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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IDEOLOGY, SUPERSTITION AND MARKED SYNTAX IN RUDOLFO ANAYA'S *BLESS ME, ULTIMA*

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1. INTRODUCTION. IDEOLOGY AND FUNCTIONALISM

The New Mexican writer Rudolfo Alfonso Anaya was born in Las Pasturas, New Mexico in 1937. He has won recognition as an interpreter of the lives of Hispanics in the U.S. Southwest through his novels, short stories, and plays. From his first novel, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), Anaya has shown a continuing interest in the folk stories of his New Mexican culture which includes Hispanic and Native American traditions and ceremonies and questions of religious faith. As López (1993: 19) points out “Chicanos took their destiny in their hands by creating a strong statement of their identity in the arts and by demanding social and political equity within American society.”

The novel was written in the 1960s in Albuquerque, New Mexico, but its setting is the mid 1940s, during the World War II and it was not first published until 1972. The setting and ambiance of the story reminds the readers that they are in a barrio or in a Chicano home Without any doubt, *Bless Me Ultima* is one of the best known novels in Chicano literature.

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As Calderón and Saldívar declare: “Chicano culture, as viewed by Chicana and Chicano critics as well as by European and Latin American scholars, is an expression of a social group that has given the distinctive cultural feature to the American West and Southwest.” (1991: 2).

Bless, Me Ultima is the story of Antonio Marez, a young coming-of-age within Spanish, Mexican and Native American influences. The story begins when Antonio is just six years old. At the beginning of the novel, Ultima, a *curandera*, joins the family. Ultima guides him so that he can face all the forces in his life and creates his personality. The story deals with his questioning of life, of traditional values, of religion, etc. He debates his beliefs and searches for spiritual satisfaction, which creates his own personality.

As Padilla (1989: 128) declares, many critics objected to *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) “on the grounds that it seemed non-referential even though it was set in a definable historical moment in a New Mexican village. Anaya’s mythic concerns, however, seemed to overwhelm the social contexts of the novel while holding out the promise of reconciliation of troubling socio-historical issues through what may be identified as mythic consciousness.”

There is a clear connection between Antonio Marez’s thoughts and Rudolfo Anaya’s ideology. Fowler (1986: 130) refers to ideology as the system of beliefs, values, and categories through which a person or a society comprehends the world. We can also refer to this concept as “mind style” or “world view” (the way in which someone perceives the world). As van Dijk points out: “Ideologies are not merely sets of beliefs, but socially shared beliefs of groups” (1998: 135). It is important to take into consideration the role played by ideologies in society. The following definition of world view offered by Fowler is very clear: “... the complete set of objectivations in a culture constitutes the representation of reality, or world-view, enjoyed by the community and its members. In a nutshell, we see the world in terms of the categories through which we and our society have constituted it.” (Fowler 1981: 25). This term normally describes the ways in which what we say and think interacts with society, this is a way of pointing out that language reproduces ideology, as Fowler (1981: 28) says: “[...] we regard language as a continuously active social practice, and the production of ideology or theory as an inevitable and ongoing function of the use of language”.

Our hypothesis in this article is that since language takes place inside a social dimension, it has to reflect ideology, and in this case Rudolfo Anaya's ideology is expressed through anomalous syntactic structures such as existential sentences, extrapositions and cleft sentences. That is the reason why we are going to analyse the examples of these structures we find in *Bless Me, Ultima* in their context.

Since context is going to be basic in our analysis, we have decided to use Systemic Functional Grammar as linguistic framework in this article because this linguistic school always analyses language in context and that is what we are going to do with the marked syntactic structures under analysis. This linguistic theory is also appropriate as a general framework for this article because it studies language in relation to society and analyses the main reasons for choosing between some linguistic forms or others, which is always determined by the function that those linguistic forms have in society. The most generalized application of systemic linguistics is: "To understand the quality of texts: why a text means what it does, and why it is valued as it is" (Halliday 1994: xxix).

From what we have said in the previous paragraph, we can infer that this linguistic school intends to analyze text, any text, written or spoken, in modern English, and at the same time it pays attention to how the text's linguistic characteristics are systematically interrelated with the characteristics of its environment, which is one of the purposes of this article.

In the following section we are going to analyse the relationship between three anomalous syntactic structures in English (existential sentences, extrapositions and cleft sentences) and superstition in *Bless Me, Ultima*. We should specify that we have analysed all the examples of these marked structures (87 existential sentences, 43 extrapositions and 40 cleft sentences) but in this article we are just going to concentrate on the examples that make reference to superstition in the novel. As we will see after the analysis of the examples, the author uses marked syntax to refer to some important facts related to superstition in the novel, and to share with the reader his ideology or world view.

