

## Ksenija Kondali

English Department, Faculty of Philosophy  
University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

# Living in Two Languages: The Challenges to English in Contemporary American Literature

### Summary

Recognizing the importance of English in (re)negotiating culture and identity in U.S. society, numerous contemporary American authors have explored the issue of cultural and linguistic competence and performance in their writing. Supported with examples from literary texts by Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz, Amy Tan, and Kiran Desai, this paper discusses the complex role of the English language in the characters' struggle for economic and emotional survival. Frequently based on the authors' own family background and bicultural experiences, the selected literary texts offer a realistic representation of the life lived by predominantly working-class immigrants and how they cope with the adoption and use of a new language in order to overcome language barriers, racist attitudes and social exclusion. Such an analysis ultimately highlights how a new literary thematic focus on living in two languages has affected English Studies.

**Key words:** English language, English Studies, intercultural dynamics, ethnic American writing, identity

## Življenje v dveh jezikih: izzivi angleščini v sodobni ameriški književnosti

### Povzetek

Spoznanje o pomembnosti angleščine pri (ponovnem) definiranju kulture in identitete v ameriški družbi je spodbudilo številne sodobne ameriške avtorje k proučevanju problema kulturne in jezikovne kompetence. S primeri iz literarnih besedil Sandre Cisneros, Julie Alvarez, Junota Díaz, Amy Tan in Kiran Desai članek obravnava zapleteno vlogo angleškega jezika pri prizadevanju pripovednih oseb za ekonomsko in čustveno preživetje. Besedila se pogosto opirajo na izkušnje iz družinskega okolja njihovih avtorjev ter njihovo dvojno kulturno ozadje in tako ponujajo realistični vpogled v življenje priseljencev iz pretežno delavskega razreda, ki se spopadajo z novim jezikom, rasističnim odnosom ter družbeno izključenostjo. Analiza tematizira in osvetli literarno ukvarjanje z življenjem v dveh jezikih in njegovim vplivom na angleške študije.

**Ključne besede:** angleški jezik, angleške študije, medkulturna dinamika, etnična ameriška pisava, identiteta

# Living in Two Languages: The Challenges to English in Contemporary American Literature

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the centrality of English in (re)negotiating culture and identity in U.S. society has gained new meaning and importance in literary texts by numerous American authors. Although the issues of cultural and linguistic competence and performance hardly constitute a new idea in literary writing, my discussion will be dedicated to some aspects of English language dynamics related to the rise of ethnic American literature since the 1980s. Taking into account the post-colonial positioning of English as a global language and the globalization of literary studies, this paper also examines the implications of ethnic writing in the United States upon the conventional role of English studies. As a discipline, English Studies have, according to Paul Jay, on one hand, departed from a limited focus on literature alone as they increasingly pay more attention “to a range of cultural forms, and on the other hand, we have come to realize the inadequacy and even arbitrariness of studying literature and culture within the restrictive and distorting borders of nation-states” (Jay 2001, 44). Such a transformation process in the traditional structures of literary study is of particular significance within the realm of considering the English language used by contemporary ethnic writers in the United States.

On account of its impenetrable complexity and fragmentation, language has never constituted a facile or definite means of communication. Far from being neutral, language inscribes the struggles and suffering of a whole culture, and acts as a mnemonic repository, encapsulating and passing on the history of a people, as well as the cultural subtext shared by the members of a community. Language represents one of the fetters of identity, and speaking of American identity, along with race, language is, in the words of Román de la Campa, one of “[t]he two most resistant anchors of the American identity, [...] elements that consistently define the path to ethnic assimilation, but it is becoming increasingly clear that the ever expanding search for markets leaves nothing untouched or unchanged, including a cultural identity based on racial and linguistic substrata” (de la Campa 2007, 466). On this background of the interdependence between culture, language and the globalized economy in both the literary and real world around us, the increasing polyglot nature of the American society, its vibrant nature and assimilative traits of language cannot be ignored. Since hegemonic oppression in society is exercised through control over language, that language becomes a means of maintaining and reinforcing dominant power structures. However, writings by contemporary American ethnic or diasporic writers seem to undermine conceptions of a monolingual, English-only, US common culture. In more specific terms, ethnic American authors tend to demonstrate their bilingual poetics and awareness of socially conditioned language dynamics by describing linguistically liminal fictional characters and highlighting how English contributes to the (re)construction of identity, often resulting in a crisis of belonging to a single-language society. Simultaneously, such narrative strategies signify the efforts of the ethnic writers toward finding innovative expressiveness in order to avoid conforming to the standards of the center and its prescribed code of English.

