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ENGL 3340

12 December 2017

Linguistic Terrorism and its Effects in *Borderlands*,  
*Comfort Woman*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*

“Linguistic terrorism” is a problem that many people face in today’s world, and is a term coined by Gloria Anzaldúa in her book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. She defines linguistic terrorism as repeated attacks on a person’s native tongue by the dominant culture; however, linguistic terrorism can also mean the censoring or silencing of a people or culture group. Both of these definitions cause long term effects in a person’s self-esteem and well-being, as evidenced in *Borderlands*, *Comfort Woman*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Chicana author Gloria Anzaldúa’s 1987 book, *Borderlands*, details her experiences with linguistic terrorism as oppression, Korean-American author Nora Okja Keller’s 1997 novel, *Comfort Woman*, highlights linguistic terrorism as the silencing of a people, and Canadian author Margaret Atwood’s 1998 book, *The Handmaid's Tale*, shows linguistic terrorism as oppression of a sex through dependency.

In her book, *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa writes about her experiences with her native language, Chicano Spanish, in the chapter titled “How to Tame a Wild Tongue.” Chicano Spanish is often called “Spanglish” because the language is an evolutionary blend of Spanish and English that developed out of a need to communicate as a people. Anzaldúa says that many native Spanish speakers, or Latinos, call her language “a mutilation of Spanish” (77). She defends her language by saying that her ancestors created it out of a need to identify themselves

as a culturally distinct group. The language is a living language, and is therefore constantly changing. Her people are neither English nor Spanish and cannot identify with either language, so the only option that was left to them was to create their own language (Anzaldúa 77). In this chapter, Anzaldúa discusses the effects of external and internal linguistic terrorism on her people.

External linguistic terrorism is a form of oppression that stems from outside groups. In Anzaldúa's case, external linguistic terrorism comes from native Spanish speakers, or Latinos, and even English speakers. She says that Latinos want to "put locks on our mouths" and discredit Chicano Spanish because it is a mutilation of the original language (Anzaldúa 76). Her words are a direct example of linguistic terrorism: Latinos are oppressing Chicanos for their language and metaphorically silencing them. The Latinos do not actually lock the Chicanos' mouths, but the desire to do so is a metaphoric silencing. Later she writes that "Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure" (Anzaldúa 80). After undoubtedly many years of censure and linguistic terrorism from Latinos, Chicanos are afraid to speak in Spanish to Latinos because they fear the Latinos' criticisms. Due to this external linguistic terrorism, Chicanos feel that their language is not worthy of recognition, and they often internalize the poor view of their language.

Internal linguistic terrorism begins when Chicanos take the Latinos' poor view of their language to heart. Chicanos have always been told their language is an illegitimate language, and according to Anzaldúa, "because...our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other" (80). Like English, Chicano Spanish varies regionally, and speakers from different regions will persecute their own people because of the way they speak. Anzaldúa writes that Chicanos will not speak Chicano Spanish to each other

because they will see their own shame and low self-esteem in the other speaker's eyes (80). She writes "In childhood we are told our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self" (Anzaldúa 80). These external linguistic terrorism attacks eventually destroy the Chicanos' sense of self-esteem for their people and their language. Towards the end of this chapter, she writes, "Ethnic identity is twin skin to my linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself" (Anzaldúa 81). If her language is not recognized as legitimate, her people cannot be recognized as a distinct cultural group. Today, Chicanos are slowly gaining their legitimacy as a people, and their language is beginning to gain recognition in popular culture.

While *Borderlands* presents persecution of a cultural group by the dominant group, Spanish or English speakers, *Comfort Woman* presents the censuring and silencing of a particular group of people in war-time, gender-based violence. *Comfort Woman* is a novel written by Nora Okja Keller about Korean women who were used as sex slaves by the Japanese army during World War II. The Japanese believed that Koreans were a racially inferior people meant to be dominated, and used this belief to justify their inhuman actions against a country. Akiko – the protagonist – gives several instances of linguistic terrorism imposed on her and other comfort women by the Japanese. Throughout the novel, Akiko identifies that she was physically silenced by the Japanese.

Akiko first identifies linguist terrorism early in the novel when she tells about being found by missionaries. The missionaries notice that Akiko is human, but they believed that she can only speak in "the language of animals," which was probably only grunts, growls, or body language (Keller 16). Akiko explains that when she was in Japanese camps, she was only taught what was necessary to know as a comfort woman. She and the other comfort women were "not

expected to understand and were forbidden to speak, any language at all” (Keller 16). The Japanese enforced linguistic terrorism as the censoring and silencing of a people. The comfort women were likely beaten for speaking, so they remained silent out of fear. Like the Chicano Spanish, Akiko and the other comfort women developed a new language out of necessity. Since they could not speak to each other, they created a language of their own. Akiko says that they communicated through eye movements, body posture, tilts of the head, and rustlings between their stalls (Keller 16). Even though the comfort women found their own way to communicate, the damage had been done. Nearly two years later when she was found by missionaries, the only “language” Akiko could speak was one of the animals (Keller 16). Keller does not identify what animal language the missionaries believed Akiko could speak, but she could probably only grunt, growl, or make eye movements to communicate. She been silenced for so long that she could no longer speak a coherent human language. Furthermore, Akiko was silenced about her experiences as a comfort woman. After she had regained the ability to speak, she could not speak about her experiences, even with those she was closest to because of her loss of language through linguistic terrorism. Even her daughter did not know about her mother’s past until after her death.

