

A Collaborative Citizen Sociolinguistic Reading of Eight Popular English-Language Novels

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In this article, a symphony of citizen sociolinguistic exploration, the author-readers methodologically research the language that comes to life in works of fiction, seeking to answer why we must talk about language (Rymes, 2020) in eight popular English-language novels. As we demonstrate, citizen sociolinguistics is not limited to only real-life exchanges, it can be undertaken by any observant person who wishes to document the splendors of happening upon remarkable language-in-action. We illustrate how the characters in these stories encounter conversations going awry, or how they seek to redeem themselves through interaction. Or, perhaps a spark of wonderment wells within readers as we take in linguistic features that are unique to diverse speech communities. In the end, the examples and subsequent analysis in this article expand the boundaries of citizen sociolinguistic exploration, exploring themes of identity and belonging and the ways that we construct our worlds through speech that an author has created. We grapple with questions of expertise, the strategic deployment of the linguistic repertoire and how we as readers constitute an essential audience for the author, in a collaborative observation of language.

In the fall of 2023, we, the authors of this paper, took a class with Dr. Betsy Rymes on the topic of citizen sociolinguistics. Dr. Rymes describes Citizen Sociolinguistics as “This everyday talk about language” (2020, p. xi), which as a methodology allows for purposeful exploration of the mundane. Inspiration for data to analyze can come from any source, and in this paper, we look to the world of fiction in novels that we read in groups from a citizen sociolinguistic perspective. In this paper, we will discuss the ways that characters, authors, and readers enact the principles of citizen sociolinguistics in the following novels: *Americanah*; *The House on Mango Street*; *The Night Watchman*; *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*; *Girl, Woman, Other*; *Pachinko*; *Deacon King Kong*; and *True Biz*. The eight novels were initially chosen by Dr. Rymes based on their diverse representations of language and culture, and the reading groups were formed based on student interest.

When we as readers pick up a work of fiction, we anticipate entering a world other than our own, watching it build before us in the eye of our imagination, filling in the edges of the imagery described and the accents portrayed in order to

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create whole characters. Although these books are written and therefore seemingly frozen in time, we find ourselves in a collaborative process with the author as we engage with them, rendering the characters and their worlds more complex and nuanced with each reading. Thus, partial perspectives, those of both reader and author, serve to co-create an ever-evolving situated experience, filled with knowing and wonder, disdain and outrage, as well as familiarity and comfort. We document how eight novels illuminate the power of literary language to evoke characters' complex identities. In a departure from standardized imaginaries of how language should be used, the characters come to life through their diverse Englishes, translanguaging practices, or absence of English altogether. Their language is the axis on which their worlds turn, allowing readers to "hear" their intersecting identities. Each book illustrates something about the identities that these authors bring to their writing. In this article, we present to you our experiences as citizen sociolinguists and readers, taking the everyday leisure activity of reading for pleasure and a basic awareness of language and transforming it into a critical approach to documenting the lives lived in these works of fiction as a compilation of authors' and readers' perspectives. These creative forms of language use have brought us, as readers, to think about how we also use language to talk about and to inhabit our lives as international students, multilingual Americans, claimants to numerous identities, and, ultimately, uniquely human.

Characters: Novel and unpredictable intersections of identity categories produced through language

Characters in the novels come from diverse backgrounds, each possessing distinct and complex identities that are evoked through their unique use of language. In order to fully portray the characters, authors make complex and localized sociolinguistic choices when they put words and ways of speaking into the mouths of their characters. Their distinct translanguaging practices (Garcia & Wei, 2014), speech patterns, naming conventions and word choices amount to a linguistic repertoire that reveals how language has shaped their journeys and vice versa, a symbiotic relationship that is foundational to their identities. At times, identity is most clearly expressed in the ways that characters experience and resolve conflicts and navigate the relationship with their closest community—such as their families, chosen or otherwise. In this section, we will examine how the uniqueness of characters from different novels is conveyed through creative and spectacular use of language in situated responses to particular lived experiences.

Conflicts can create a site for reflection and re-establishment of the characters' language ideologies. In Nović's (2022) *True Biz*, we meet Charlie, a Deaf teenager, as she is enculturated into the Deaf community through American Sign Language (ASL). Charlie's late start with ASL often requires her to ask someone more experienced to translate, but in the case where her friends do not agree on the best way to sign a word, varieties of ASL become the focus after one of them assumes to be the most correct because he is using the standard:

'It's Black ASL, her sign.'
 'There's...Black ASL?', said Charlie.
 'Of course. Deaf schools were also _____.'

