to CS should have little difficulty in recognizing calques and in reconstructing their source utterances. Since the reader in effect restores the original language, calques may be considered cases of covert CS, meant to reveal and not disguise the source text. Spanish translation scholars. CS is performed when the reader mentally back-translates the English to a likely Spanish original.

Minnette Wilkinson and López Guix (1997:243) point out that calques have a two-fold, Jekyll-and-Hyde nature. On the one hand, they assert that «El calco ... contribuye tanto como el préstamo naturalizado a enriquecer la lengua que lo recibe». Unamuno is quoted as saying that borrowing serves to enrich the language by inserting new nuances for expressing familiar concept, whether or not there is other native vocabulary available. Like lexical borrowing, calques are a by-product of extensive culture contact and transfer, including the written word and its translation. On the other hand, say these scholars, «Para los traductores, el calco, como el célebre personaje de Robert Louis Stevenson, tiene un segundo aspecto que hay que evitar a toda costa, puesto que puede representar la expresión más concreta de la abominación de la desolación».

Professional translators criticize calques as being indicative of a translator's inability to free him/herself from source-language surface forms and produce natural-sounding equivalents in the target language. Such criticism hardly applies to an author of the caliber of Sandra Cisneros. Her calques rather appear to help implement one of her intentions in interweaving Spanish into her novel. In an interview with the Barcelona monthly *Que Leer* of 1 July 2003, she stated,

«Trabajé para que el lector norteamericano entendiera que los personajes están hablando en castellano. Entonces la traducción, al regresarlo al español, salía muy natural.»

Calques:

- (i) But where am I to present myself? (109)
- (ii) It is the hour of the nap. (39)
- (iii) What a barbarity! (11)
- (iv) You mean to say that your «rule» hadn't descended yet? (259)
- (v) Don't make me commit a craziness. (63)

The obvious Spanish sources of these sentences allow the bilingual reader to reconstruct to a high degree of certainty the characters' «original» words.

- (i) ¿Pero adónde debo presentarme?
- (ii) Es la hora de la siesta.
- (iii) ¡Qué barbaridad!
- (iv) ¿Quieres decir que todavía no te había bajado la regla?
- (v) No me hagas cometer una locura.

Repetitive-CS, whereby an item in one language is restated in the other language, is a form of **self-translation** that may serve to provide clarification or emphasis. In *Caramelo*, some of these self-translations seem to be for the benefit of readers with limited knowledge of Spanish. Self-translations take two forms: an **immediate**, conventional translation of a word or phrase, and a **delayed** contextualized rendition. In discussing the latter technique in my analysis of a Cormac McCarthy novel (Hensey 2003), I call it **inferential restatement** or **quasi-translation**.

Self-translation: immediate

- (i) ¡Ya tenemos casa! Father says. *We're homeowners!* (299)
- (ii) Ay, ya no puedo. *I can't anymore, I can't!* (293)
- (iii) I was estrenando, *wearing a new outfit.* (267)
- (iv) Me das asco, *you disgust me!* (11).
- (v) El destino es el destino. *A person's destiny is her destiny.* (69)

Examples (i) and (ii) are from dialog, while the remainder appears in narrative passages. The first two are examples of repetitive CS, while the remainder appear addressed to the reader in narrative segments. In some cases, when the author reads such passages, her volume drops and her delivery speeds up as if to generate verbal parentheses around the translated material. This technique does not apply to the following examples:

Inferential restatement or quasi-translation:

- (i) They call me *bolilla* when they cross my path, or worse yet, *gabacha*. Who wants to be called a *white girl*? (354)
- (ii) — Why do you think they call this dish *manchamanteles*? It really does *stain tablecloths*. (53)
- (iii) ¿*El ropero*? Oh, lots of things. Would you like to see? ... The Grandfather walks over to the walnut-wood *armoire* (57) (iv) You were telling *cochinadas*. — I was not *being filthy*. (172)
- (v) — You can't address my wife like that, *tarugo*! — Who are YOU to call me *an idiot*? (342)

In these examples, the narrator or one of the characters provides an explanation or restatement of the Spanish items. In example (iii), the grandfather's action provides a physical context for understanding *ropero*. In the last two examples, the second speaker's rejoinder restates the original term.

The examples from *Caramelo* have been of varieties of CS or closely related processes. Another major device is metalinguistic commentary on the two languages in narrative and dialog. Here, language examines language. The metalinguistic function is one of the communicative functions developed by Roman Jakobson (1967), and here I extend it to the overlapping interaction of two languages. These observations might also be called interlinguistic observations. As defined by translation scholar Peter Newmark (1988:43-4), Jakobson's metalinguistic function is that which «indicates a language's ability to explain, name, and criticize its own features.» Cisneros presents a wide range of lexical and phonological features of and/or English as observed by narrator or characters.