However, linguistic terrorism in *Comfort Woman* is not simply represented by the silencing of Akiko and the comfort women. The novel presents the comfort women as a symbol of their country. Induk, Akiko’s successor, would often yell at the Japanese soldiers to stop the invasion of her country. She would shout “I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive” and her words established these women as the symbol of Korea (Keller 20). Induk was eventually killed for her words, silencing the other comfort women through fear of death. Paula Gilbert argues that the women in *Comfort Women* are a symbol of their country in her article, “The Violated Female

Body as Nation: Cultural, Familial, and Spiritual Identity in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*." Gilbert likens comfort women and their violated bodies to "the cultural identity of Korea" (486). In the first half of the twentieth century, the Japanese invaded Korea as they invaded the bodies of these women, who did not want to be in this situation just as Korea did not request an invasion. Along with this military history, the Japanese denied these women basic human rights, and stripped them of their voices through linguistic terrorism. To this day, the Japanese government still denies that Korean women were taken for the soldiers' personal use, further silencing these women. In order to rectify the linguistic terrorism in this situation, the former comfort women must be acknowledged and their experiences legitimized.

*Comfort Woman* presents the censoring and silencing of a particular group of people in gender-based violence, and *The Handmaid's Tale* also presents linguistic terrorism as gender-based oppression through dependency. *The Handmaid's Tale* is a novel written by Margaret Atwood about the misogynistic society of Gilead. In this society, the birth rate is rapidly declining, and handmaids are assigned to high ranking men in the hopes that the two will conceive a child. The protagonist, Offred, is a handmaid, and the novel is her story of life as a handmaid. Offred gives several examples of linguistic terrorism throughout the novel and identifies that she and other women in the Gileadean society were oppressed through linguistic terrorism and were kept dependent on the men.

In Atwood's critically acclaimed book, *The Handmaid's Tale*, linguistic terrorism rears its head as the oppression of a sex through dependency. Women in *The Handmaid's Tale* are forbidden to read and write, and this form of linguistic terrorism keeps the women dependent on the men in the misogynistic society of Gilead. Offred's first indicates linguistic terrorism when she and Ofglen go shopping. She says, "The store has a huge wooden sign outside it in the shape

of a golden lily [...] you can see the place, under the lily, where the lettering was painted out, when they decided that even the names of shops were too much temptation for us” (Atwood 25). Offred indicates that all words have been replaced by pictures—the stores’ names and the coupons are two examples that she gives when she and Ofglen go shopping. If women cannot even read or write, skills necessary to survive in our modern world, they would be fully dependent on the men for their information. The restriction of reading in Gilead is one example of linguistic terrorism that keeps women dependent on men.

A second example of linguistic terrorism in *The Handmaid’s Tale* is the restriction of writing. According to Aunt Lydia, who trains the handmaids, writing leads to envy (Atwood 186). One night, Offred and the Commander are in his office, and she asks him about a Latin phrase. The Commander asks her to write the phrase down, and Offred comments, “The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of words it contains. Pen Is Envy... [...] And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen” (Atwood 186). Even holding the pen is a punishable crime for Offred, but once she holds it, she knows the power behind the pen. The pen represents the thoughts and ideas that women in Gilead are denied through the removal of their ability to read and write. By removing the temptation to read or write from the women, Gilead hopes to keep its female citizens submissive. Moira is an example of a female who has not been kept dependent, and she is not submissive. She acts on her own free will and breaks many of Gilead’s laws. She argues that the government does not “want us going anywhere,” so they keep the women dependent on the men so that they do not leave Gilead. If the women became independent, they would understand the pitfalls of this society, as Offred and Moira do, and perhaps leave Gilead in favor of a better society.

Perhaps the most significant account of linguistic terrorism in *The Handmaid's Tale* comes from the Ceremony. Before the Ceremony, the Commander reads passages from the Bible. Offred says, "He has something we don't have, he has the word" (Atwood 88). Here, she is referring both to the Bible, which is also called "the word," but Offred also means the freedom to read without the fear of punishment. Since the women cannot read, the Commander could read to them anything he liked, no matter if it were in the book he was reading or not. This way, his household was fully dependent on the Commander for their spiritual guidance. In this light, the Commander reading to his household is very similar to the Catholic church in Rome during the early 1500s. The Catholic church would sell indulgences to parishioners, who believed that these documents would pardon their sins (Hitchcock and Perry). However, many people during the 1500s were illiterate and the Bible was written in academic languages, such as Greek, so parishioners had no way to verify the facts themselves. Likewise, the Commander's household could not verify their own facts. The Pope was using his parishioners' blind faith to his advantage because the funds collected from indulgences built St. Paul's Basilica and aided a German bishop who was in financial trouble (Hitchcock and Perry). Both Gileadean leaders and the Catholic church perhaps kept their people in the dark so that they could reap the benefits of perfectly obedient citizens. If citizens do not know that they are being fooled, they will remain complacent.