What?

S-e-g-r-e-g-a-t-e-d. Language developed differently.

But, wasn't that a long time ago?

It's cultural, said Alisha, then looked back to Austin. And you're being racist.

(Nović, 2022, p. 188-189).

For the first time, Charlie must confront a more complicated landscape of ASL, characterized by tensions within the Deaf community that are not readily apparent to outsiders. Nović accomplishes this through dialogue, having the interlocutors sign the information instead of informing us in the following paragraphs. The featured characters all come to the conversation with different perspectives, and each departs with a slightly altered worldview. For Charlie, the harmony she had experienced in her Deaf school has been invaded by the language ideologies and racism of the hearing world, apparently there the whole time.

Characters resolve conflicts in many different ways, and at times, this process sparks wonderment about how certain aspects of their language provide them with a particular understanding of the situation. In Erdrich's (2020) *The Night Watchman*, the Native American characters often call on their mother tongue for its unique affordances. The protagonist Pixie's mother, for example, frequently uses native expressions that align with the social nuances of a situation in ways that using English may not. When Pixie returns home with her sister's baby, for example, and doubts her mother's ability to serve as a wet nurse, her mother retorts: "...I'm not that old....My breasts aren't yet hard dried-up old leather pipe bags." (Erdrich, 2020, p. 191). And the narrator explains for us: "In Chippewa, that was all just one word. They both started laughing in that desperate high pitched way people laugh when their hearts are broken" (ibid). For these characters, using Chippewa allowed them to express and straddle the multitude of emotions they felt, which in turn adds to their multi-dimensional identities.

Family and characters' embrace of or distancing from language forms is another central aspect of identity in several books. In a poignant moment from Cisneros' (1994) *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza, the narrator, learns from her father that her grandfather has died. Clearly overcome by emotion, her father speaks in both Spanish and English to let her know the news: "*Your abuelito is dead, Papa says early one morning in my room. Está muerto, and then as if he just heard the news himself, crumples like a coat and cries, my brave Papa cries*" (p. 56). Cisneros contributes to Papa's identity through his way of speaking, and that is how both we as readers and the protagonist Esperanza experience him, through his bilingual linguistic repertoire.

Families also serve as foundations for individual identity, both pride and shame. The main character Noa from Lee's (2017) *Pachinko* discovers his father's association with the Yakuza, a Japanese organized crime syndicate. He refers to the Yakuza as "the filthiest people in Japan" (Lee, 2017, p. 285), and upon learning of his father's affiliation, he declares that he has been made "dirty." Noa has had to endure anti-Korean sentiment in Japan for his whole life and has tried to make amends for the Korean blood that he cannot change. Defeated, he declares that his efforts have been in vain: "How could you have ruined my life? How could you be so imprudent? A foolish mother and a criminal father. I am cursed" (Lee, 2017, p. 303). This blend of linguistic and cultural elements highlights how the

characters' personal experiences, family connections, and heritage collectively shape characters' understanding of themselves, their multilingual families and their place in society.

Characters' choice of language can bring them closer to their families or can separate them. Evaristo's (2019) novel *Girl, Woman, Other* tells unique stories of several generations of black British women, through which the complexities of race, gender, age, and social class interweave and manifest in characters' identities. Any time a character speaks, they evoke layers of social history, often spanning continents. A character called Slim is an African American born and raised in Georgia who moved to England to become a farm owner. He is raising his Black children in his dominantly-white adopted country, and at times the difficulties that they encounter seem trivial to the dangers of growing up in the Jim Crow South. In the following quote, Slim shows little sympathy to his children who experienced bullying by white kids in school. From Slim's perspective, what his kids experience today is just a teasing that is hardly worth crying over, compared to the horrendous suffering he faced in Georgia, and they should toughen up by fighting back and then move on. Slim deftly illustrates the horror of the state-sanctioned racism that he experienced in his youth as he talks about his time there as a Southern Black man:

'y'all ain't living in the segregated society I come from where you ain't got no rights.'

y'all ain't got a fifteen-year-old younger brother called Sonny who was soaked in coal oil before he was strung up on a sugarberry tree and set alight while still alive in front of thousands cheering.'

a boy called Sonny whose murder by mob was photographed and sent across the country as a postcard because folks were so damned proud of witnessing his lynching

y'all didn't discover that the woman who cried rape gave birth nine months later to a child so white, even her daddy came round to your daddy's house to apologize in person

y'all ain't been through that now, have ya?
so negroes, please, hold it down.