## 2. Challenging English

The way in which the dominant discourses in society construct identity and position subjects in relation to language is tied to mechanisms of constructing and evolving personal and group identities. Some contemporary authors of American fiction present characters who are not necessarily affected by a conflict between languages or the traumas of a multilingual society, but for many other characters presented in these texts it is necessary to retreat toward their mother tongue and reject English as the pressures of U.S. society force them into silence. Almost invariably though, for many the literary protagonists, language and culture are so closely intertwined that their identity is profoundly shaped by the language they use and by its related sociolinguistic and cultural paradigms. The English language as a reflection of the economic, social and political reality in the characters' lives becomes, therefore, a persistent challenge in their efforts to survive economically and emotionally. It comes as little surprise that the selected literary texts are often grounded in the authors' personal history and bilingual/bicultural experiences, as these authors are of immigrant (frequently working-class) background whose representation of the American linguistic reality stems from their experiences of using English as a new language in their struggle for economic, social and cultural acceptance.

Each of the texts by the authors selected in this paper offers examples of language politics affecting the characters' subjectivity and agency that have their roots in different hybrid cultural traditions. The main thrust of the argument is that the so-called "hyphenated writers" (Aaron 1964) appropriate language forms in different ways for different purposes, predominantly leading toward emancipatory strategies and thus refusing to gather around the dominant discourse as an emblem for nationalistic identification and essential identity. These authors depart from an intercultural experience that bestows on them a double allegiance, as they do not solely belong anywhere and may belong to two or three cultures at the same time. Thus such writers are in-between languages, representing two identities (or more) which they are not willing to give up, placing emphasis on tensions between the multiple cultural traditions interacting with the English language in the United States. A particularly salient example of such dialogic interplay between English and other coexisting languages resulting in the creative fusion and cross-cultural energy is provided in Mexican-American and other Latina/o literature written in the United States.

## 3. Chicana Language Strategies

Among the most extensive and imaginative examples which demonstrate such strategies of language politics are literary texts by U.S. Latina/o writers, more specifically by Chicana/o authors. One of the major characteristics of its fictional expressiveness which permeates their sense of identity in the United States is the creative use of interlingualism, a term coined by Chicano critic Juan Bruce-Novoa (1990) to describe creative fusions of grammar, syntax, or cross-cultural allusions. In other words, "[i]nterlingualism is a linguistic practice highly sensitive to the context of speech acts, able to shift add-mixtures of languages according to situational needs or the effects desired" (Bruce-Novoa 1990, 50). Such language is generally labeled and usually in negative terms as "slang", "Spanglish," or "Tex-mex", but it is typical of the Chicana/o speech, in which words and grammatical patterns from both Spanish and English are mixed and

merged, resulting in cross-cultural idioms. It is a language that comes naturally to Chicanas/os who “do not function as constantly choice-making speakers; their language is a blend, a synthesis of the two into a third. Thus they are interlingual, not bilingual. The codes are not separate, but intrinsically fused” (ibid., 29).

Like many Chicana/o writers, Sandra Cisneros avails of such language strategies in an effort to reconcile her language with those of her ancestors and to reconfigure perceptions of identity for her community. She strives to negotiate an identity that encapsulates both cultures by writing texts exclusively in Spanish or by code-switching, the application of an extensive interlingual phenomenon which makes use of untranslated words. In the latter strategy, English becomes decentered and through switching between codes, the author constructs a dialectic relationship between two cultures. As a linguistic strategy, code-switching has special import for the Chicana/o authors since it defies the border that seeks to separate the Indian, Spanish, and Anglo in Chicana/o identity and therefore is designated as “linguistic terrorism” by Gloria Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa 1987, vii). Cisneros also resorts to the inclusion of untranslated Spanish words in her writing, actually capitalizing on the idiom of the gritty, inner-city, mainly Spanish-speaking neighborhood called the *barrio* and its hybrid reality to highlight that language and literacy are sites of cultural and class conflict. As Naomi Quiñonez points out, “[t]he use of untranslated language functions to inscribe difference, since it makes the non-Spanish speaker the ‘other.’ In postcolonial writing, the use of untranslated words is a political act” (Quiñonez 2002, 143).

