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## **‘Dad, yo soy una chica americana’: Migration, Identity and Language in Eduardo González Viaña’s *El Corrido de Dante***

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### *Abstract*

The focus of this article is the representation of language and identity in Hispanic immigrant literature. It provides a framework for the analysis of linguistic and cultural constructions of migrant identities in literary texts, on the basis of the exploration of the novel *El Corrido de Dante*, by Eduardo González Viaña. The most significant finding is that González Viaña applies linguistic homogenization in order to stress a common Hispanic identity without effacing cultural, national and ethnic differences, as these are stylistically marked by means of strategic (re)creations of different varieties of Spanish and instances of code-switching between Spanish and English (Spanglish) that require no bilingual competence. The article also sheds light on three crucial language and identity conflicts in the novel: intergenerational conflicts between undocumented migrants and their U.S.-born children; conflicts between Chicano/as and “new” Latino/as; and asymmetric power relations between Hispanics and Anglo-Americans.

*Keywords:* Hispanic immigrant literature; code-switching; Spanglish; bilingualism; language and identity; representation; borders

### 1. Introduction

This study is an approximation to the analysis of language and identity in Hispanic immigrant literature.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this article is to analyse the linguistic characteristics of the discourse produced by Latin American undocumented migrants and other U.S. Hispanics, or Latino/as, in the novel *El Corrido de Dante* (2006)<sup>2</sup> by the Peruvian writer Eduardo González Viaña (Chepén, 1942), with a particular focus on how this discourse is connected to questions of culture, identity and power.<sup>3</sup> For more than twenty years, González Viaña has worked as a professor in the United States, first in Berkeley and later in Oregon, where he has become a

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<sup>1</sup> González Viaña: *El Corrido de Dante*. University of Houston, Arte Público Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> For a definition of Hispanic immigrant literature and a comprehensive overview of the principal works and characteristics of the genre, see Nicolás Kanellos: *Hispanic Immigrant Literature: El Sueño del Retorno*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> I use the terms Hispanic and Latino/a interchangeably.

voice for Latin American migrants in the United States and a civil rights activist for these marginalised subjects.<sup>4</sup> The focus of this study is the literary (re)creation in *El Corrido de Dante* of the linguistic repertoire of Latino/as, in particular the use of language as a cultural or ethnic marker and the representation of code-switching between Spanish and English as a literary expression of bilingual identity.<sup>5</sup> *El Corrido de Dante* has been translated into English as *Dante's Ballad* (2007), by Susan Giersbach Rascón.<sup>6</sup> It should be observed, however, that the code-switching is lost in translation in the English edition: I therefore quote the Spanish text and provide the English translation in the footnotes.

The article opens with a brief discussion of identity and diversity in relation to Latin American migration, the linguistic situation of U.S. Hispanics, and González Viaña's literary production. Then I continue to outline the contours of a framework for the analysis of language and identity in polylingual literary texts involving code-switching, based on theories of Meir Sternberg, John Lipski and Mikhail Bakhtin. The third section is an overview of the linguistic repertoire in *El Corrido de Dante*, with special attention to characters' speech and the narrator's discourse. The last part analyses three conflicts in the novel intimately connected to questions of migration and linguistic and cultural identity: intergenerational conflicts between migrants and their children; conflicts between "new" and "old" Latino/as; and conflicts between Hispanics and Anglo-Americans.

## 2. Hispanics and the Spanish of the United States

In his novels, short stories and newspaper columns in Spanish, González Viaña analyses the Hispanic presence in the United States and sheds light upon the difficult struggle of many undocumented migrants against poverty, racism and asymmetrical power relations.<sup>7</sup>

According to the latest census from 2010, there are more than 50 million Hispanics (Latino/as) in the United States, the majority of them of Mexican origin, and it is a rapidly

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<sup>4</sup> See González Viaña's often political essays published in his blog in Spanish, *El Correo de Salem*, <http://www.elcorreodesalem.com/>. His is also an active columnist in several newspapers. Some of his critical reflections have been collected in three volumes published in Peru: *La dichosa memoria*. Lima: Librusa, 2004; *El Correo del milenio*. Lima: Ediciones Copé – PETROPERÚ, 1999; and *El Correo de Salem*. Lima: Mosca Azul Editores, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> I use the term code-switching to designate the phenomenon of using two languages in one communicative episode. Thus, it includes switching between two languages within the same sentence, as well as between sentences.

