

## Using Language as an Instrument for Critical Thinking

Inés Valdez  
UNC Chapel Hill  
Spring 2008 LAC Workshop Series  
April 4, 2008

Speaking (and learning) in a foreign language can be thought of as an instrument for *embodying* critical thinking. In the case of the use of Spanish, moreover, it can be used to reflect about critical issues or citizenship, internal exclusion, and discrimination that are close to the students' lives.

In the next two sections I develop roughly these two topics.

### 1. Critical stance as sense of foreignness

Speaking a foreign language involves making an effort to express differently our experiences. It also means having to “act” within a cultural background that is not ours. It means as well to be unable to express ourselves occasionally, as well as misunderstanding other people.

So, speaking in a foreign language automatically puts us in an uncomfortable situation, we lack words, we lack the cultural understanding around words and expressions, we fail to understand others, etc. This is the exact situation of a foreigner, an outsider, which—in my way—is a feeling that makes for a “consciousness” that is inherently valuable.

This situation seems to me like a *usable* one in terms of it generating non-automatism, helping us learn to see things in a new light, or discover cultural connections between words, acts, and people anew.

This can be thought of as opposed to a consciousness based on moral certainties and erasure of difference and doubt.

This stance, I think, is not unlike the stance we are supposed to take when we try to deconstruct hegemonic discourses, look for hidden assumptions, and uncover power structures in—seemingly—every day discourses.

### 2. Spanish = contentious

I teach LAC in Spanish, and I was born in Perú, and lived in Perú and Argentina before coming to the U.S. for my PhD. The use of Spanish in this country is a highly contentious issue, anti-immigration groups usually complain about having to press 1 for English when they call for some service or that the fact that successive generations keep speaking Spanish inter-changeably with English, suggesting that this fact is what prevents them

from properly assimilating to American culture and values (since when being bilingual is a bad thing!?).

In sum, Spanish in the U.S. is often a language that is not taken to be sophisticated or “learned,” and—in general—Spanish speakers are in U.S. society part of a vulnerable class (regardless of their legal status they are subject to discrimination of several kinds). In that context I proposed the students that having our discussion about globalization in Spanish has to make us aware of these facts, should help us “stand” in their feet.

### **Activities**

In that spirit, the first day of class I assigned a Manu Chao song on clandestine immigrants (with quite a different message than—for instance—then current debates among republican candidates) I took a picture of Wilson’s library with a banner that equalized academic exploration to Columbus’ discovery of America (showing how standing in different feet should make us realize that such is the wrong metaphor) and assigned Anzaldúa half-Spanish half-English reading, to show how Spanish-speaking culture is a core part of American culture, if at all because their exclusion or marking as different and foreign has helped construct this homogeneous “we.”

The idea was to make them discuss this “unknown” world in an “unknown” language. The questions posed included: What does it feel to be illegal? What does it feel to speak a language that is publicly derided? How many assumptions we let arise when we see a Spanish-speaking person in the cafeteria, etc.

Student: It must be difficult being a Latina.

### **Purely speculative thoughts about other languages**

*Arabic:* I think similar issues arise with respect to the fears and assumptions that surround people that speak Arabic in the United States. The post-September 11 period marks these people as potential terrorists, backward, etc. I think it would be interesting to assign texts written by women leaders from Arabic-speaking countries, or discussions from the press about “The West,” giving students an opportunity to look at their mirror reflection, so to speak.

*French:* Manu Chao may also be of help, he sings in French about “sans-papiers” about the panic that the periphery generates, etc. Post-colonial writers that use French abound as well, starting with Fanon, whose use of French for writing against French colonialism can be seen as an act of rebellion in and of itself.

*German:* I would imagine Jewish German writers to be a good way of looking at issues of identity and locating ourselves in the position of the oppressed.