Cisneros’s first novel *The House on Mango Street* (1984) is set in a Chicago *barrio* and includes a character named Mamacita, who is new not only to Mango Street but to the USA. Mamacita who recently joined her husband in the U.S. is the center of the story “No Speak English”. The title designates the character’s own issue of not being proficient in the language spoken in her new surroundings, which marginalizes her and consequently, “she won’t come down. She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull” (Cisneros 1984, 77). She much prefers to stay in her apartment because she cannot reconcile herself with the fact that the US is her home now. But it is her child’s development that causes her greatest sorrow as “the baby boy, who has begun to talk, starts to sing the Pepsi commercial he heard on T.V.” (ibid., 78). The title becomes an imperative sentence addressed to her boy: “No speak English, she says to the child who is singing in the language that sounds like tin. No speak English, no speak English, and bubbles into tears. No, no, no, as if she can’t believe her ears” (ibid., 78). For Mamacita, her mother language and home coalesce to create safety, and language is territorialized on both sides of a door that constitutes the dividing line between two different languages and experiences. By wishing her boy to speak Spanish, Mamacita tries to preserve one of the most important ethno-cultural aspects and a crucial marker of cultural identity.

In her more recent novel *Caramelo* (2002), Sandra Cisneros capitalizes on the colorful blending of English with Spanish expressions that is typical of both the bilingual character and of the vibrant nature of contemporary Chicano/a speech. Such a strategy reflects the hybrid existence of the characters and their sense of dislocation due to their immigrant and subaltern status among the dominant monolingual English speakers. In this novel, Cisneros makes the Spanish text

understandable through context or direct translation, as demonstrated in the following example when the Mexican-American narrator Celaya recalls a childhood memory: “They’ve forgotten about me when the photographer walking along the beach proposes a portrait, *un recuerdo*, a remembrance literally” (Cisneros 2003, 3). Throughout this inventive word play English structures are subverted and Spanish forms are evoked, often to a humorous effect: “Estás deprived?” (ibid., 238). Celaya keeps coming back to her father’s birth home in Mexico every summer. She recognizes, however, that the two languages she speaks serve different purposes due to the emotional association attached to her Spanish. This partiality toward Spanish for describing and expressing internal emotional states permeates the novel, as does the attitude toward English as the dominant, i.e. “master” discourse, evident in Celaya’s explanation of how her Mexican-born father went to Chicago and tried to learn English: “Spanish was the language to speak to God and English the language to talk to dogs. But Father worked for the dogs, and if they barked he had to know how to bark back” (ibid., 208). Hence, Spanish is considered relegated to the zone of the private, while English is public. The importance of being able to switch between English and Spanish and thus take control of the language they are using gives Chicana authors such as Sandra Cisneros the power to oppose Anglo domination and assimilation demands.

#### 4. Losing the Accent, Losing Oneself/One’s Self

Understanding pressures to assimilate amid the personal struggle to maintain one’s own identity marked by language politics is also the focus of Julia Alvarez’s work. For this Dominican-American author, language is crucial in the search of individual identity and collective belonging. Her novel *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) is centered on the experiences of four sisters and their exile from Trujillo’s regime in the Dominican Republic to the United States where the Garcías struggle to become fully assimilated, middle-class Americans. But the García sisters are trapped between languages and cultures – Spanish and English, Anglo American and Latin American – leading to feelings of dislocation, linguistic and cultural inadequacy. With their arrival in the United States they are forced to prioritize English language acquisition and “lose their accent,” in a traumatic process suppressing their native Spanish. English becomes the emblem of the characters’ struggle to become integrated and accepted within the mainstream American society. One of the sisters, Yolanda, is an avid learner of English, but irrespective of her perfect English skills, she still feels displaced in the United States. At the same time Yolanda’s success at mastering English comes at a high cost as she loses fluency and confidence in her mother tongue, manifested during her visit to the Dominican Republic: “In halting Spanish, Yolanda reports on her sisters. When she reverts to English, she is scolded, ‘¡En español!’ The more she practices, the sooner she’ll be back into her native tongue, the aunts insist. Yes, and when she returns to the States, she’ll find herself suddenly going blank over some word in English or, like her mother, mixing up some common phrase” (Alvarez 1992, 7). It becomes evident that the interaction of the different languages and cultural traditions deeply affects the characters’ identity, caught between feelings of exile nostalgia and the pressures of immigrant adjustment.