<sup>6</sup> Eduardo González Viaña: *Dante's Ballad*. Trans. Susan Giersbach Rascón. Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Eduardo González Viaña: *Los sueños de América*. Lima: Alfaguara, 2001; translated into English as *American Dreams*. Houston, Texas: Arte Público Press, 2005, and *El amor de Carmela me va a matar*. Unites States: Axiara Editions, 2010, are other outstanding examples of González Viaña's fictional work about Latin American migration to the United States.

growing demographic group.<sup>8</sup> Undocumented migrants, who have good reasons to evade contact with the authorities, tend to not appear in the statistics, but they have been estimated at 11 million.<sup>9</sup>

Curiously enough, *El Corrido de Dante* is a novel written by a Peruvian author living in Oregon about primarily the U.S.-Mexican borderlands and a family of undocumented Mexican migrants. However, in the vast gallery of characters in the novel, there are Hispanics of many different national, cultural and social backgrounds. As Marta Fairclough<sup>10</sup> points out, the U.S. Hispanic population is an extremely heterogeneous group. In fact, the official label "Hispanic or Latino" spans native groups as well as several generations of migrants, from descendants of the Mexicans who were annexed by the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo in 1848 to "new" Latino/as – i.e., recently arrived immigrants from Mexico, Central or South America. Several generations of immigration from Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, etc., have not only contributed to the Hispanic presence in the United States, but also maintained the Spanish language. As several researchers have argued, without continuous Latin American immigration, the Spanish language would not have survived in the United States, because the language policy of the dominant culture has always strived to assimilate languages other than English. In sum, U.S. Latino/as can be said to constitute a microcosm of the Hispanic World.<sup>11</sup>

The heterogeneity of U.S. Hispanics is associated with great linguistic variation. An individual of Mexican origin, for example, often has a series of linguistic options. Fairclough presents a scale with standard Spanish at one extreme of the spectrum and standard English at the other. In between, she places popular Spanish (different varieties or dialects), *pachuco* (or *caló*), Spanglish and vernacular varieties of English. Spanglish is a term commonly used to refer to the mixture of Spanish and English spoken along the U.S.-Mexican border and among sections of the Hispanic population of the United States.<sup>12</sup> Chicana activist Gloria

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<sup>8</sup> According to the 2010 Census, which is based upon self-definition, "Hispanic or Latino" refers to a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race." Sharon R. Ennis, Merarys Ríos-Vargas and Nora G. Albert: *The Hispanic Population*. United States: U.S. Census Bureau, May 2011, accessed on 5 June 2011 on <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Bryan Baker and Nancy Rytina: *Estimates of Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States* January 2012. United States: Office of Immigration Statistics, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, March 2013, accessed on 8 February 2015 on <http://www.dhs.gov/publication/estimates-unauthorized-immigrant-population-residing-united-states-january-2012>. See also Debra A. Castillo: *Redreaming America: Toward a Bilingual American Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Marta Fairclough: El (denominado) Spanglish en Estados Unidos: polémicas y realidades. In *La Revista Internacional de Lingüística Iberoamericana* 1/2 (2003), p. 185-204, p. 192.

<sup>11</sup> Fairclough, El (denominado) Spanglish, p. 191-192.

<sup>12</sup> Fairclough, El (denominado) Spanglish, p. 187, 192-193.

Anzaldúa maintains that “because we are a complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages.”<sup>13</sup> As Anzaldúa points out, “[t]here is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience.”<sup>14</sup>

For Chicano/as as well as U.S. Hispanics in general, language is closely tied to questions of identity and power. While “new” Latino/as often try to preserve the Spanish varieties of their homelands, Chicano/as like Anzaldúa defend their rights to speak and write in Spanglish or regional variants of Chicano Spanish. “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language”, Anzaldúa firmly states, fighting back against what she calls “linguistic terrorism”: the marginalization and prohibition of Chicano Spanish, which is the result of Anglo-American internal imperialism and the belief that it is “poor Spanish”.<sup>15</sup> According to Anzaldúa, Chicano Spanish is a living language, a “border tongue”, that is the historical result of the need to identify the Chicano/as a distinct people in between two dominant cultures (the Anglo-American and the Mexican). The Chicano movement’s struggle to find a voice is in Anzaldúa closely related to questions of power and the freedom of expression in one’s own language(s), whether they are Chicano Spanish, Tex-Mex argot or *pachuco*. For some Chicano/as in the East or Midwest, Anzaldúa affirms, “language is a homeland closer than the Southwest [i.e. Aztlán].”<sup>16</sup>

González Viaña, who writes in Spanish and publishes his work in the United States as well as in Peru, feels it is important that Latino/as read Hispanic literature and he believes that more books ought to be published in Spanish in the United States.<sup>17</sup> If Anzaldúa’s political struggle is an attempt to overcome the silence of the Chicano/a minority, González Viaña can be associated with a broader preoccupation with the rights of the Spanish-speaking population, in particular giving a voice to new Latino/as from Central and South America. If Anzaldúa’s writing is a formal experiment in which code-switching between Spanish and English comes as naturally to the author as the occasional words in *nahuatl*, González Viaña writes mainly in American standard Spanish, although he uses dialectal speech and code-switching between English and Spanish as stylistic devices. However, what unites them is their concern for

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<sup>13</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa: *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007, p. 77. It can be observed that “Chicano/a” refers to a U.S. citizen of Mexican origin (see, for example, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* de la Real Academia Española), but is normally used with a political slant that goes back to the Chicano Movement of the 1960s. Not all Mexican Americans identify themselves as “Chicano/as”.