2. USE OF MARKED SYNTAX TO REFER TO SUPERSTITION

Rudolfo Anaya uses New Mexican culture as the background of the novel *Bless Me, Ultima*. The three most important influences in this culture are family values, religion and superstition. In this article we are going to analyse in detail the last aspect, i.e., superstition. The fact that we find examples of marked syntax related to superstition is a way to point out that Antonio Marez cannot find clear answers to his questions about morality, human experience, moral values, etc. in the traditional Catholic faith.

As systemic linguists we are interested in how the structure of the marked structures under analysis reflect how the author processes and packages information. As discourse analysts, we are interested in the analysis of discourse and its relationship with the culture that discourse belongs to, as Johnstone (2002: 42) declares:

But acts of discourse are creative; discourse is not just the automatic result of the application of language and culture. Each instance of discourse is another instance of the laying out of a grammatical pattern or the expression of a belief, so each instance of discourse reinforces the patterns of language and the beliefs associated with culture. Furthermore, people do things in discourse in new ways, which suggest new patterns, new ways of thinking about the world.

The first structure we are going to study is the existential sentence. This structure describes the existence of something or gives information about something that happens. The term existential sentence was coined by Jespersen. The author (1909-1949 Vol. VII: 110) declares the following statement regarding the 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” The structure of the sentence is: *There* + verb + nominal group. 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.

After these introductory lines about the structure, we are going to analyse the examples related to superstition we find in the novel in their context. The first two examples of this syntactically marked structure make reference to the existence of witches and curses in the society presented in the novel:

Ay, and there were many other forms the witches took. ...Under the old law there was no penalty for killing a witch. (Anaya 1972: 87)

“There was a curse like that at El Puerto when I was a little girl,” my mother nodded, “the dishes would move, the statues of the saints themselves were found in the pigpens and the outhouse, and stones would fall like rain on the house“ (Anaya 1972: 225)

Ultima is presented as a very good person for Antonio’s family throughout the novel. Ultima lives and teaches the moral system that the novel espouses. She is an elderly *curandera*, a healer endowed with the spiritual power of her ancestors. It is Ultima who helps Antonio to understand that each person has to be responsible for his or her personal choices and has to be able to create a set of values to understand the world. Ultima teaches him to respect all the traditions surrounding him (Catholic and indigenous), to live in harmony with nature and to avoid judging others when they have different beliefs from his own. Antonio learns with Ultima’s help that everything that happens in life teaches a lesson and there is always something to learn, even when it is disappointing, difficult or painful. She helps him to cope with his anxieties and uncertainties. By using this structure, the author is emphasizing that the presence of Ultima is very important for Antonio since she helps him to resolve many of the conflicts within and around him:

“There isn’t a family she did not help,” she continued “no road was too long for her to walk to its end to snatch somebody from the jaws of death, and not even the blizzards of the llano could keep her from the appointed place where a baby was to be delivered“ (Anaya 1972: 3)

In the hills Ultima was happy. There was a nobility to her walk that lent a grace to the small figure. (Anaya 1972: 40)

The following examples underline that Antonio used to go with Ultima to gather herbs and plants and that there is a clear connection between Ultima’s healing powers and her knowledge of nature. Ultima shows the power inherent in plants and stones to Antonio since it is during the childhood years that our values are formed by family and community.:

I had received cuts from tree branches before and I knew that the next day the cuts were red with dry blood and that the welts were sore. But last night’s cuts were

only thin pink lines on my flesh, and there was no pain. There was a strange power in Ultima's medicine. (Anaya 1972: 27)

There were some plants that Ultima could not obtain on the llano or the river, but many people came to seek cures from her and they brought in exchange other herbs and roots. (Anaya 1972: 42)

The previous examples point out that Antonio's family respected the art of *curanderismo* or folk medicine that Ultima practices throughout the book; she cures beyond the ability of the Church. This can be considered autobiographical since Rudolfo Anaya's family also respected *curanderismo*. Although the Catholic Church does not recognize Ultima's powers, she respects the wisdom of the Catholic faith and attends mass regularly. We should highlight that Ultima's power is often misunderstood and feared by the community. Many people refer to her as a *bruja*, or witch and other people see her as a *curandera* (one who curbs with herbs and magic). Since she is a firm believer in tolerance and understanding and knows her place in the world, she respects other people's opinions and sees wisdom in all things.