Metalinguistics: words and sounds:

- (i) — I'm talking to you! Mother continues. — *Te hablo*. Which sounds like *the Spanish for «devil»* (235)
- (ii) — A name fit for a *king*! — That's very funny, because my name is *rey*. Narciso Reyes del Castillo, to be precise. (108)
- (iii) She calls her «*tú*», the familiar «you». Not «*usted*», which is like bowing (342)

Bilingual puns and word-play:

- (i) The seats were redone in what my brothers got a kick out of calling «*Nalgahide*» (359)

- (ii) —What's the matter, Lala? ¿Estás «*deprimed*»? Father says, chuckling. It's an old joke, changing a Spanish word into English or the other way around, just to be a wise guy. (238)
- (iii) To see her so «*emotioned*» makes me feel sad for her. (265)

The first example is based on the upholstering material Naugahide. The remaining examples exploit similarities and differences between the languages in the area of cognate vocabulary and the corresponding morphologies.

Representation of accented speech:

- (i) —Oh my *Got*, Father says in his gothic English. (16)
- (ii) —*Jau du iú du?* Asked how he was coming along in his English lessons, —*Véri uel, zanc iú.* (209)
- (iii) —*Go hell ... Guat's a matter ... ¡Seim tu yu móder!* (9)

The sound of English, «the horrible language»

- (i) *Qué* strange was English ... It was a barbarous language! Curt as the commands of a dog trainer (209)
- (ii) The English she speaks to the *güeros*, nasally and whiny and with the syllables stretched out like the laundry on the clothesline. (376)
- (iii) —What? we say in the horrible language, which Awful Grandmother hears as *¡Guat?* (28)

«Proper» and «Crooked» Spanish

- (i) Not «Hank». Not «Henry». «*Enrique*,» he'd said. *Enrique Aragón*, in Spanish. And not a *crooked* Spanish either, like her own. (224)
- (ii) —Memo and Lolo? Are you joking? With their *pocho* Spanish nobody will understand what they're saying (257)
- (iii) —My son could do better than marry a woman who can't even speak *proper* Spanish. (85)

These metalinguistic observations reflect the author's awareness and mastery of the resources of each of the two languages and her personal knowledge and experience of interaction between the Mexican and Mexican-American cultures, the tension between *Chilango* and *Chicano*. This novel is rich in social and cultural information expressed through language behavior. Since Cisneros' writings have long been used in university programs in Mexican-American studies, *Caramelo* will doubtless prove to be a valuable resource. This tension is well represented in a passage in *Caramelo* (2002a), in

which protagonist Celaya's father, a native of Mexico City, confronts a former friend from West Texas:

A Cultural and Linguistic Divide

- You it was. You called *la Migra*. Explain. How is it the Immigration came to my shop that day, and not yours, eh?
- Man, *estás zafado*. You shitty *chilangos* think you know everything!
- *Baboso*. Can't even speak your mother tongue!
- I can speak my mother tongue all right, but you can bet it ain't Spanish. (380)

Cisneros told an interviewer for *La Vanguardia* of 9 June 2003, «Yo escribo en un inglés que es español, un inglés pensado en español. Yo creo que cuando dos culturas, dos idiomas están en roce, en competencia ...» (Interviewer: gana el más fuerte.) ... «No. Nace una tercera cultura. ... Hoy escribo un inglés imposible para quien no domine el español». She would later speak, in an interview for *Que Leer* on 1 July 2003, of the broad appeal of *Caramelo* in a world of immigrants and permeable, ambiguous borders. «Esta novela no es un cuento exótico. Lo que pasa es que gente de otros sitios reconoce igual que yo la frontera». However universal her theme, Cisneros' language is also authentic American English with Hispanic seasoning; «not too much, but just enough», to quote some of her characters. In this framework, it serves as well as a faithful literary reflection of the the major features of the language of a *frontera*, less a political boundary than a cultural frontier.

In her end-note to the Spanish version of *Caramelo*, translator, Liliana Valenzuela (Cisneros 2002b:464), vouches for the authenticity of Cisneros' usage: «Cisneros reproduce fielmente la completa naturalidad con que los habitantes de estas comunidades fronterizas sintetizan un lenguaje formado de palabras en inglés y español, el cual refleja una realidad auténtica y una personalidad incomparable.» Chicano poet Alurista gave a succinct picture of CS in Mexican-American communities. In a class lecture delivered at the University of Texas in 1983 and quoted by Melinda Stewart (1999:197), he stated: «This is the way we speak. *Así hablamos en los barrios, en las comunidades*. You know, we have to use English to survive and Spanish to preserve our heritage. Why you use one or the other *eso tiene mucho que ver con* what kind of impact you give to your words.»

Let the author have the final word. In an interview with the Barcelona daily *La Vanguardia* of 12 June 2003, Cisneros said: «El hogar del escritor es el idioma, el lenguaje. Con mi literatura intento buscar lo que me hace única como escritora, que entre otras cosas pretende reinventar el idioma inglés a la manera fronteriza. En ese territorio fronterizo es donde se puede construir una nueva cultura integradora.»

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