<sup>14</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 80-81.

<sup>15</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 80-81.

<sup>16</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, p. 77.

<sup>17</sup> Eduardo Corrales: Entrevista con Eduardo González Viaña. *El Corrido de Dante: una metáfora sin documentos de la inmigración latinoamericana en EEUU*. In: *Letralia* XI/158 (19 February 2007), accessed on 15 July 2011 on <http://www.letralia.com/158/entrevistas02.htm>.

questions of language, identity and power and the rights of marginalised groups, whether they be bilingual Chicanos or newly arrived South American migrants.

### 3. Representation, polylingualism and code-switching

Hispanic immigrant literature brings to the fore a problem relating to voice and literary representation: the representation of a narrative situation in which two or more languages coexist in the extratextual reality: Spanish and English, as well as regional varieties, different sociolects and Spanglish (code-switching).

In an article entitled "Polylingualism as reality and translation as mimesis", Meir Sternberg poses the following mimetic challenge in literature: "how to represent the reality of polylingual discourse through a communicative medium which is normally unilingual?"<sup>18</sup> By "polylingual" Sternberg refers to the diversity of utterances (usually made by different speakers) within the world of a single text.<sup>19</sup> The problem that Sternberg deals with concerns "heterolingual" or "translational mimesis" and he suggests the following hypothesis: "The interlingual tension between language as represented object (within the original or reported speech-event) and language as representational means (within the reporting speech-event) is primarily mimetic rather than communicative."<sup>20</sup> In a literary text, it is generally the narrator (or sometimes a character) who does the translation and/or representation of the original speech event, and the reader normally has access only to the result of that operation. It is thus important to emphasise that character speech is not a mirror of an extratextual linguistic reality, but a (re)creation of speech.

It should be stressed that the literary text is potentially polylingual, because characters may speak in different languages or dialects and the story often moves between various countries, as it normally does in immigrant literature. The translational mimesis arises from the problem of eliminating heterolingual (foreign) speech.<sup>21</sup> Sternberg argues that the author (or narrator) can apply different strategies to deal with this problem of heterolingual mimesis or

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<sup>18</sup> Meir Sternberg: Polylingualism as Reality and Translation as Mimesis. In *Poetics Today* 2.1 (1981), p. 221-239, p. 222.

<sup>19</sup> Sternberg here differentiates between, on the one hand, the sociolinguistic terms "multilingual" and "monolingual", which refer to the linguistic range of a single speaker or community, and on the other, the notions of "polylingual" and "unilingual", which he prefers when speaking about literature and representation. According to Sternberg, "a work may be said to represent a polylingual reality of discourse even though each individual speaker or milieu is strictly monolingual, and to represent a unilingual reality of discourse even though each speaker is potentially multilingual." He also adds the term "heterolingual" to denote a foreign language or dialect, usually a language other than that of the reporting speech-event. Sternberg, 'Polylingualism', p. 222.

<sup>20</sup> Sternberg, Polylingualism, p. 222.

<sup>21</sup> Sternberg, Polylingualism, p. 224.

translation, strategies that can be arranged on a scale according to their distance from the represented object: “vehicular matching”, “selective reproduction”, “verbal transposition”, “conceptual reflection”, “explicit attribution” and “homogenizing convention”.<sup>22</sup> At one extreme of the scale, vehicular matching implies a mere juxtaposition of languages without translation. At the other extreme, homogenizing convention reduces character speech to an intertextually homogenized and standardized language. Selective reproduction works as a kind of mimetic synecdoche, as when emblematic words or phrases (clichés) from a foreign language are used to signal that the original speech-event is in that language. In a similar way, verbal transposition implies a sort of bilingual interference: the narrator incorporates characteristic traits or structures, such as grammatical irregularities, from the translated language in order to inform the reader about the original speech-event. Conceptual reflection takes this one step further and indicates the foreign code not in verbal form but in sociocultural norms, for example by means of cultural stereotypes. Finally, explicit attribution is a direct statement concerning the language in which the reported speech was originally made (comments such as “... , she answered in Spanish”).<sup>23</sup>