Sometimes extraposition is used to add vividness to certain facts narrated in the short story since the most important part of the information is not shared with the reader until he/she reads the end of the structure, as we can observe in the way the following psychological reaction is presented:

The second syntactic structure under analysis is 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." 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 is the rest of the structure.

Superstition and God create a conflict in Antonio's life since he tries to seek the truth and to do this he is open to the influences of religion and superstition. The following examples of extraposition are used by the author to express thoughts in a categorical way:

It is bad luck to let one of these small whirlwinds strike you. But it is easy to ward off the dust devil, it is easy to make it change its path and skirt around you. The power of God is so great. (Anaya 1972: 55)

“Ay! Those evil brujas!” My mother crossed her forehead and I followed suit. It was not wise to mention the names of witches without warding off their evil with the sign of the holy cross. [...] He drew near and saw that it was no natural fire he witnessed, but rather the dance of the witches. They bounded among the trees, but their fire did not burn the dry bush.” (Anaya 1972: 86-87)

Extrapolation is also the structure used by the author to refer to the golden carp, which is one of the symbols of the novel together with the Virgin of Guadalupe and Ultima's owl:

The river was full of big, brown carp. It was called the River of the Carp. Everybody knew it was bad luck to fish for the big carp that the summer floods washed downstream. (Anaya 1972: 78-79)

We agree with Leal (1989: 6) in that one of the functions of the critic is to “discover and analyze literary symbols with the object of broadening the perception that one has of a certain social or national group, or of humanity in general.”

The golden carp represents an alternative religion to Catholicism, it is a symbol of Antonio's tie to pagan religions. The golden carp legend offers its own brand of wisdom and moral guidance, which is clearly stated in the following quotation: “The golden carp is a god who rules over his realm. The carp is also destined, according to the pagan myth, to rule the entire area when the humans are destroyed because of their sin.” (<http://www.novelguide.com/BlessMeUltima/metaphoranalysis.html>) (Date of visit: 24 August 2005)

It is important to point out that when Antonio discovers the pagan myth of the golden carp he faces a dilemma because he has to reconcile it with the Catholic doctrines he has been taught, in other words: “Antonio first rejects the golden carp, feeling that he is abandoning God by simply pursuing an interest in the magical fish. He learns later that the carp can actually help in his endeavor to draw from all the cultural and religious sources available to him in crafting his own identity and finding his own answers.” (<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/ultima/themes.html>) (Date of visit: 24 August 2005)

Chicano literary symbolism cannot be separated from Chicano cultural background, as Leal (1989: 6) states: “In the case of Chicano literature, a literature that has emerged as a consequence of the fight for social and human rights, most of the symbols have been taken from the surrounding social environment.”

The following example of extraposition is followed by an example of a cleft sentence. In this way, the author is really emphasizing the time in which Lucas Luna was sick because of a curse, which is one of the important facts that takes place in the novel:

“Ay, Lucas told papa the story after he took sick, but it is not until now, that we have to resort to a curandera, that our father made the story known to us. It was in the bad month of February that Lucas crossed the river to look for a few stray milk cows that had wandered away. (Anaya 1972: 86)

Next, we can observe how by using this syntactic structure the author states the importance of the Holy Cross against witches in a categorical way. In this way, the author places a long subject at the end of the structure in such a way that the structure accomplishes the principle of end-weight:

It is true that no person of evil, no bruja, can walk through a door guarded by the sign of the Holy Cross. (Anaya 1972: 134)

In the next example, the author uses extraposition to let us know that Ultima came to live with the protagonist’s family. The family has taken Ultima in because she is respected for her long use of folk magic in service of the community, her healing powers and her knowledge of plant lore. Ultima acts as Antonio’s mentor and the relationship between these two characters is the most important one in the novel. It is important to precise that she appreciates multiple faiths and perspectives, which makes her believe that each person must make his/her independent moral decisions, instead of just trusting one authority. As Anaya (1993: 8) declares: “Having lived the role of a minority ethnic group within the society, Chicano writers have important things to say about the experience. So you may find more attention given to racial or ethnic prejudices and bigotry and how it affects people.”

We can define her as an open-minded, tolerant and independent person and she tries to transmit to Antonio the same values.