(Evaristo, 2019, p. 355).

Several features of speech associated with the American South reoccur throughout his lecture to his children, such as "y'all," and "ain't." These linguistic markers are associated with a racial identity which he embodies in his physical experience as well as through his way of speaking. His life stories become more compelling when he switches to the way of speaking that sounds most natural to him when disclosing his past. The way Slim tells his horrifying stories reveals his stoicism and Black pride as an African American who has managed to rise above excruciatingly traumatic racial discrimination.

Authors' Identities

The wonderment and delight that we encounter as readers of these novels is part of the craft of writing in which the authors share their years of citizen

sociolinguistic experience in the language forms their characters invoke. By writing at the intersection of individual identity and community norms and expertly intertwining those positionalities, the authors offer an insider's perspective on the ways of using language to engage with the readers. To achieve this, authors must act as citizen sociolinguists—knowledgeable of highly nuanced localized features of language variety and multilingualism (Rymes, 2020)—to successfully accomplish all these literary maneuvers.

McBride's (2020) *Deacon King Kong* is a novel set in a fictional housing project in Brooklyn in which the main character shoots the leader of the neighborhood drug dealers and sets off a chain of events. In a conversation between Bunch, a local drug kingpin, and his right-hand man Earl who is fiercely loyal to Bunch, author James McBride reveals the characters' neighborhood roles in their word choice: "'Said he was a little short on money from that . . . whatever that thing is. The city thing we doing, the poverty program thing . . . 'The Redevelopment Authority?' " (McBride, 2020, p. 66). Bunch, a high-level operator in the neighborhood, uses, "The Redevelopment Authority," speaking in the more official register of governmental organizations. In contrast, through his simplified phrasing, "poverty project," Earl enacts his role as down-to-earth everyday guy in the neighborhood. Familiarity with the distinction between these roles allows McBride to invoke their status through a seemingly simple turn-of-phrase.

The formative years of an author's life can inspire contexts that are ripe for citizen sociolinguistic exploration. Oscar, the titular protagonist in Díaz's (2007) *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* suffers from a chronic inability to fit in. To describe this, author Junot Díaz uses the Dominican word "parigüayo," explaining that "parigüayo," or "party watcher," has been used since the first U.S. occupation to refer to military personnel who observed Dominican social gatherings rather than participate and rub elbows with the locals (p.19). Thus, "parigüayo" gained the meaning of observer/outsider, which perfectly fits the image of Oscar—an overweight Dominican American high school student living in Paterson, New Jersey in the late 1980s who fails to fit into a predominantly white social environment, which made him unpopular both at school and in his neighborhood. It is precisely because of author Díaz's familiarity with the Dominican language and history that he can successfully depict the character of Oscar who feels forever destined to be an outsider.

Authors can also make use of their own life experiences as subjects of analysis in their work, through semi-autobiographical citizen sociolinguistics. For example, like the protagonist Ifemelu, in *Americanah* (2013), the author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Nigeria, started university there before moving to the U.S. to attend a different university in Philadelphia, held a fellowship at Princeton University, and spent time in Connecticut with her aunt who works in the medical field. Perhaps this citizen sociolinguistic practice of observation is best illustrated in a brief discussion of the Nigerian language Igbo with Ifemelu's aunt. As we see, bilingualism is constructed as negative in this new context, especially for her nephew Dike: "'Dike, *I mechago?*' Ifemelu asked. 'Please don't speak Igbo to him,' Auntie Uju said. 'Two languages will confuse him.' 'What are you talking about, Auntie? We spoke two languages growing up.' 'This is America. It's different'" (p. 134). Although Igbo carried important, desired cultural capital in Nigeria during both Ifemelu and Auntie Uju's time in Nigeria, now, in the U.S., the most important

currency is an idealized “American” English, which signals a validated American identity. Aunty Uju’s statement “This is America. It’s different” reflects the othering that comes along with speaking a language associated with a racialized group, conceivably sharing Adichie’s experiences around language (p.134). Therefore, the reader can assume that a large part of Ifemelu’s observations on the varying language practices in different communities as well as the contextual dependence on how multilingualism is valued are in fact Adichie’s own citizen sociolinguistic observations from different stages of her life.