What if the object to be represented is a bilingual milieu in which the use of code-switching is common? Sternberg affirms that sociolinguistic interference and code-switching among bilingual speakers are also objects of translational mimesis.<sup>24</sup> As John Lipski remarks, written code-switching is not spontaneous speech but a literary device and therefore it does not necessarily reflect social usage.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Spanglish and code-switching are subject to the same transformations as heterolingual discourse when they are incorporated in the literary text. Moreover, written code-switching is a device that may work as an efficient identity marker. A few heterolingual words “thrown in for flavour” can serve as cultural and/or ethnic markers. Only a low grade of bilingual competence is needed for the reader, even though biculturalism may be presupposed.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the language-game of loan shifting may visualise and emphasise that other culture, like a world seen on the other side of the mirror.<sup>27</sup> When applied more consistently in the text, code-switching can consist of intersentential

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<sup>22</sup> It is to be noted that “the scale classifies types or aspects or translational mimesis rather than texts or textual segments.” Sternberg, *Polylingualism*, p. 232.

<sup>23</sup> Sternberg, *Polylingualism*, p. 223-232.

<sup>24</sup> Sternberg, *Polylingualism*, p. 230.

<sup>25</sup> John Lipski: Spanish-English Language Switching in Speech and Literature: Theories and Models. In: *The Bilingual Review* 9.3 (1982), p. 191-212, p. 191-193.

<sup>26</sup> Lipski, Spanish-English Language Switching, p. 195.

<sup>27</sup> Florencia Cortés-Conde and Diana Boxer: Bilingual word-play in literary discourse: the creation of relational identity. In: *Language and Literature* 11/2 (2002), p. 137-151, p. 146.

switches, typical of bilingual individuals, and intrasentential switches, which often are accompanied by a high degree of bilingual grammar.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. The linguistic repertoire in *El Corrido de Dante*

The protagonist of *El Corrido de Dante*, Dante Celestino, is an undocumented Mexican farm labourer, who has worked in Oregon for more than twenty years without obtaining U.S. residence. Dante's narrative is situated on two different levels: his family's past is narrated in a series of retrospections including fragments from his life that he tells his four-legged friend, the donkey Virgilio, about his lack of future in Mexico, the journey across the border, U.S. employers' abuse of undocumented workers, the difficulties he has had in attempting to be reunited with his fiancé Beatriz and the endless quest for the Green Card. On the other level, Dante's current life in the United States is narrated: we read of how his only child Emma elopes with her criminal Chicano boyfriend Johnny at her *quinceañera* party (traditional Latin American celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday) and how Dante, together with Virgilio, sets out on an odyssey in his old van in order to find her. There is also a frame narrative about a Hispanic journalist who is investigating the story of Dante's search for his daughter all over the continent accompanied by a donkey. The journalist is the main narrator, but he is also supposed to be the author of the novel that we are reading. A salient feature of the text is the parodic style and the technique of the pastiche, which makes the novel a hybrid of different genres and intertexts.<sup>29</sup> The most obvious intertextual references are Texan-Mexican *corridos* (traditional border ballads), the *Divine Comedy*, the *Bible*, *telenovelas* (Latin American soap operas), radio shows, advertisements and syncretic Latin American religious beliefs such as the cult of *Santa Muerte*.

In his novels and short stories about Latin American migration to the United States, González Viaña celebrates the idea of an overreaching, communal and unproblematic Latin American or Hispanic identity, Cecilia Esparza argues.<sup>30</sup> A similar project can be observed in the linguistic standardisation that González Viaña performs in the text, a technique that implies a continuation of his literary style from his early career in Peru. Despite the many voices and the variety of literary and non-literary genres intercalated in the novelistic text, González Viaña shows a tendency to level (at least partially) the novelistic discourse in order to obtain

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<sup>28</sup> Lipski, *Spanish-English Language Switching*, p. 195.

<sup>29</sup> I here make use of Bakhtin's theories of genres and dialogic speech. See Mikhail Bakhtin: *The Problem of Speech Genres*. In: Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (eds.): *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2002, p. 60-102.

<sup>30</sup> Cecilia Esparza: *Peruanos en el mundo. Narrativas sobre migración internacional en la literatura reciente*. In: *Inti* 67-68 (2010), p. 173-184, p. 174-175.

a coherent, poetic prose in American standard Spanish. By means of this homogenising convention, the author performs a stylistic equalization and translation of the narrator's discourse and characters' speech into a predominantly literary language mixed with passages written in a more journalistic prose style (the fictive author is after all a reporter).