So it was decided that Ultima should come and live with us. I knew that my father and mother did good by providing a home for Ultima. It was the custom to

provide for the old and the sick. There was always room in the safety and warmth of la familia for one more person, be that person stranger or friend. (Anaya 1972: 4)

The existential sentence at the end of the paragraph points out the importance of hospitality for Antonio's family. The following quotation makes reference to Ultima moving from El Puerto to Las Pasturas, which gave Antonio's family the opportunity to live with her:

Just as Guadalupe, the town where Antonio and his parents live during the time of the novel, in the middle ground, the mediating point, between El Puerto and Las Pasturas, between heaven and earth, so does Ultima mediate between the forces working on Antonio, the forces in the Márez family, and ultimately the cosmic forces at work in the world of the novel. Ultima, in her role as mediator, [...] is the central Christ-figure in the novel, and just as Christ, originally from heaven, came to live on earth, so did Ultima, originally from El Puerto, also subsequently live in Las Pasturas. (Holton 1995: 25)

The fact that Ultima moves to Las Pasturas is a very important fact in the novel; Antonio feels that living with Ultima is very good for the family. He spends a happy time with Ultima, during which he helps her to gather herbs from el llano and learns about plants and trees. The pseudo-cleft sentence at the beginning of the example makes reference to the extraordinary things Antonio's family has seen:

"What we have seen today is incredible," he finished.

"It is good that we have Ultima to explain it," I told him, and he only shrugged.
(Anaya 1972: 232)

The previous examples point out the importance of the family in the novel and in Chicano culture. As Anaya (1993: 8) declares, in this kind of literature:

You will also find more attention given to the family; la familia and all the relationships involved therein are very important in Chicano literature. The relationship with the elders in a family provides a valuable learning context for our younger generation. The elders are the roots of our cultural ways. You will find important attention given to the theme of identity. We know who we are and we know our history, but belonging to an ethnic group within the confines of the wider society makes it necessary for us constantly to affirm this identity. This push and pull between the world of our own culture and the larger Anglo American world provides our literature with an important subject matter.

As it is clearly stated in the following example, Ultima's owl represents her life force and the power of her religious mysticism. The fact that Tenorio Trementina kills

the owl at the end of the novel implies that Ultima's life force is destroyed and this leads her to her death because the owl is her spiritual guardian, her life force throughout the book. It is interesting to point out that the owl appears sometimes in scenes of the Crucifixion symbolizing that as the owl sees at night, so does Christ see everywhere.

It was true that the owl was Ultima's spirit. It had come with Ultima, and as men brought evil to our hills the owl had hovered, over us, protecting us. (Anaya 1972: 256)

The following example of extraposition and existential sentence together points out that the souls of the Trementina Sisters (Tenorio's daughters) were in the place to do evil since they practice witchcraft:

The sun grew very white and warm in the clear, azure sky. It was hard to believe that in this wide beauty there roamed three souls trapped to do evil. (Anaya 1972: 228)

The last examples of marked syntax related to superstition and curses we are going to analyse are 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." Halliday and Matthiessen (2004³: 97) propose 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 whole sentence. The following example illustrates these two analyses:

It was Ultima who now spoke sternly. (Anaya 1972: 93)

a) Theme Rheme Theme Rheme

b) Theme Rheme

The cleft sentence is a thematization structure used by Rudolfo Anaya to emphasize in a categorical way as we can see in the analysis of the corpus of examples. As we have said before, Lucas Luna (one of Antonio's uncles) is cursed by the satanic Trementina Sisters and the priest is unable to cure him, which is emphasized in the following example:

Even the holy priest at El Puerto had been asked to exorcise el encanto, the curse, and he had failed. It was truly the work of a bruja that was slowly killing my uncle! (Anaya 1972: 84)

The previous example shows that Christianity and *curanderismo* are not in conflict since it is Ultima who cures Lucas Luna when the priest has failed. We agree with Holton (1995: 26-27) in that "...they are skew, and *curanderismo* is a metaphor for something Christianity has lost. Ultima teaches Antonio the beauty of the llano and of all nature and demonstrates its power to cure physical and moral ills. This power in nature supplements and goes beyond the power of the Church, but it is a power the Church is supposed once to have possessed."

When Antonio's uncle is very sick because of having the evil inside him, it is Ultima who is able to banish the curse. The following example of cleft sentence is used by the author to emphasize the way in which the evil came inside him:

"Let the evil come out!" Ultima cried in his ear.

"Dios mío!" were his first words, and with those words the evil was wrenched from his interior. Green bile poured from his mouth, and finally he vomited a huge ball of hair. It fell to the floor, hot and steaming and wiggling like life snakes.