Latina/o writers nearly always resort to Spanish as the language of their emotional life, of family values and cultural heritage. It is the language of passion, whereas English is reserved for the practical, the necessary, prompting Norma González to make the following conclusion: “English

as the medium of functional communication, of professional development, and of economic mobility. But with Spanish, the roots of feeling, of emotion, and of identity pull me back and tie me to a social memory” (cited in Mermann-Jozwiak and Sullivan 2009, xix). In an episode of the novel, Yolanda has an important conversation with a Spanish speaking poet she meets at a party that leaves her wondering about the primacy of Spanish as her native language. Namely, he “argued that no matter how much of it one lost, in the midst of some profound emotion, one would revert to one’s mother tongue. He put Yolanda through a series of situations. What language, he asked, looking pointedly into her eyes, did she love in?” (Alvarez 1992, 13) Yolanda’s inability to answer this question reflects the confusion her bicultural identity continues to evoke. Therefore, “English and Spanish are more than tools for communication; they represent different ways of ordering reality” (Mermann-Jozwiak 2005, 101).

Yolanda ponders her own language strategies and preferences, clearly privileging Spanish for her romantic involvement, substantiating the conclusion that “[w]e develop different speaking selves that speak for different aspects of our identity” (Gómez-Peña 1995, 156). Yolanda’s relationship with men mirrors her attitude to Spanish and English, specifically the gap that exists between them. Silvio Sirias (2001, 34) points out that Yolanda’s relationship with her lover John is destined to fail exactly because of their linguistic differences, and this is shown in the episode when Yolanda plays the rhyme game with John as an indicator of his inability to match her poetic sensibilities in either language. Alvarez clearly shows the lovers’ linguistic and emotional incompatibility:

Yolanda becomes frustrated with his inability to rhyme “Yo,” she reaches into her mother tongue to find the word *cielo*, in English, “sky.” “Yo rhymes with *cielo* in Spanish.” Yo’s words fell into the dark, mute cavern of John’s mouth. *Cielo, cielo*, the word echoed. And Yo was running, like the mad, into the safety of her first tongue, where the profoundly monolingual John could not catch her, even if he tried. (Alvarez 1992, 72)

Yolanda’s realization that John will not be able to bridge the gap between the two languages and sensibilities leads to her final breakdown into nonsensical babble and institutional care, making her lose more than just her accent.

## 5. “Revenge on English”: The Subaltern Linguistic Resistance and Creativity

While Julia Alvarez’s narrative reflects her status of an upper-class Dominican woman, her fellow contemporary Dominican-American writer Junot Díaz tells the story of the oppressed, the silenced, and the underprivileged. Thus he gives voice to those who do not have access to political power, nor the written word, while also deconstructing the narratives of empire in both the U.S. and Dominican hegemonic contexts. Díaz uses contemporary language that surpasses mere mimicking of spoken Dominican Spanish – he has created a style all his own, mixing Spanish, hip-hop slang, and Standard English into a descriptive new language. Such language allows for the opening of a transformational space from which to interrogate unequal power relations based on race and class, and therefore functions as a site of resistance in relation to mainstream American norms of language.

With an epigraph from a poem of Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Díaz's first text, the collection of stories entitled *Drown* (1996), announces the problematic role of English in telling these stories: "The fact that I / am writing to you / in English / already falsifies what I / wanted to tell you. / My subject: how to explain to you that I / don't belong to English / though I belong nowhere else." *Drown* demands a double linguistic consciousness since unmarked, unglossed Spanish words and phrases are common throughout the book, such as *tío*, *colmado*, *flaca*, *ponchera*, *cobrador*, and *cabrón*. The text employs code-switching to expressively enhance its whole emotional range, demonstrated in the following examples from the book: "You pato, I said. [...] You low-down pinga-sucking pato, I said" (Díaz 1996, 12). "Mami looked really nice that day. The United States had finally put some meat on her; she was no longer the same flaca who had arrived here three years before" (ibid., 23). The purpose for using English and Spanish inter-sententially is explicated by the author himself in an interview in which he not only defended his use of Spanish but criticized the 'othering' of Spanish:

Spanish is not a minority language. Not in this hemisphere, not in the United States, not in the world, not inside my head. So why treat it like one? Why 'other' it? Why denormalize it? By keeping the Spanish as normative in a predominantly English text, I wanted to remind readers of the fluidity of languages, the mutability of languages. [...] by forcing Spanish back onto English, forcing it to deal with the language it tried to exterminate in me, I've tried to represent a mirror-image of that violence on the page. Call it my revenge on English. (Díaz 2002, 904)

Whereas the introduction of Spanish words and phrases into English was relatively subtle in the fiction of Sandra Cisneros and Julia Alvarez, Díaz seems heavily invested in the violence of his code-switching exemplified in the following sentence: "Beli might have been a puta major in the cosmology of her neighbors but a cuero she was not" (Díaz 2007, 103). He infuses English with the passion of his native Dominican Spanish idioms and metaphors to such a degree that readers coming to the texts with nothing but the knowledge of English will have their linguistic patience tried, as is apparent in the following example: "A new girl. Constantina. In her twenties, sunny and amiable, whose cuerpo was all pipa and no culo, a 'mujer alegre' (in the parlance of the period)" (ibid., 112). Such interplay between languages creates a rich field of reference and cross-reference where bilingual readers, able to decipher the subtexts, will be at an advantage and enjoy the humor of such language use: "It sounds like the most unlikely load of jirijonza on this side of the Sierra Madre. But one man's jirijonza is another man's life" (ibid., 235).

The novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) represents an attempt to cast a "very own counterspell" (ibid., 7) of words as a cultural critique of the dominant discourse and colonial Dominican (and broader Caribbean) historical and political experience both at home and in the United States. In this narrative Díaz paints the portrait of a shy Latino nerd as a young man in order to point out the inherent contradictions of living as a bicultural Latino intellectual faced with racial and ethnic prejudice as seen in the following description: "The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. 'You're not Dominican.' And he said, over and over again, 'But I am. Soy Dominicano. Dominicano soy'" (ibid., 49). Due

to its liminality between two languages, two worlds and two identities, the narrative deconstructs the stereotypical representation of the 'other'. Thanks to such narrative strategy and the portrayal of the characters' existence as "cohabitation" of cultures and languages (Pérez-Firmat 1987, 5), Díaz not only contributes towards presenting authentic experiences of his community, but also de-mystifies the relationship between the dominant and 'minority' cultures and their related linguistic dynamics.

## 6. Being Native Asian and Ethnic Asian-American

Drawing the conclusion that it is destined for writers of color, including anglophone and francophone Third World writers of the diaspora, to write only autobiographical works, the theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha underscores how these authors live "in a double exile – far from the native land and far from their mother tongue – they are thought to write by memory and to depend to a large extent on hearsay" (Minh-ha 1994, 10). Such a condition characterizes the work of numerous contemporary ethnic authors in the United States as they are required to move between generations, languages and cultural spheres, being both within and outside the dominant culture, occupying a position that offers contested potential as it undermines the validity of one authoritative voice. The writer Amy Tan makes use of complex storytelling methods to reveal the troubling implications of the divergence between native (Chinese) and ethnic (Chinese-American) cultures in the U.S. A vital part of her narrative strategy is the use of the English language with the purpose of depicting the position of Chinese Americans in the dominant U.S. culture.

In her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Amy Tan portrays the lives of four mothers born in China and of their four American-born daughters. More specifically, Tan presents the ways in which both generations have negotiated aspects of "Chineseness" and "Americanness" (of which language is an important aspect) "to create their own hybridized cultural traditions" (Michael 2006, 40). Along with their racial and cultural characterization, their English language deficiency reduces these Chinese immigrant women who hail from middle- to upper-class status in their native country to lower-class status in the United States. They all share the memory of having suffered "unspeakable tragedies" (Tan 1989, 6) in China and expectations of their future – "hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English" (ibid., 20). Tan underscores how achieving fluency in English potentially presents another set of concerns in her culture. While some of the characters in this novel find voices and resolve the cultural conflicts in the United States, some of them are denied a voice on the basis of their ethnicity. However, despite their loss of voice rooted in their inability to speak English, they are determined to survive and find a voice, even if it means relying upon their Americanized daughters to speak for them. Tan shows in her work that the reconciliations of the characters' contemporary American cultural space with their Chinese heritage often involve a generational gap caused by linguistic tensions. Thus Jing-mei, one of the characters in the novel, states how her relationship with her mother was defined by their different linguistic affinities: "[M]y mother and I spoke two different languages...I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese" (ibid., 23). The reluctance or inability of the mothers and daughters to communicate in the same language is the main source of friction between the two generations, signifying the misunderstandings and cultural differences that



