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Strategic use of speech acts in the story “Tell the Truth...” by Nicholasa Mohr

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The story “Tell the truth...” is part of the book “El Bronx Remembered” which was written by Nicholasa Mohr, the first Nuyorican woman who had her literary works published in the United States of America. “El Bronx Remembered” was first published in 1975 and it draws attention to the “Great Migration” of Puerto Ricans to New York in the 1950’s. The stories reflect the hardships of Puerto Rican migrants through the eyes of characters who are children, teenagers and young adults. The story “Tell the truth...” depicts a conversation between a lawyer, Mr. Crane, and Vickie, a 13 year old teenager. He is trying to make her confess to having seen a package of drugs in the apartment she was living in. Mrs. Vargas, a single mother and a numbers runner in the Bolita lottery, had asked her daughter, Vickie, not to say anything to anyone because everything was a frame-up. The objective of this paper is to describe within the framework of Conversation Analysis (Schegloff et al., 1974; Briz, 2018) how certain speech acts are strategically used and combined by the lawyer in order to obtain the confession of the teenager. He resorts to directives which contain yes or no questions and to linguistic intensifiers. He also uses multiple directives that follow each other in order to put pressure on the teenager. The lawyer makes her a compliment, but he also insults her. The use of impoliteness is strategic in his argumentation. The expressive speech act of giving “thanks” performed by the teenager arouses interest because it marks the closing of their verbal interaction. It can also be noticed that Vickie does not answer back various times during their conversational turn-taking, so the adjacency pair question-answer is left uncompleted. The story “Tell the truth...” is actually a story in which both characters do not tell the truth, as some speech acts infringe on the sincerity condition.

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