It was his hair with which they had worked the evil! (Anaya 1972: 103)

As we have mentioned in the previous paragraphs, Ultima knows how to heal by using plants and herbs. The following example points out the importance of certain plants such as oshá for *curanderas*. It is important to emphasize that although Ultima comes from an indigenous mystical tradition, she acknowledges the value of the Catholic faith:

It was with a mixture of oshá that Ultima washed my face and arms and feet the night Lupito was killed. (Anaya 1972: 40)

One of the climatic moments of the novel is the fight between Tenorio and Ultima, which points out that Ultima's evil counterpart is Tenorio, whose name evokes images of Don Juan Tenorio. Ultima and Tenorio represent the forces of good and evil and Tenorio's personality helps the author to develop Ultima's personality through the novel because goodness cannot normally be fully perceived without evil. Ultima's words are emphasized through the cleft sentence:

“Tenorio!” It was Ultima who now spoke sternly. “You are a fool if you do not heed my words. I did not need to come to you, but I did. Listen to my words of reason. Tell your daughters to lift the curse“ (Anaya 1972: 93)

Another important moment in the novel takes place when Narciso, a friend of Antonio’s father, has an argument with Tenorio because he wants to protect Ultima and makes clear that the Trementina Sisters were responsible for the evil. As we have mentioned before, the Trementina Sisters are reputed to hold Black Masses and perform other rites in service of the devil:

“It was your daughters who started the evil!” Narciso reported, “and if you seek to do evil to La Grande I will cut your heart out!” (Anaya 1972: 162)

The next example of cleft sentence refers to the moment when Antonio discovers the importance of the owl for Ultima when Tenorio speaks about it. The owl is her spiritual guardian, her own familiar:

It was when he said that the owl was the spirit of Ultima that everything I had ever known about Ultima and her bird seemed to make sense. The owl was the protective spirit of Ultima, the spirit of the night and the moon, the spirit of the llano! The owl was her soul! (Anaya 1972: 255)

Up to this point it is important to highlight that Tenorio detests Ultima because she lifts the curse on Lucas. Soon after she does so, one of Tenorio’s daughters dies. Tenorio blames Ultima for the death of her daughter and he spends the rest of the novel plotting Ultima’s death; he is willing to kill her and that is the reason why he threatens Ultima with the following statement:

“This very night I will avenge the death of my two daughters! It is the owl that is the spirit of the old witch“ (Anaya 1972: 256)

This example makes clear that Tenorio pursues his vengeance. He kills Narciso and tries to kill Antonio. He also kills Ultima’s owl, which results in her death. Tenorio is killed by Antonio’s uncle Pedro.

3. CONCLUSIONS

One of the most important themes of the novel is Antonio’s search for moral independence, which is clearly influenced by superstition. During the novel, Antonio

wonders about sin, hell and death. He realizes that there is no religion or culture that can answer entirely all the questions about life. Antonio has questions and doubts about the soul, evil, truth, etc., and Ultima helps him to understand that all those questions can only be answered by himself. His conclusion is that he has to observe everything surrounding him, to respect all ideologies and opinions and think for himself and become independent. He tries to find the truth, the essence of life and realizes that what he is trying to seek is not in any religion, in any culture, in any family values, etc.

Apart from this, another important theme in *Bless Me, Ultima* is the influence of culture on identity. The main conflict is between the Catholic Church and superstition, which is clearly expressed through marked syntax. Antonio has to learn to be himself, to build his own identity, which is not easy since there is a conflict between his parents. His mother wishes him to become a priest, while his father would like him to become a vaquero. In the end, Antonio takes into consideration the wisdom and experience of his family to help him make his own choices not to limit himself by limiting to his family's perspectives.

Since English is a language with a fixed word order, we have to state that the use of certain syntactic structures that break the normal SVO order, such as existential sentences, extrapositions and cleft sentences is very relevant from the functional point of view because these structures contrast with the basic word order of English.

All the examples of existential sentences, extrapositions and cleft sentences help the author to highlight Antonio's identity and perspective on life. Through the examples we have analysed we can see Antonio's growth from childhood to maturity. Antonio goes through a huge learning process during the approximately two years the story covers. The examples of marked syntax make clear what the important questions, conflicts, and dilemmas are for Antonio. Ultima helps Antonio to develop his own identity and system of values, although he respects all the religious and cultural traditions to which he is exposed.

Marked syntax helps the author to emphasize the conflicts in Antonio's life: in his own family between the Marez and the Luna, between Catholicism and *curanderismo*, between good and evil in Ultima and Tenorio, etc. The examples of marked syntax we have analysed help the author to highlight important facts for the development of the novel, such as Lucas Luna's curse or the fight between Tenorio and

Ultima. These structures are also useful to precise Anaya's ideology, such as his respect for *curanderismo* as we can clearly see in the examples related to Ultima.

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