divide them. The lack of a common linguistic and cultural tongue on the part of the mothers and daughters in this novel is also symbolic of the divisions based on belonging to the immigrant and the assimilated or American-born world. The older generation is, naturally, more tied to the past, while the younger generation tends to assimilate faster:

Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow. For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, “This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions.” And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English. (Ibid., 17)

Further illustration of this linguistic and cultural divide is offered in Amy Tan’s subsequent novel *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), which is also focused on the complex relationship between mothers and daughters. In this narrative, Pearl, a second-generation Chinese-American, has been estranged from her mother Winnie, who still uses terms of endearment in Chinese:

[S]he patted my head. “Syn ke,” she said, “you’re already so big.” She always called me syn ke, a nickname, two words that mean “heart liver,” the part of the body that looks like a tiny heart. In English, you call it gizzard, not very good-sounding. But in Chinese, syn ke sounds beautiful, and it is what mothers call their babies if they love them very, very much. I used to call you that. You didn’t know? (Tan 1991, 109)

The generation gap creates also a cultural and communication conflict between the mothers and daughters in this novel as the girls speak only some Chinese, but cannot read nor write it. At the same time, the Americanized daughters tend to distance themselves from their mothers as they are more Chinese and not fluent in English, thus making the English language “a race and class signifier that divides the daughters from their Chinese immigrant mothers” (Ho 2000, 171). When Winnie tries to relate her history to her daughter in her broken English, she resorts to Chinese words that are untranslatable into English, shown in the episode when Winnie in a time of need sends a telegram to a cousin containing the message “Hurry, we are soon taonan” (Tan 1991, 259). Her daughter does not understand the word “taonan,” and Winnie has trouble explaining the meaning and significance of the word:

This word, taonan? Oh, there is no American word I can think of that means the same thing. But in China, we have lots of different words to describe all kinds of troubles. No, “refugee” is not the meaning, not exactly. Refugee is what you are after you have been taonan and are still alive. And if you are alive, you would never want to talk about what made you taonan. (Ibid., 260)

Tan reveals a reality deeply marked by cross-cultural exchanges, destabilizing the presumed ethnic identity and shifting towards a hybrid bicultural and poly-vocal identity. The growing understanding of not belonging entirely to either Chinese or American culture, and the failure of both Chinese and American narratives to deliver her Asian American liminal position encourage striding the standard binary understanding of white and Asian.

## 7. Imperial Legacy of Language

Among writers who implicitly or explicitly echo their own ambiguous relationships to both dominant and sub-ordinant cultures and their respective language codes is Kiran Desai, an author of Indian-German American background. Her novel *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) explores how the tensions between colonial hegemony of the past, family aspirations, and community expectations affect characters placed on the margin of the society, strapped between assimilation and resistance in the struggle to assert their personal and national identities. A critical approach to the analysis of this novel cannot disregard Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's discussions about the difficulties for the subaltern subjects to communicate their experiences, feelings, and injustices in a public space due to their lack of access to instruments of public discourse and related control over language to enable the marginalized voices to be heard (1995, 28). Spivak suggests the way in which language and discourse are employed with an ideological agenda in order to sustain power and control over those on "the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit [are] marked out by this epistemic violence of imperialist law and education" (ibid., 24–5).

