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**Reflections on Some Syntactical Processes and
their Communicative Implications in Two Short
Stories Written by Julia Álvarez: *My English* and
*A Genetics of Justice***

María Martínez Lirola

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Reflections on Some Syntactical Processes and their Communicative Implications in Two Short Stories Written by Julia Álvarez: *My English* and *A Genetics of Justice*

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Abstract

Our hypothesis in this article is that Julia Álvarez chooses several anomalous syntactical structures in English in the short stories *My English* and *A Genetics of Justice* to point out certain facts or certain feelings that are important in her life. In this sense we can say that there is a relationship between the use of words or structures and the author's ideology.

This article is within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar for two main reasons: a) the importance of context for the analysis of the main syntactical processes of thematization and postponement in English and b) because it studies language in relation to society

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and analyses the main reasons for choosing between some linguistic forms or others, fact that is always determined for the function that those linguistic forms have in society.

The main purpose of this article is to show that presenting ideas using certain syntactical structures in English (existential sentences, extra-position, pseudo-cleft sentences, passive, cleft sentences, reversed pseudo cleft and left dislocation) is not at random because those structures have specific communicative implications, as we will see when we analyse the examples in the two short stories we have chosen.

1. Introduction

In a functional grammar approach, the interpretation of language is understood as a system of meanings together with the forms that those meanings express (Halliday, 1994²: xiii-xiv). In this sense we can state that a functional grammar is connected with semantics and analyses authentic products of social interaction (texts).

Instead of having chosen independent examples coming from a computational corpus, we have decided to analyse some anomalous syntactical processes in English (existential sentences, extraposition, pseudo-cleft sentences, passive, cleft sentences, reversed pseudo cleft and left dislocation) in two short stories written by the Hispanic writer Julia Álvarez: *My English* and *A Genetics of Justice* ([note 1](#)).

The literary texts under analysis are authentic texts in the sense that language is used in a real context of situation and context of culture. In the examples under analysis in these two short stories we can see how the author uses language, which is clearly connected with her ideology or world view, together with the social reality she wants to describe. In this way, the literary text becomes a source of socio-cultural meanings because it points out the relationship between the text and the social reality. As Rudolfo Anaya declares in his interview with Martínez (1998: 118):

[...] the Chicano literature that we have been writing over the past twenty years begins to talk about the fundamental world view of the people, of the group. That is tremendously important. Again, you reflect on those values of that world view; without that reflection you, we are apt to be consumed by that which is not you, us, more easily. Part of the authentic values that we describe as beautiful, as valuable, also take place in art and in the constant experimentation that we call art or literature.

The only criterion for Hispanic literature is that it be written by a Hispanic writer. Hispanic literature as viewed by Hispanic critics as well as by European and Latin American scholars is an expression of a social group.

Although Julia Álvarez was born in New York City, her family moved to the Dominican Republic shortly after her birth, and

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it was there that she spent most of her childhood. In 1960, when Álvarez was 10 years old, her family emigrated to the United States, fleeing the Dominican Republic because of Álvarez's father's involvement with an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Trujillo dictatorship. In New York, Álvarez received her primary education in boarding schools and realized while in high school that she wanted to pursue a career as a writer.

The writing of Julia Alvarez incorporates her vivid memories of childhood in the Dominican Republic, and the subsequent adjustment to a new life in New York City. Alvarez first made her mark as a poet but is best known for her novels, particularly the award-winning *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) and *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994).

Having spent the majority of her life in the United States, Álvarez considers herself influenced by American culture, yet her writing bridges the realms of Latino and American culture. Her Dominican roots are often traced in her stories, but they are flooded with insights about the human experience. Her works reflect the multiple identity she has assumed as a woman, a Latin American, and an American.

In these two short stories *My English* and *A Genetics of Justice*, she unveils such powerful issues as the male chauvinism

characteristic of Hispanic families, the role of women under dictatorships, and the misogyny manifested in political structures. She clearly anatomises the immigrant experience.

The anomalous syntactical structures under analysis have certain communicative implications that are quite relevant for discourse from the functional point of view since these structures contrast clearly with the basic word order in English.

2. Analysis of existential sentences

Existential sentences describe the existence of something or give information about something that happens. The term existential sentence is due to Jespersen (1909-1949: Vol. VII: 110). He declares the following statement regarding the main use of existential sentences:

The chief use of there-sentences is to denote the more or less vague existence or coming into existence of something indefinite; thus very frequently with the verb be [...].