Furthermore, as in the works of the Mexican writer Juan Rulfo (there is an intertextual reference in the text to Comala in *Pedro Páramo*),<sup>31</sup> the characters sometimes deliver lines of great poetic beauty, as when Dante's mother wisely tells him before he leaves Mexico:

“[C]uando ya te toque morir, déjale dicho que te traiga de vuelta para acá. Los muertos y las plantas tienen su tierra, hijo. Y si te plantan aquí, al igual que las plantas, florecerás...”<sup>32</sup>

In the same way, the narrating journalist sometimes expresses himself poetically, as in the following intertextual nod to *Platero y yo* (*Platero and I*), by the Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez: “Es pequeño, peludo, suave, burro por dentro y por fuera, y por más burro que sea, transparente, silencioso, y leve, tan leve que no hay razón en este mundo para que sepa leer ni para que siquiera pensemos en él.”<sup>33</sup> To some extent, this linguistic standardisation in the novel stresses the similarities between Latin American migrants, which can be interpreted as a means of emphasising the Spanish language and Hispanic cultural heritage as a unifying factor.

However, even though González Viaña defends the idea of a shared Hispanic or Latin American identity and makes use of homogenising convention in *El Corrido de Dante*, he is nevertheless careful to point out national and regional differences between characters of Hispanic origin in the text. Linguistically he does so by means of selective reproduction, conceptual reflection or verbal transposition. Just as in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante meets a series of characters along the road, mostly Hispanics, who tell him about their lives and

<sup>31</sup> Juan Rulfo: *Pedro Páramo*. Barcelona: Anagrama, 2001 [1953]. The novel is a central work of the Latin American canon and is known for its poetic language and complex narrative techniques. Comala is the mythical village where the novel is set. For a critical discussion of Rulfo and *Pedro Páramo* see, for instance, Donald L. Shaw: *Nueva narrativa hispanoamericana. Boom. Posboom. Posmodernismo*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2005, p. 159-165.

<sup>32</sup> “The dead, like the plants, both have their land, son. And if you are planted here, just like the plants, you'll flourish...”. Eduardo González Viaña: *El Corrido de Dante*, Murcia: Alfaqque, 2008, p. 61. / Eduardo González Viaña: *Dante's Ballad* [Translated by Susan Giersbach Rascón]. Houston: Arte Público Press, 2007, p. 57.

<sup>33</sup> “Virgilio is small, furry, and soft, a donkey through and through, and no matter how much of a donkey he may be, transparent, silent, and light, there is no reason in this world for him to know how to read or for us to even think about him.” González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 279. / González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, p. 299. This passage can be compared with the opening of the canonic work of prose poetry by Ramón Jiménez: “Platero es pequeño, peludo, suave; tan blando por fuera, que se diría todo de algodón, que no lleva huesos.” Juan Ramón Jiménez: *Platero y yo*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2005 [1914], p. 91. “Platero is so little, so hairy, smooth, and so soft to the touch that you might say he is made of puffy cotton, all light and boneless.” Juan Ramón Jiménez: *Platero y yo / Platero and I*. Trans. Myra Cohn Livingston and Joseph F. Domínguez. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1994, p. 3.

backgrounds. Some of them speak Spanglish or their national or regional varieties of Spanish, which makes the novel an artistic (re)creation of the linguistic repertoire of Hispanics. Besides, González Viaña continuously emphasises the orality of the text, which can be seen not only in the use of *corrido* songs but also in the (re)creation of popular spoken varieties, especially Mexican Spanish – for example, by throwing in emblematic Mexicanisms such as “chingao”, “pinche” or “güey”. This stylistic technique works as an identity marker in the otherwise linguistically standardised text, signalling the national and ethnic identity of the characters, as well as their social class. An example of the representation of the speech of non-Mexican migrants is the discussion in a bar between two migrants from Venezuela concerning the supposed miracles of the Venezuelan witch María Lionza: “¡Qué vaina, chico! Claro que sí. María Lionza me ayudó en el aeropuerto de Miami. Mi pasaporte y mi visa eran falsos, y el coñoemadre del agente los estaba mirando con lupa. Se demoraba y se demoraba. Una eternidad, chico.”<sup>34</sup> In this oral and colloquial discourse, there is a selective reproduction of clichés (“qué vaina”) to mark the speaker’s national origin, which is also signalled by means of direct attribution. The colloquial repetition of “chico” in imitation of oral language can also be observed.

Just as with Hispanic characters, the techniques of selective reproduction, conceptual reflection and verbal transposition from English are used in the representation of speech events that were originally uttered in English, normally by Anglo-American characters. Moreover, English loans are often employed by the narrator to describe typical U.S. phenomena (words like “dating”, “talk show” and “low rider”), which serves to situate the narrative geographically as well as culturally.

In sum, the narrative discourse of *El Corrido de Dante* is characterised by linguistic homogenisation and heterolingual translation that reduce linguistic variation and situates the U.S. Latino/as in a common Latin American tradition characterised by the use of a neutral American standard Spanish. The instances of code-switching in the text consist, for example, chiefly of words and phrases “thrown in for flavour” and complete bilingual competence is therefore not required. Language is, however, used stylistically as an identity marker to signal characters’ national, cultural and ethnic belonging, but even then by applying techniques that imply reducing the complexities of heterolingual speech.