Throughout *The Inheritance of Loss*, the characters' experiences, in particular their linguistic, social, and cultural abilities, demonstrate the complex impact which language exerts upon their individual and collective identity. For example, one of the main protagonists, a retired Anglophilic Indian judge by the name of Patel, retreats into self-imposed isolation, becoming a stranger in his homeland because he lacks the linguistic and other sensibilities of his native surroundings: "The judge could live here, in this shell, this skull, with the solace of being a foreigner in his own country, for this time he would not learn the language" (Desai 2006, 36). During his years as a student at Cambridge, the judge's already timid nature suffered from further isolation and a sense of dislocation as he barely communicated his opinions and desires in English, but immersed himself into the new tongue because "the self-consciousness of it, the effort of it, the grammar of it, pulled you up; a new language provided distance and kept the heart intact" (ibid., 215). In England, Patel undergoes a thorough cultural change: he flees not only from the unfamiliarity of the setting but also from his Indianness, allowing his landlady to call him James instead of Jemubhai. All attributes of his Indian background – his unpronounceable name, his dark skin and pungent smell of curry – are a source of embarrassment to him: "[H]e grew stranger to himself than he was to those around him, found his own skin odd-colored, his own accent peculiar" (ibid., 47). Upon return to his own country, he repudiates his Indian identity, but remains equally uncomfortable in the company of the English: "He envied the English. He loathed Indians. He worked at being English with the passion of hatred and for what he would become, he would be despised by absolutely everyone, English and Indians, both" (ibid., 126). This quote reveals how his command of the English language and radical cultural transformation mirrors the historical narratives of national and imperial grandeur enforced by the system of colonial power and related language control.

The other narrative in the novel is that of New York City's "shadow class ... condemned to movement" (ibid., 109), Indian restaurant workers without legal status who harbor hopes of an American dream, represented by the character of Biju. His precarious life as an illegal alien

reflects the self-doubt and uncertainty of our time, as well as the economic, social, and racial inequality in the era of globalization and alienation, evident in the following linguistic liminality:

“No speak English,” he always said to mad people starting up conversations in this city, to the irascible ornery bums and Bible folk dressed in ornate bargain basement suits and hats, waiting on street corners, getting their moral and physical exercise chasing after infidels. Devotees of the Church of Christ and the Holy Zion, born-again handing out pamphlets that gave him up-to-date million dollar news of the devil’s activities... (Ibid., 274)

As representatives of colonized people, these characters testify to a very complex interaction of language, history and environment, captured in the concepts of place and a sense of displacement, both physical and linguistic, mandated by the dominant culture and the required command of English postcolonial/immigrant agency and identity. Kiran Desai consistently presents relative success and failure in terms of how the characters adapt in response to experiences that confound their expectations and prejudices when cultures and languages are brought into conflict.

## 8. Conclusion

At a time when the function of English has long become indispensable for every aspect of life in economy and culture, the challenge to the previous expectations and meaning of English studies cannot be ignored. Given that English studies as a field of research and learning is dedicated mainly to the analysis of texts written in English, including, among others, those written by U.S. authors, it has become necessary to reassess how the interplay of another language with English in such literature affects English studies as an academic discipline. Writing on the expansion of “diasporic English” which places significant emphasis on the awareness that contemporary writing is created in “a post-national, global flow of de-territorialized cultural products appropriated, translated, and recirculated world-wide” (Paul Jay (2001, 44) calls for devising a way of accommodating “the transnational and postnational perspectives of globalization studies in our programs and curricula without subordinating the heterogenous literatures we deal with to outdated critical paradigms” (ibid.). The growing emphasis on English language performance and its cultural impact has taken center stage as thematic core in many literary texts by ethnic American authors since the 1980s.

Contemporary American authors such as Sandra Cisneros, Julia Alvarez, Junot Díaz, Amy Tan, and Kiran Desai expose the American reality and the challenges to English as the dominant language in their ongoing quest to make sense of the world. Since language and literature of necessity reproduce the specific social and cultural conditions of a particular environment, these authors, themselves of complex racial, linguistic, cultural and other backgrounds, occupy a particular liminal position – between two languages, two cultures, defying static notions of self and identity. Each of the authors chosen here uses English in order to construct a mode of expression enabling them to present the experiences of those who are marginalized in the U.S. society, and thus voice their position, even opposition, to the dominant English-only culture. For many protagonists bilingually is the primary way in which they experience their world and enact their identity. The literary texts selected here illustrate just some aspects of the extensive