Grzegorek (1984: 76) points out three characteristics that existential sentences have in common: “(1) their subject NPs (**note 2**) are focus elements, (2) their verbs have a lower degree of C.D. (**note 3**) than the subject NPs, (3) the verb and the notional subject are arranged according to the increasing degree of C.D., i.e. the order is: verb – subject”.

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The structure of the sentence is: *There* + verb + nominal group.

The existential sentence can be followed by a relative clause as we can see in the following examples:

There wasn't a sentence that wasn't colonized by an English word (Álvarez, 2001: 182).

[...] there is a scene I imagine that she has not told me about (Álvarez, 2001: 208).

With regard to the analysis of the structure in terms of theme and rheme, the theme is *there* and the rheme is the rest of the structure. New information is in the rheme, i.e., in the notional subject.

The existential sentence has a very clear textual function. As we can see in Downing and Locke (1992: 257), in the existential sentence the nominal group (notional subject) represents new information, that is the reason why it is normally indefinite. If we presented an indefinite subject in initial position, the expectations of the hearer would be altered since the beginning of the message would be preceded by unknown information for the hearer. In this way, the theme would be new and without any connection to what has been previously said. When this happens, if we place a *there* without any meaning at the

beginning of the sentence, all the sentence receives newness in a way that the hearer's attention is attracted.

With this syntactical structure, the author just lets us know the existence of something:

There was also a neat little trick I wanted to try on and English-speaking adult at home (Álvarez, 2001: 183).

In the next example, Julia Álvarez emphasizes the brutal repression in the Dominican Republic under the dictatorship of Trujillo:

There were still old cronies of the dictator around who would love an excuse to go after my family, after my father, after her (Álvarez, 2001: 210).

In this example it is pointed out that the politician Rafael Leonidas Trujillo normally got the girl that he wanted:

Respectable families such as hers kept their daughters out of the public eye, for Trujillo was known to have an appetite for pretty girls, and once his eye was caught, there was no refusing him (Álvarez, 2001: 206).

Speaking Spanish was very important for the Hispanic population in the United States but it was difficult to speak pure Spanish; Álvarez emphasizes this fact in the following example:

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There wasn't a sentence that wasn't colonized by an English word (Álvarez, 2001: 182).

The end of the second short story is really representative since it emphasizes the genetics of justice (title of the short story) as something the Hispanic population finally got:

If there is such a thing as genetic justice that courses through the generations and finally manifests itself full-blown in a family moment, there it was (Álvarez, 2001: 211).

This structure sometimes adds to narration a mysterious way together with some imprecision:

When I run through my mother's memory of this parade, there is a scene I imagine that she has not told me about (Álvarez, 2001: 208).

3. Analysis of extraposition

When we place a long subject at the end of the superordinate clause and we replace it by the pronoun *it* in subject initial position, we find an example of extraposition. Huddleston (1984: 451) offers the following definition: "Extraposition shifts a unit to the end of the clause (except that certain peripheral adjuncts may still follow it) and inserts *it* into the vacated position".

In the second part of the structure we can find a *that* clause or a *to* infinitive clause, as we can see in the two examples we find in these short stories.

According to Erdmann (1990: 138-139), the main difference between extraposition and the correspondent sentence without extraposition is that this last one situates the speaker in discourse, in the situation or in her/his knowledge of a fact. In contrast, extraposition does not make reference to the text, to the context or to the knowledge of certain facts or people. Extraposition is then a much more neutral construction than its correspondent without extraposition.

If we concentrate on the analysis of the structure in terms of theme and rheme, we have to say that according to Halliday (1994²: 61), the theme is *it* and the rheme the rest of the structure.

The two examples of extraposition are related to the fact of learning a language. The first one emphasizes the importance of learning English for Hispanic families to have more opportunities in the United States:

It was very important, she kept saying, that we learn our English. She always used the possessive pronoun: your English, and inheritance we had come into and must wisely use. Unfortunately,

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my English became all mixed up with our Spanish (Álvarez, 2001: 182).

We cannot forget that Julia Álvarez was forced to learn English when she was ten, that is why we can clearly perceive a certain sense of resilience, the forging of her personality under the pressure of her sudden immersion in a strange culture with a new language.