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<sup>34</sup> “You know it, man! Of course. María Lionza helped me at the Miami airport. My passport and visa were fake, and the damn officer was looking at them with a magnifying glass. He was taking forever. An eternity, man.” González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 247. / González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, p. 262.

5. Identity and language conflicts: “new” Latino/as, Chicanos and Anglo-Americans  
 Emma’s running away with her Chicano boyfriend during her *quinceañera* party reveal a profound intergenerational conflict between migrant parents and their children born in the United States, which has been identified as a common theme in immigrant literature.<sup>35</sup> Dante speaks from the position of a migrant who has not assimilated but continues living in a present time invaded by the nostalgic memories of his Mexican hometown, memories often retrieved by food or music. Moreover, Dante keeps the dream of returning to his homeland alive and maintains his petrified Mexican identity and his emotional attachment to the Spanish language. In fact, he neither speaks nor understands English, partly because his employer, who wants cheap and submissive workers, thinks it is unnecessary for him to know another language. According to Dante, there are two kinds of Hispanics: those who have assimilated, and those who maintain their roots in order to be able to return some day. He therefore wants Emma to find a boyfriend among the community of Mexican migrants: “Hispanos, como nosotros, eso está bien [...] pero no esos otros jóvenes hispanos que no hablan en español y se juntan en pandillas para hacer negocios con las drogas.”<sup>36</sup> However, Emma rejects her cultural heritage and speaks from a radically different subject position to her father. In the farewell letter, reproduced in the text, Emma positions herself as an American girl, but she does so in Spanglish:

Me voy, Dad, no me siento bien en este environment que tú tienes para mí.  
 Remember, Dad, ya no estás en México y yo no soy una chiquilla. Mom y tú siempre me llevaron a las fiestas de hispanos, a la iglesia, a las clases en español, y luego me hiciste esa fiesta ridícula. Dad, yo soy una chica americana. Johnny y yo hemos estado saliendo *for a long time* [...] Como querías que te lo dijera, Dad, si tú no quieres a los chicos que hablan inglés [...] Dad, ya no estás en tu tiempo ni en tu patria [...] *Wake up*, Dad, yo soy una chica americana. Yo no nací en Michoacán [...] Dad, tú eres casi un analfabeto, y no puedes ofrecermelo el futuro que tú mismo no tienes [...] Y no te preocupes mucho, quizás algún día regrese, pero será cuando haya cumplido mi sueño de ser una gran cantante como Selena [...] I’m gonna be famous, Dad.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> See Vicente Luis Mora: La identidad migrante y su reflejo literario en libros sobre inmigración en Estados Unidos. In *Impossibilia* 2 (2011), p. 48-62, p. 56.

<sup>36</sup> “Hispanics, like us, that’s fine ... but not those other Hispanic guys that don’t speak Spanish and join gangs and make drug deals.” González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 18. / González Viaña: *Dante’s Ballad*, p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> I’m leaving, Dad, I don’t feel right in this environment that you have for me. Remember, Dad, you aren’t in Mexico anymore and I’m not a little girl. You and Mom always took me to the Hispanic parties, to church, to Spanish classes, and now you organized this ridiculous party for me. Dad, I’m an American girl. Johnny and I have been going out for a long time [...] How do you think I could have told you that, Dad, since you don’t like boys who speak English [...] Dad, these aren’t your times and you aren’t in your country anymore [...] *Wake up*, Dad, I’m an American girl. I wasn’t born in Michoacán ... Dad, you’re practically illiterate, and you can’t offer me the future that you yourself don’t have [...] And don’t worry too much, maybe someday I’ll be back,

As expressed in the letter, Emma does not identify with the Mexican migrants and their (according to her point of view) anachronistic traditions. On the contrary, she repudiates the traditional Mexican celebration of her fifteenth birthday, which was of such great importance to her mother. This rejection is crucial, as the *quinceañera* party is a powerful symbol of cultural heritage and difference. Emma positions herself in an ambivalent in-between position, in the borderlands, or, to use Homi Bhabha's term, in a Third Space, between a bilingual Chicana and an "American girl".<sup>38</sup> She identifies primarily with the murdered Texan-Mexican singer Selena, icon and legend of Latino music in Spanish and English. Her boyfriend, who exercised so much influence over her, is a Chicano as well, a monolingual English speaker, but nevertheless of Mexican origin. However, Emma's subjective identity does not correspond to the social identity assigned to her by the dominant Anglo-American culture. For example, in school she receives special treatment as Hispanic and a "person of colour".<sup>39</sup> Thus, as a second generation immigrant she is repeatedly being defined as Other by the hegemonic culture, but at the same time she no longer identifies with her migrant community. As a consequence of this disintegration, Emma experiences a profound identity crisis that leads to the drastic decision to break with her family.