linguistic experimentalism and innovation in contemporary American fiction that may offer new possibilities to engage English studies, validating also the conclusion that “language is a site of change, an evershifting ground” (Minh-ha 1994, 9). Contemporary American writing features, thus, various forms of linguistic resistance that generate a new and emancipatory expressiveness. Such innovative language use is also the inspired blend of coexisting languages and their interchange that has become not only a prominent characteristic of Chicana/o and other Latina/o literature written in the United States, but increasingly also a crucial feature of other ethnic American literature. In their writing, the authors uncover new possibilities of expression within the English language that contest both the standards of English language and the English studies literary canon. By embracing linguistic elements previously, mostly not recognized by the dominant standardized language in the United States and, consequently excluded from English studies, such writing could constitute an important step in reorienting the concept of English and the approach to studying its cultural significance. The exploration of the effects of other languages and cultures on the English language may open paths for a dialogical and emancipatory paradigm in the study of contemporary American fiction in a broader scope of scholarship known as English studies.

## Bibliography

- Aaron, D. 1964. The Hyphenate Writer and American Letters. *Smith Alumnae Quarterly* (July): 213–7.
- Alvarez, J. 1992. *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*. 1991. New York: Plume.
- Anzaldúa, G. 1987. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Spinster/ Aunt Lute Press.
- Bruce-Novoa, J. 1980. Introduction. In *Chicano Authors. Inquiry by Interview*, ed. J. Bruce-Novoa, 3-33. Austin & London: University of Texas Press.
- . 1990. *Retrospace: Collected Essays on Chicano Literature*. Houston: Arte Publico Press.
- De la Campa, R. 2007. Latinas/os and Latin America: Topics, Destinies, Disciplines. In *A Companion to Latina/o Studies*, eds. J. Flores and R. Rosaldo, 461–8. New York: Blackwell.
- Cisneros, S. 2003. *Caramelo, or Puro Cuento*. 2002. New York: Vintage. Original edition, 1957.
- . 1984. *The House on Mango Street*. New York: Vintage.
- Desai, K. 2006. *The Inheritance of Loss*. London: Penguin Books.
- Díaz, J. 1996. *Drown*. New York: Riverhead Books.
- . 2002. Fiction Is the Poor Man’s Cinema: An Interview with Junot Diaz. By D. Cespedes and S. Torres-Saillant. *Callaloo*. 23.2 (2002): 892–907.
- Céspedes and S. Torres-Saillant. *Callaloo*. 23.2 (2002): 892–907.
- . 2007. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York: Riverhead.
- Gómez-Pe a, G. 1995. Bilingualism, Biculturalism and Borders. Interview by Coco Fusco. In *English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas*, ed. Coco Fusco, 147–58. New York: New Press.
- Ho, W. 2000. In *Her Mother’s House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing*. Walnut Creek, CA & Oxford: Altamira Press.
- Jay, P. 2001. Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English. *PMLA*, no. 1: 32–47.

- Mermann-Jozwiak, E. 2005. *Postmodern Vernaculars: Chicana Literature and Postmodern Rhetoric*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Mermann-Jozwiak, E. & N. Sullivan. 2009. Stories That Must Be Told. An Introduction. In *Conversations with Mexican American Writers: Languages and Literatures in the Borderlands*, eds. E. Mermann-Jozwiak and N. Sullivan, vii-xxv. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Michael, M.C. 2006. *New Visions of Community in Contemporary American Fiction: Tan, Kingsolver Castillo, Morrison*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Minh-ha, T. T. 1994. Other than myself/My other self. In *Travellers' Tales, Narratives of Home and Displacement*, eds. G. Robertson et al., 9–26. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pérez Firmat, G. 1987. Transcending Exile: Cuban-American Literature Today. In *LACC Occasional Papers Series Dialogues (1980-1994)*, ed. Richard Tardanico, 1–13. Miami: Florida International University.
- Qui onez, N. H. 2002. Re(Riting) the Chicana Postcolonial: From Traitor to 21<sup>st</sup> Century Interpreter. In *Decolonial Voices: Chicana and Chicano Cultural Studies in the 21st Century*, eds. A.J. Aldama and N.H. Qui onez, 129–51. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Sirias, S. 2001. *Julia Alvarez: A Critical Companion*. Westport, CT & London: Greenwood Press.
- Spivak, G. Ch. 1995. Can the Subaltern Speak? In *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, 24–8. London: Routledge.
- Tan, A. 1989. *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Ivy Books.
- . 1991. *The Kitchen God's Wife*. New York: Ivy Books.