The second example points out the equality of two very important languages in the United States, Spanish and English, although for some people, English is superior. Álvarez discusses being torn between two cultures and the hardships faced by her immigrant family:

It took some time before I understood that Americans were not necessarily a smarter, superior race. It was as natural for them to learn their mother tongue as it was for a little Dominican baby to learn Spanish (Álvarez, 2001: 184).

As Galindo (1975: v) states: “Thus, with the social, political, and economic dominance of the Anglo, Spanish was no longer the respected language of a proud and independent people, but the despised tongue of a stubborn foreign minority who refused to accept English graciously and the full-fledged Americanism that presumably came with it”.

The two previous examples emphasize that speaking Spanish was considered inferior to speaking English. While we are on this subject we should remember that there was a movement in favour of speaking only English, the *English Only Movement*, mentioned by Anaya in the interview he had with Martínez (1998: 119):

But it seems to me that there is a danger when particular groups within the multiplicity of cultures acquire too much power and instead of sharing important values they impose values. [...] Well, I think the English Only Movement in this country is a reflection of fear.

4. Analysis of passive sentences

Passive can be used in two different ways: as a thematization process, passive has no agent complement; in this way the result of an action or the person affected by the action is emphasized, i.e., the patient subject. As a postposition process, passive emphasizes the agent when this is present. As a postposition process, if there is no agent complement, it can also emphasize the predicate.

Stein (1979: 26) defines passive in the following way: “Passive verb phrases are verbal combinations consisting of a verb+an obligatory past participle which function as verbs in a sentence and cannot be replaced by a one-word form in the

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present and past tense nor by a corresponding coordinated active verb phrase”.

Most of the examples we find in our corpus have a “by agent” complement except in the following example:

When we arrived to New York, I was shocked. A country where everyone spoke English! These people must be smarter, I thought (Álvarez, 2001: 184).

In the previous example, we can clearly perceive how Julia Álvarez felt in New York. The next example also points out the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel since it is related to languages:

They had been punished for their pride by being made to speak different languages so that they didn’t understand what anyone was saying (Álvarez, 2001: 184).

Halliday (1970: 161) declares the following statement in which we can see that the use of passive is justified:

[...] theme, actor and modal subject are identical unless there is a good reason for them not to be. Where they are not, the tendency in Modern English is to associate theme and modal subject; and this is the main reason for using the passive. The passive has precisely the function of dissociating the actor from this complex so that it can either be put in focal position at the end, or more frequently, omitted, as in (29) (**note 4**):

(29i) This gazebo was built by Sir Christopher Wren.

(29ii) This gazebo is being restored.

In relation to the analysis of the structure in terms of theme and rheme, the theme is the part of the structure before the passive verb and the rheme is the rest of the sentence. This example points out something related to Trujillo that is known by everybody: [...] for Trujillo was known to have an appetite for pretty girls, and once his eye was caught, there was no refusing him (Álvarez, 2001: 206).

When we talk about Trujillo's appetite for girls, we have to make reference to the Mirabal sisters, three sisters who were against the tyranny of Trujillo, joined forces to oppose the regime and stood up to oppression in a time of terrible violence. They paid for their resistance with their lives when they are savagely murdered on a mountainside by the secret police after waging an underground fight against the Trujillo regime. The date, November 25, is now commemorated all over Latin America as International Day Against Violence Towards Women.

Other facts related to Trujillo are also expressed through passive sentences to emphasize that he was a bad person; in this way the author establishes certain distance between Tru-

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jillo and herself. In the following example passive sentences highlight things that are related to his physical appearance:

How in order to appear taller , his shoes were specially made abroad with built-in heels that added inches to his height. How plumes for his Napoleonic hats were purchased in Paris and shipped in vacuum-packed boxes to the Island. How his uniforms were trimmed with tassels and gold epaulettes and red sashes, pinned with his medals, crisscrossing his chest (Álvarez, 2001: 207).

Nash (1980: 140) presents passive as a characteristic of formal discourse: “A further stylistic property of the passive is that it noticeably cools the manner of address – i.e. it is an index of the formal tone”.

We agree with Nash since in some examples, passive sentences present facts that are important for the narration and give solemnity to it, for instance: We were not told that every night our house had been surrounded by black Volkswagens; [...] (Álvarez, 2001: 209).

The next sentence points out that *Spanglish* was quite common instead of proper Spanish:

Mix-up, or what’s now called Spanglish, was the language we spoke for several years. There wasn’t a sentence that wasn’t colonized by an English word (Álvarez, 2001: 182).