Emma's linguistic identity is particularly interesting, as she identifies more with the English language than with Spanish. In fact, she is perfectly fluent in English and prefers speaking English in school and to her friends. Several examples of code-switching can be observed in the letter and most of them are marked in italics: short phrases such as "for a long time" and "I'm gonna be famous, Dad", and single words like "Dad", "Mom" and "remember". The repeated use of "Dad" is emblematic. When she talks about school and her boyfriend, she also tends to switch to English; education and the intimate sphere shared with her English-speaking boyfriend seem to be associated with the English language.

Emma's ambivalent position is taken a step further in the character of an old hitchhiker called Villa, a border subject who inhabits the U.S.-Mexican borderlands without feeling at home in either of the two nations. Villa begins to tell Dante how he was born in El Paso in a family of undocumented Mexican migrants:

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but that will be after I've achieved my dream of being a great singer, like Selena [...] I'm gonna be famous, Dad. González Viaña, *El Corrido de Dante*, p.23-24. The Spanish edition is not consistent in the use of italics. Perhaps they are misprints? / González Viaña: *Dante's Ballad*, p. 13-14. It should be observed that the code-switching is lost in translation. Thus, the English reader will unfortunately be unable to recognise González Viaña's careful stylistic representation of Emma's bilingual identity in the letter.

<sup>38</sup> For a theory of the Third Space, see Homi Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>39</sup> González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 163-164. / González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, p. 171-172.

Yo mismo no sé de dónde soy. A veces soy de aquí. A veces soy de allá. [...] [M]is padres eran mexicanos, pero mi señora madre me parió en tierra americana y hablo inglés como primera lengua, pero las más de las veces sueño en español. Cuando era joven todo el tiempo hablaba, pensaba y comía en gringo. Ahora vivo más de recuerdos y de sueños, y todo me viene en español. [...] La verdad es que ya no sé ya lo que soy. A veces me sacó los recuerdos y los remuevo para ponerlos en orden, pero creo que no se puede.<sup>40</sup>

The old man displays a bilingual and bicultural identity, an ambivalent position in between dominant American and Mexican national identities and in between English and Spanish. Just like Emma, Villa used to renounce his linguistic and cultural heritage, but this condemned him to live in a constant state of nostalgia and finally he lost all sense of home and belonging. There is also a secondary conflict between “old” and “new” Hispanics – i.e. between Chicanos that are U.S. citizens and more recently arrived migrants from all over Latin America. This conflict is also connected to questions of language, power and identity. At one point during his odyssey, Dante, who in many ways is a stereotypical “greenhorn immigrant”, is verbally and physically assaulted by racist Chicano delinquents who despise him for being a *mojado* (“wetback”).<sup>41</sup> The narrator comments that the Chicanos speak a Spanish variety that is mixed with English, but the (re)produced dialogue is in Spanish only.<sup>42</sup> In another passage Dante is accused of trespassing and the landowner sends two men to turn him away, one Chicano, who according to the narrator speaks half English and half Spanish, and one Anglo-American, who only speaks English. The Chicano serves as an extension of the power of his boss and treats Dante with scorn for being a “new” Latino and not sharing the linguistic codes or the hybrid culture of the Chicanos, while Dante has problems understanding the Chicano’s heavy accent. The following fragments from the dialogue contain several examples of code-switching that mark the bilingual identity of the Chicano:

- El güero quiere saber quién es el hombre que está contigo para reportarlo al *boss* – dijo el chicano, quien veía a través de Dante. [...]
- *Hold on*. No te vayas a caer –grito [sic] el chicano quien se comía las palabras con la risa–. No te vayas a caer... a caer. [...]

<sup>40</sup> I myself don’t know where I’m from. Sometimes I’m from here. Sometimes from there [...] My parents were Mexican, but my mother had me on American soil and I speak English as my first language, but I usually dream in Spanish. When I was young I always spoke, thought and ate in Gringo. Now I live more on memories and dreams, and everything comes to me in Spanish. González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 195. / González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, p. 205-206.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion on the term greenhorn, see Kanellos, *Hispanic Immigrant Literature*, p. 2-3, 30-31.

<sup>42</sup> González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 58-60.

– *Get off. Oye, tú, get off with your ass.*<sup>43</sup>

It can be noted that even though the Chicano is depicted as speaking half-English, half-Spanish, the code-switching consists mainly of single words and short phrases and the represented speech in English is principally marked by selective reproduction. Thus, identities and ethnic belongings can be shown without insisting upon the bilingual competence of the reader.