Readers’ Identities

As demonstrated above, authors build characters from cultures whose experiences may be similar or different to our own, and it is these similarities and differences that allow us to see our own lives in the stories. In other words, when we read a novel, the way characters talk and act can feel close or far to our own lives. In this final section, we will analyze how readers’ personal experience and cultural background shape their understanding of and emotional response to the characters and plots in the novels.

Readers who find themselves away from home for work or study may find a deep connection to Cisneros’(1984) *The House on Mango Street*, in particular regarding Esperanza’s story in terms of navigating a new cultural environment. It is possible to maintain a profound connection to our heritage, or distance ourselves from lands that we no longer know, as Esperanza does when she refers to Mexico as “that country”—a phrase laden with a sense of estrangement from her Mexican roots. Nevertheless, we can see reflections of our own cultural experience in Esperanza’s journey. This loss is not complete, however; much like Esperanza’s use of terms such as “Mamacita” and “Papa,” readers and protagonists alike may oftentimes find that they hold on dearly to certain phrases from the past—phrases that reaffirm cultural identity. This complex interplay of holding on to one’s cultural roots while assimilating into another culture underlines the subtle and individualized process of navigating identity within a multicultural landscape. It reflects the dynamic nature of culture—how it can be both a touchstone and a mosaic of evolving experiences.

Similarly, many individuals who find themselves between two places, because of voluntary migration, citizenship status, or displacement may resonate with Ifemelu’s journey from seeking to be legitimized as an “American,” to feeling conflicted when this is within reach. Like Ifemelu, we may find ourselves seeking to “sound,” “look,” or even “think” “American” and comparing ourselves to a nonexistent idealized standard that pixelates any image of true individuality. Indeed, the line between assimilation and preservation can become quite blurry, more so when our core sense of self and values are in flux. Many times, we may realize this too late, only after we have contorted ourselves to fit within a prescribed mold that falsely promises a sense of normalcy, acceptance, and inclusion. Also, like Ifemelu, however, we may find ourselves on a course of reconnection with who we once were, who we would like to be, and the cultural, linguistic, and individual connections that ground us there. This path will not look the same for everyone as some may not have the option of returning to their place of origin; consequences for non-assimilation can be quite dire for some or tame for others,

but a constant is the longing for places where or people with whom we can be our whole selves.

Regarding assimilation, Nović (2022)'s *True Biz* shows readers how culture is created and passed on in the Deaf community, and at times some of the most compelling interactions occur at the family level. Even readers not themselves in Deaf communities can relate to how family decisions regarding language choice/use impact how they grow into their identities. This can become particularly salient in conversations surrounding how parents and caretakers navigate teaching or withholding heritage languages from their children. These linguistic decisions, much like the ones showcased in *True Biz*, consider possible ramifications for future opportunities and livelihood, as well as cultural and familial connections. In the process, author Nović uses their lived experience to bring the reader into the inculturation of deaf signers, rendering protagonist Charlie's coming-of-age experience both universal and unique.

Conclusion

Acts of citizen sociolinguistics are not limited to real-life exchanges caught in the moment or documented online in social media. As illustrated in the previous sections, characters, authors, and readers enact citizen sociolinguistic approaches when they talk about language, choose specific language forms and invoke the associated identities. Consequently, there are many ways language is used to enact and produce individual and community identities, as seen in the names and description of characters, the context surrounding the use of certain languages, and the linguistic choices the author makes that leave an impression on the readers.

Often, the way characters speak conveys as much as or more than what they say, allowing the dialogue to demonstrate the work of the citizen sociolinguist. As a result, readers can experience the novels in different ways depending on what they bring to their reading. Sometimes, we become insiders, unlikely participants like a fly on the wall. Other times, we are users of a similar language, or party to similar situations, awed to find ourselves in literature, in situations we have never experienced, a potentially empowering experience.

Whether aspects of these new worlds are everyday or brand-new and eye-opening, whether we are unsure of what to expect or trusting that the author will serve as a dependable guide to the world they are creating, there is something new to discover each time a novel is picked up, by a particular person, at a particular time, in a particular place. This collection of partial perspectives forms a kaleidoscopic portrait of linguistic experience—we find ourselves in stories because authors have placed us there, through their nuanced portrayals of, even if imagined, realities that capture slices of ways we think and talk about language.

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