The fact of not speaking good English at school normally implied that children were humiliated. The following example emphasizes in a very clear way the peripheral position Hispanic people occupied in American society:

Whenever I made a mistake, Teacher would shake her head slowly, "In English, YO-LEE-A, there's no such word as columpio. Do you mean a swing?"

I would bow my head, humiliated by the smiles and snickers of the American children around me (Álvarez, 2001: 182-183).

The writer pays special attention to language because she felt she was without a language since she was losing her Spanish and her English was not good enough to feel confident to speak it. This makes reference to the combination of two languages and two cultures that were present in Álvarez's life from her childhood.

Julia Álvarez recreates the feelings of loss she experienced after her immigration to the United States, when she was ten years old. After their arrival in New York City, she and her sisters struggled to find their place in a new world. In the United States, the writer found an unfriendly, unwelcoming world.

The following example lets us know that learning English was not an easy task for the Hispanic population and knowing the grammar and syntax of this language was difficult:

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“Because...,” I answered him. Papito waited a second for the rest of my sentence and then gave me a thumbnail lesson, “Because has to be followed by a clause” (Álvarez, 2001: 183).

In the next example, Julia Alvarez emphasizes the negative feeling that her mother felt against Trujillo:

Perhaps because she had innocently revered him, my mother was now doubly revolted by this cold-blooded monster (Álvarez, 2001: 207).

This example is connected to the fact that Álvarez’s father’s once-wealthy family had supported the wrong political faction during the revolution. Álvarez’s parents were clearly victims of the dictatorship.

The next example of passive also emphasizes a negative fact related to Trujillo: he felt superior to women and used to humiliate them:

To my father and other men in the country, the most humiliating of these tributes was the occasional parade in which women were made to march and turn their heads and acknowledge the great man as they passed the review stand (Álvarez, 2001: 208).

5. Analysis of cleft sentences

Jespersen (1909-1949: Vol. VII: 147-148) defines cleft sentences in the following way: “A cleaving of a sentence by

means of *it is* (often followed by a relative pronoun or connective) serves to single out one particular element of the sentence and very often, by directing attention to it and bringing it, as it were, into focus, to mark a contrast”.

Visser (1963-1973: 49) presents this structure in the following way: “This periphrastic construction is used to bring a part of a syntactical unit into prominence; it is especially employed when contrast has to be expressed: It is father (not mother) who did it”.

Delin (1992: 71-72) declares regarding cleft sentences:

Clefts are focusing constructions.

Clefts serve to indicate syntactically the position of GIVEN **(note 5)** or NEW information [...].

Many accounts of clefts have in common the view that the use of a cleft construction, either of itself or in conjunction with a particular accent pattern, indicates that the speaker or writer considers or intends certain elements within the construction to be interpreted as FOCAL.

Halliday (1994²: 60) proposes a double thematic analysis for cleft sentences. The first one represents the local thematic structure of the two sentences that we find in the construction. The second level shows the thematic structure of the

The following examples are clearly related to the fact that the brutal dictator of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, would not dare to victimize a family with such strong American ties; he made no move against their wealth and hesitated to struggle with them for political reasons. While we are on this subject we have to remember that Álvarez's father secretly joined the insurrectionists attempting to oust Trujillo and the police began surveillance on the compound. In 1960, just as they were preparing to apprehend him, an American agent warned the doctor in time for him to usher his family into an airplane headed out of the country:

It was from my father that my mother learned why Trujillo hated blacks with such a vengeance, how he disguised his own Haitian ancestry, how he lightened his skin with makeup (Álvarez, 2001: 207).

It was this same United States that had helped put our dictator in place during their occupation of the country from 1916 to 1924 (Álvarez, 2001: 209).

When Álvarez was in the United States, she faced homesickness, feelings of alienation and prejudice. She portrays her family's adjustment to their new life in the United States, the disorientation and sense of loss and isolation, the shock of prejudice, and the struggle to fit in a new world.

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In the next example, the emphasized element is made even more emphatic with the “focalizing adverb” only: It was the one and only time that my mother saw, up close, the man who had ruled her imagination most of her life (Álvarez, 2001: 208).

As we have clearly seen in the analysis of the examples, cleft sentences let the speaker or writer state something in a categorical way, generally in contrast with something already said. This structure also lets us emphasize information that we consider central in a text; for this reason we can state that it is important in the textual organization of discourse.