A third area of conflict is that of the asymmetric power relations between Latin American migrants and Anglo-Americans. In the text there is a tendency to reproduce the speech of Anglo-American characters in English only when it is an order or an exclamation, normally from officials. Dante does not speak English, nor does he know how to interpret the cultural codes outside his Hispanic community, which makes him especially vulnerable. However, contrary to what is common in Hispanic immigrant literature, policemen and agents of the Border Patrol are not portrayed as villains, although they do treat Dante with prejudice. When Dante goes to the local police station to report the disappearance of his daughter and at the same time try to return the donkey that suddenly showed up at Emma's *quinceañera* party to its owners, the policeman believes the donkey is a bribe, and exclaims in English: "*No, no, no. [sic!] Thank you... Thank you! But it is not necessary.*"<sup>44</sup>

Throughout the text, Latin American migrants and Anglo-Americans are positioned as a cultural dichotomy. Nevertheless, I would suggest that González Viaña believes that harmonious intercultural relations *are* possible. This is hinted at in the passage in which Dante makes friends with a fellow camper called Sean Sutherland, a Second World War veteran of Irish origin, who speaks Spanish because he was once married to a woman from Spain. As a cultural marker, Sean's pronunciation is (re)produced phonetically in the text: "Casualidad. Kah-sua-li-dad."<sup>45</sup> It can be observed that there is an extra aspiration and a short break between the syllables, both typical interferences from English phonology. Dante, Sean and Sean's friend Jean find a common language in music. Sean plays the accordion and sings an Irish lullaby, and Dante sings the Mexican song *María Bonita*. Dante even learns the refrain of the lullaby: "*Too-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra-loo-ra. Too-ra-loo-ra-lai*"<sup>46</sup> Despite their

<sup>43</sup> "The blond guy wants to know who the man that is with you is in order to report him to the boss" González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 134-135 (my translation). This line has been omitted in the English edition. Perhaps the translator made the strategic choice to distance herself from the source text and translate the passage freely to make it more coherent. "Hold on. Don't fall", shouted the Chicano, whose laughter was muffling his words. 'Don't fall ...' [...] 'Get out now. Hey, you, get your ass out'." González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, p. 138-139.

<sup>44</sup> González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 36.

<sup>45</sup> "Coincidence. Ca-sua-li-dad." González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 71. / González Viaña, *Dante's Ballad*, p. 66.

<sup>46</sup> González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 73.

linguistic, cultural and ethnic differences, Dante is treated with true hospitality and solidarity. Thus, the friendship between Dante and Sean suggests that it is possible to treat the Other as an individual and not as a representative of a nationality or an ethnic group.

The novel ends with the reconciliation between father, daughter and boyfriend. Order is re-established and Emma and Johnny are on their way to become productive citizens. While Johnny organises a small business purchasing and distributing Christmas trees, Emma teaches her father how to read and write and plans to go to university. Thus, with her bilingual competence, Emma finally gains her inclusion in American society. In the end Dante seems to feel at home in Oregon, but unlike the *Divine Comedy*, the United States did not turn out to be heaven, nor will he ever get his Green Card, because as the journalist remarks, “el universo hace milagros, pero el Departamento de Inmigración, no.”<sup>47</sup>

*El Corrido de Dante* displays a vast gallery of characters originating from all over Latin America, but in the novel there is a predominant tendency to translate heterolingual speech and homogenize the linguistic repertoire of the U.S. Hispanics to a mainly literary, and often poetic, American standard Spanish. This tendency, I suggest, situates the text in a broader Latin American literary tradition and emphasises the idea of a common Hispanic or Latin-American identity, without, however, effacing internal differences within this overarching label. In fact, language is used stylistically as a cultural, national and ethnic marker, as can be seen in the strategic (re)creation of different varieties of Spanish and the various instances of code-switching between Spanish and English, but the marking of differences is also achieved by means of homogenising techniques. Furthermore, three crucial areas of identity conflicts can be located in the novel. The plot is propelled by the family conflict between Dante, an undocumented Mexican migrant, and his U.S.-born daughter Emma, who suffers from an identity crisis, as she repudiates her Mexican origin at the same time as she is constituted as Other by the dominant society. This fundamental intergenerational conflict is also a linguistic one, where Emma’s hybridised bilingual identity is marked and emphasized in the text with stylistically (re)created switching between Spanish and English. There are also two additional areas of cultural conflict, negotiation and translation: on the one hand, between “old” and “new” Hispanics, and on the other, between Latin American migrants and Anglo-Americans. These antagonisms also relate to language, power and identity. However, the representation of the musical friendship between Dante and the Anglo-American fellow camper Sean can be

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<sup>47</sup> “[...] the universe does miracles but the Immigration Department doesn’t.” González Viaña, *El Corrido*, p. 279 / González Viaña, *Dante’s Ballad*, p. 299.

interpreted as an emphasis on the importance of intercultural communication as a means of reconciling the differences behind the identity conflicts.