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CASTILLO, MARÍA ILIANA

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Narratives of place, belonging and language: An intercultural perspective

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Nic Craith, M. (2012). *Narratives of place, belonging and language: An intercultural perspective*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan. 216 pages. ISBN: 0230202632 / ISBN-13: 9780230202634

Narratives of place, belonging and language, is a study of the experiences of individuals who have commendably overcome the language barriers between two or more languages. The individuals are famous contemporary writers peculiar for finding themselves in a position of vagueness between two cultures at different points in their lives. This unabridged sense of isolation which can best be defined as neither the identification with the host culture nor the native culture is precisely what the author refers to as being “in-between” cultures. This notion of language and cultural in-betweenness is what the author constantly recaptures throughout the volume, exposing several cases in which in-betweenness has served as a source of encouragement in order to generate ingenious forms of expression.

Through the adoption of both an anthropological and stylistic approach to language, the author explores the rich stories of selected writers to offer the academic audience a novel insight into the role of language in identity development and sense of belonging. Furthermore, innumerable annotations and a broad collection of chronicles and fact-based dissertations published in Irish, English, German and French provide an unvarnished perspective on the influence that the acquisition of a new language has on perceptions of self and society and the effect that the loss of the first language inflicts on the recognition and respect for the native culture.

In the first chapter, the author comments on globalization and proposes that this recent

phenomenon, which is the main reason for migration, caused a profound impact on writers in terms of identity having to “negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture, or more creatively speaking, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere” (Minh-ha, 1994, as cited in Nic Craith, 2012, p. 4). While some writers developed profound feelings of displacement both linguistically and geographically—in the worst of the scenarios frequently resolved through deliberate or unconscious assimilation into the new culture—some other writers learned how to successfully bond the transition between the two languages, the two cultures, and the two places, eventually undergoing a process of transculturation. In the second chapter, the author identifies similarities in writers’ second language acquisition processes surprisingly finding that most of these writers endured a silent phase as recent migrants characterized by a distancing from the host community; a nostalgic, painful, and even traumatic reminiscence of the homeland; and idealization of their lives prior to immigration. Likewise, the author finds that whenever writers were questioned about their life stories in their native language and their second language, life stories were more likely to differ from each other attributable to the experiences associated with particular settings in either language; the wide range of sentiments towards the native language; and the connotation of words in a given language, which depended heavily on context clues rather than mere translation. In the third chapter, the author discusses about the resilient connection between language and context. The author



encounters that the acquisition of a new language was a process that transcended writers' understanding of word meaning in a given language. Instead, this process required responsiveness to the social use of the language that was implicitly incorporated into the dynamics of a specific place. According to one of the writers, "the real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group ... no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality" (Sapir, 1949, as cited in Nic Craith, 2012, p. 55). Finally, the author proposes that awareness of the social values and traditions reflected on the language of the place played also a crucial role in successful adaptation of writers to the host culture. In the fourth chapter, the author describes the influence that the so called "mother tongue" had on the approach of many writers to life situations in general—even after the loss of the first language. Consistent with the author when referring to one of the writers, "He thinks and feels in English rather than in either Hungarian or German (his second language). And yet he is conscious of missing something." (Nic Craith, 2012, p. 85). Later, the author introduces the concept of "father tongue" and explains how the nature of experiences with the parents in the first language set the psychological basis for writers' attitudes expressed in the second language:

My father was ... very powerful, violent, I suffered a great deal under him. But when it came to German, I was superior to him. ... Then I was in charge. I was able to lie to him then. When I got bad marks in school that I did not wish to show him, for example, I could tell him that there were no reports given out at school this year. He knew it couldn't be true but he couldn't go into the school to check it out, he was speechless. German gave me a refuge where I could escape from him. (Nic Craith, 2012, p. 102-103).

In the fifth chapter, the author determined that for many immigrants internal dialogues were a both a rehearsal and reinforcement of the second or third language. The author clarifies that the internal dialogue signified for writers a preamble to imminent

interactions with the real world, resembling the act of role-playing where the "other" was the individual self and immersing writers in complete silence. In the sixth chapter, the author notices that language and culture are intimately related. The author finds that to cultural or contextual symbols were particularly important in the process of communication of writers' living in a foreign region concluding that miscommunication was present even among writers who spoke the same language. Conversely, the author discusses about the features of body language and finds that for the writers the advantages of mastering this type of communication were superior to the advantages of mastering other forms of communication, for instance, verbal fluency and/or grammar. In the seventh chapter, the author shares her own views on the concept of interculturality and affirms that the fact of experiencing other cultures provides individuals with a wider understanding of the world and the opportunity to develop sympathy for others. Whereas for some writers bilingualism represented a loss of identity and hostility against the host culture, for other writers pointed out that bilingualism was the root of manifold other talents. Furthermore, the author portrays the virtues of bilingualism and the benefits of linguistic diversity cognitively, culturally, and socially. As one of the writers stated, "I have the impression that my knowledge of French has actually given me extra fingers" (Almassy, 2004, as cited in Nic Craith, 2012, p. 157). Similarly, another writer expressed that "In short having two languages enabled me to view the world through different lenses" (ÓSearcaigh, 2009, as cited in Nic Craith, 2012, p. 159). As a final point, the author concludes that language enhances imagination. The author defines this capacity to create as the "third language," or a unique form of communication that emerged from the amalgamation of writers' first and second language.

The book offers a conceptual framework on the subject of language acquisition and the impact that the environment has on self-concept and social development. Correspondingly, the book is



remarkably well-written, consistent, and readable. It stimulates a broader understanding on how language operates at the social and psychological levels and its implications for an individual's overall functioning in life. However, questions of generalizability of the outcomes may arise as the author exclusively concentrates on the experiences of an elite population. Although interesting, the author's assumptions are far from holding true for the majority of the immigrant

population, such as the United States, where the social order is imbalanced, the economic opportunities are reduced, and policymaking decisions are a major factor in migration.

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THE AUTHOR

MARÍA ILIANA CASTILLO, M.A., is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Teacher and Bilingual Education at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. Her research interests primarily lie in the area of adult education, with an emphasis on technology-based language teaching, and the applications of brain research and cognitive approaches to language education. In recent years, she has focused on the applications of technology to language education. She has keenly collaborated on faculty research projects and co-authored research publications and presentations. She currently coordinates an English language program for adults concentrated on exploring the teaching and learning possibilities offered by a Multi-User 3D Virtual Environment (MUVE).