Each of these groups that were silenced have one thing in common: they are known as the "subalterns" of their communities. Subaltern is a term found in Gayatri Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and an interchangeable term for subaltern is "Other." The subaltern is someone who is a person of the lowest class in a society (Spivak). Therefore, the Chicanos are subaltern to Spanish or English speakers, the comfort women are subaltern to the Japanese

Imperial Army, and the handmaids are subaltern to anyone else in Gilead. Each of these groups have become the subaltern through linguistic terrorism. Spivak claims that ostracizing groups is the “clearest available example” of epistemic violence (76). Therefore, one can argue that making these groups into subalterns through linguistic terrorism is a form of violence. Ray Gwyn Smith writes, “Who is to say that robbing a people is less violent than war?” (qtd. in Anzaldúa 75). Both Spivak and Smith make the assertion that taking away someone’s language—whether by censure from the dominant group, silencing a group through fear, or stripping a group of their language to make them dependent on another—is just as violent as war.

Stripping people of their language through linguistic terrorism can cause serious long-term effects. For example, Anzaldúa writes that she did not read her first Chicano novel until the 1960s, when she was at least eighteen years old (81). She writes, “For days I walked around in stunned amazement that a Chicano could write and could get published” (Anzaldúa 81). Her amazement shows that she believed her language would never be recognized as a legitimate language, much less ever be published. How many years of censure from native Spanish or English speakers did she have to endure before her pride in her language and people was completely destroyed? Anzaldúa was an adult before she finally saw her language recognized in an official capacity. She writes, “...I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself” (Anzaldúa 81). Because Chicano Spanish was not recognized as an official language or culture, Anzaldúa was not able to take pride in herself or her language, causing a self-esteem problem that she claims many Chicanos have.

In *Comfort Woman*, Akiko was not able to verbalize to her daughter her experiences as a comfort woman because of the linguistic terrorism she experienced in the Japanese military camps. The Japanese soldiers silenced the comfort women through fear of death after they killed



Induk for her words—"I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive" (Keller 20). For years, Akiko held on to the guilt and shame she had from her experiences. Not even those she was closest to were able to understand her pain. Even fifty years after World War II and the exploitation of comfort women, the Japanese government still denies that these women were forced into sexual slavery. Some brave women have stepped forward and told their stories, but the Japanese government insults them by saying that they were prostitutes who chose that life. In both the novel and today's world, comfort women must privately deal with the emotions caused by their experiences since their experiences are not recognized in an official capacity. This linguistic terrorism has caused shame in Akiko and the many comfort women whose experiences were denied credibility.

Finally, in *The Handmaid's Tale*, women were robbed of their independence because they were forbidden to read or write. The Gileadean government stripped women of their independence because the leaders knew the women would leave if they had the ability. Women were necessary in Gilead society because of the declining birth rate. If there were no women, or at least no handmaids, there could not be any births. Therefore, the Gileadean government placed all of the women's property in their husband's possessions as another way of removing their independence. The long-term effects of linguistic terrorism in Gilead would be total illiteracy. If the women could not read or write, who would teach the children? The men in Gilead seem to be servants, who are also illiterate, or in the military. There would not be anyone to educate the future generations, so everyone would follow the government blindly, which is perhaps the ultimate goal of the Gileadean society.

In conclusion, linguistic terrorism is a very real problem that we still face today. Anzaldúa's book *Borderlands* shows the effects of linguistic terrorism in America during the

1980s. Because of linguistic terrorism, her people were not recognized as a distinct cultural group, and they felt ashamed of their heritage. Keller's novel *Comfort Woman* shows linguistic terrorism in effect in Asia during the 1940s. Many Korean women were silenced in the Japanese military camps. These women were not allowed to speak and were silenced by their oppressors. Today, Korean comfort women are still denied their voices through linguistic terrorism as the Japanese government vehemently denies that comfort women exist. Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* shows linguistic terrorism in effect in Gilead. In the misogynistic society of Gilead, the women are kept dependent on the men as reading, writing, and owning property is illegal for women. The oppression of women in *The Handmaid's Tale* reminds readers of the oppression of the Catholic church's parishioners in the 1400s. As long as Chicanos' language and identity, comfort women's experiences, and Gileadean women's independence are denied through linguistic terrorism, society will continue to deal with the problems of low self-esteem and other problems that linguistic terrorism presents. To rectify the harms of linguistic terrorism, the persecuted people's experiences must be validated as legitimate experiences.

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