6. Other marked structures

The definition of reversed-pseudo cleft offered by Quirk et alii (1985: 1387) is the following: “It is essentially an SVC sentence with a nominal relative clause as subject or complement”.

In these structures one sentence is identified with another. The identifier is normally more prominent and it is there that we find the focus of the information. Halliday (1994²: 40) refers to this structure as “Thematic equative”, since we can clearly see it appears as an equation where the theme equals the rheme. Traditionally the first part of the pseudo-cleft sentence

has known information; on the other hand, the sentence after the verb *be* has the focus. With this structure we introduce a new theme thanks to the part of the sentence in which we do not find the *wh*- element.

The following example points out that Julia Alvarez's parents used English at home when they needed to talk of something important, serious or urgent; it emphasizes new information:

What I first recognized was not a language, but a tone of voice, serious, urgent, something important and top secret being said, some uncle in trouble, someone divorcing, someone dead (Álvarez, 2001: 181).

We find a reversed pseudo-cleft when the nominal relative clause is at the end of the complex sentence as subject complement and the emphasis is on the subject. Regarding the analysis of reversed-pseudo-clefts, we have to say that it is a sentence with the structure SVC with a nominal relative clause as subject complement.

Reversed pseudo-cleft sentences are thematically unmarked, since the theme is the subject of the clause, which is normal in declarative sentences. In these sentences the thematic element is the identifier instead of the identified and receives emphatic. The identified is rhematic.

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In this version of the reversed pseudo-cleft we can find the following *wh*-forms: *what*, *why*, *where*, *how* and *when*. The most common are *what* and *why*.

The following example belongs to the short story *A Genetics of Justice* and clearly emphasizes the importance of a moment: a political fact that has relevance for the Álvarez's family:

At this point I would always ask her why she and my father had returned to live in the country if they knew the dictatorship was so bad. And that's when my mother would tell me how, under pressure from his friends up north, Trujillo pretended to be liberalizing his regime (Álvarez, 2001: 207).

The last marked structure we are going to comment on is left dislocation. Geluykens (1992: 18) declares that this structure "consists of a sentence with a pro-form, preceded by a noun phrase which has the same reference as the following pronoun. E.g: Steve, he likes beans".

Left dislocation can be divided in different parts. Following Geluykens (1992: 18-19) we will denominate the nominal phrase that precedes the sentence "referent", and the sentence "proposition". The pronominal element in the proposition is called "gap". In the interaction process, the referent, the

pause and the proposition can be considered as three stages of the process.

According to the analysis of the structure in terms of theme and rheme, we have to say that the theme is the noun phrase we find before the comma and the rheme the rest of the structure.

With the following example the author wants to emphasize how “campesinas” (peasants) spoke. As we can see, their language is different to the standard one: Campesinas, they spoke a lilting, animated campuno, ss swallowed, endings chopped off, funny turns of phrases (Álvarez, 2001: 181).

7. Conclusion

Since to a large extent, word order in English is fixed, we have to say that the use of certain grammatical constructions is functionally relevant. For example, by using extraposition, we are postponing an important part of the message as a way of giving prominence to it. By the use of existential sentences, we introduce new elements into discourse. In the same way, clefting is a device used to focus on a particular constituent of the sentence.

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Systemic Functional Grammar has been chosen as a theoretical framework for this article because one of our main interests is to study the use of language in context.

A very important implication coming from the functional perspective from which we have analysed the anomalous syntactical constructions is that language and context are interrelated, i.e., there is a clear relationship between the language used by Julia Álvarez in the two short stories and the social structure presented in these two literary texts.

Since systemic meaning is not independent from context, we can say that each of the examples we have presented appears in the appropriate context and in the appropriate discourse situation, which implies that the examples are suitable to each particular discourse situation. The literary text is an authentic text because in it we find the real language in context.

Álvarez chronicles the bewilderments of acquiring English while slowly losing her grip on Spanish, the cultural and generational conflicts of her family, and her dawning understanding of the peril in which they had been living under Rafael Trujillo's ruthless and capricious dictatorship.

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1. The two short stories belong to the anthology of Hispanic American Literature published by McGraw Hill in 2001.
2. NP stands for Noun Phrase.
3. C.D. stands for Communicative Dynamism.
4. The number of this example has been given by Halliday (1970).
5. Capital letters in this word and the following ones appear in the original text.