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Intro to Linguistics

Bilingual Interview Paper

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The Importance of Language to a 'Multi-Native' Man

I first met Joe Spir during customs week and was very impressed by his multicultural upbringing (1). Despite being only 18 years old, he has already lived in four different countries and has interacted with a diverse group of people (2). Though he was born in Columbia, he moved to Spain at the age of 5 where he completed most of his schooling. At the age of 16, he moved to Puerto Rico where he completed high school. When he moved to the United States for college, his mother shifted to a house in Orlando. Though his "official house" is now in Orlando, he considers Haverford to be his home because he has not lived in Orlando for over a week (3). When I heard about his diverse lifestyle, I was curious to find out the role language played in his interactions with people around the world and whether it affected the way he perceived different cultures.

Joe's introduction to language is an interesting one. He is fluent in English and Spanish. He is "almost fluent" in Catalan but needs to polish his vocabulary since he has not spoken it in a while. For that reason, he is planning to intern at a firm that deals with Catalan Independence in Spain. Though he does make a few mistakes while speaking French, he believes that the advanced French course he is currently taking will help him become fluent. Nonetheless, he can confidently converse and write in each of these four languages. He also has a working knowledge of Portuguese but is not fluent in it yet (4, 6). He learnt English, Spanish, French and Catalan all at the same time during his time at school in Spain. I was surprised when I found out that it was mandatory for all students at his school, except the ones with disabilities, to learn these four languages at the same time. All students also had to choose between learning either German or Chinese as a fifth language (5). Though Joe chose to learn German, he does not remember it because he only took "beginner German" and has not taken a German course since. Had he continued to learn and regularly speak German, he would not have lost the use of the language over time (13). It was not easy for him to learn all these languages at the same time and he often confused words in one language with those in another. It took him time to adapt to the

subtle differences that exist in each of these languages (12). However, he is grateful for the time he spent studying in Spain because he would not have learnt so many languages if it was not mandatory (11). He is confident that the knowledge he has of these languages is enough to make learning a new language easier.

Language has played a large part in shaping Joe's academic life. At his school, different classes were taught in different languages. Until he was in the sixth grade, Science was taught to him in English, Mathematics in Spanish and Social Science in Catalan. Due to this, he perceives different subjects with the help of different languages. He exemplified the intersectionality between language and study in his life by narrating an incident that occurred during the day, just prior to this interview. When he was asked to calculate the amount of money he had made at work that day, he began counting aloud to himself in Spanish. He feels it is easier for him to "remember numbers" in Spanish than in English because he had initially learnt Mathematics in Spanish. This is the reason he uses different languages to understand and learn different fields of study.

The subconscious mind has the ability to play around with language. Joe was amused when I asked him about the language he dreams in (15). He said that it depends on where he is located in his dream. This is fascinating because if he was at Haverford in his dream, he would converse mainly in English because that is what he mostly speaks here. But if he was in Spain, his dream would be filled with conversations in Spanish. This phenomenon is "not weird when you're dreaming it, but it is weird when you remember it." It is very interesting to see how the subconscious mind decides the language based on the setting of the dream. However, the conversations in his dreams are not limited to a single language. He remembers this one dream where he spoke in English, Spanish, Catalan and French, and when he woke up he felt that "it was cool to have that experience." Dreaming in different languages restores his confidence in the fact that he knows all those languages well. At times, even in his dreams, he accidentally mixes up languages (17). This "mixed language" is either 'Spanglish' or his own "created language" that he too barely understands a few moments after speaking it. This illustrates how the subconscious mind can use his knowledge of multiple languages interchangeably.

Though English is Joe's dominant language, Spanish still plays an important role in his life (7). Joe "grew up with Spanish his whole life": he began speaking it at his childhood home and community, and continues to speak to most his family in Spanish even today (10). However,

he has recently started speaking to his mother in English, which might be because she is an English professor. He can think better in Spanish: “Spanish is always at the back of my mind” he says. Whenever he must count or write a paper, he does so in Spanish because he believes that his organizational skills and ability to strongly express himself in words lie in his Spanish roots. Despite Spanish being dominant in his early years in Spain, he proudly claims that English is more dominant now. This transition only happened once he moved to Puerto Rico, where his fluency in English “skyrocketed”. In Puerto Rico, he interacted with a lot more people who spoke English fluently. As he expanded his English vocabulary and developed an “English accent”, he realized that the English he knew in Spain was merely “broken English”. It was then when he realized that he should not have been placed in the “High Flyers” club at his school in Spain, which consisted of students who were proficient in English. Even though nowadays at Haverford he converses mainly in English, he thinks in Spanish and is glad that Spanish is still a big part of his life (14). When he must express something aloud, his “spoken mind” jumps to English because he feels he is better understood in English (8). That is the reason his English naturally surfaces when he feels angry or sad because his words can have the greatest impact when expressed through English (16). But when he needs to write something, his thoughts flow more smoothly in Spanish. There will always be aspects like in his life where no other language can do something as well as Spanish does. Though English is his dominant language, he considers himself a native speaker of Spanish (18). This is because he may forget English if he does not use it, but proudly says “I will never forget Spanish because it’s within me.” Spanish is, and always will be, an essential part of him.

“It is not difficult, it is tricky” for Joe to switch from talking in one language to another (30). The switch between Spanish and English is not smooth, which often results in the common use of ‘Spanglish’ in conversation. To Joe, ‘Spanglish’ is a unique link between Spanish and English that emerges when he speaks to his other bilingual friends. He believes that speaking a combination of these two languages (Spanglish) allows him to connect more with people because there is a commonality in the way the two languages affect their thought (28). There are words and phrases in one language that are not present in the other. Joe expresses frustration when he says that talking in only one language inhibits him from those phrases even though they fit perfectly in context (26). He believes it is very difficult to translate these phrases into another language without losing its main meaning and not making the conversation “awkward.”

However, when he speaks Spanglish, his chain of thought is not disrupted and he feels he can fully express himself without “missing something.” He feels that the conversations he has in “Spanglish” are more complete and meaningful.

The relationship Joe has with others can be determined by the language he uses to communicate with them (28). English represents a more formal mode of communication whereas Spanish “tends to get more colloquial.” A relationship with an acquaintance would involve the use of English while a casual conversation with a friend would use Spanish. This is because “Spanish is a more poetic language” that is filled with metaphors and symbolism while English is very straightforward. English has fewer ways of describing emotions and sentiments than Spanish. For example, a sentence used to express something in English is usually direct and easily comprehensible, but the same sentence said in Spanish represents an array of different emotions that hides beneath the obvious meaning of the sentence. There are “more ways to express feelings in Spanish”, which enables him to be more comfortable with people. He then gives an example of his close friend with whom he speaks English when there are other people present but only speaks Spanish when they are alone. He behaves differently depending on the language he uses (27). He confidently says that he is “more free” when he talks in Spanish because it lacks the “restraints of expressing emotion” enforced by English. This restraint is, as described above, English’s limited ways of expressing sentiment. While talking to a person in Spanish, he can easily share more about himself and sympathize with them on a deeper level. This allows him to form better friendships using Spanish. I even noticed that he appears to be more relaxed and calm when he speaks in Spanish as compared to being uptight and careful while speaking in English.

Being multilingual is an advantage that Joe is very grateful for because it has allowed him to connect with so many people and opened the door to so many experiences that have made him more “efficient in life” (19). Joe believes he belongs to each of the cultures where he can speak their native language fluently (21). He says that he can experience the culture to the fullest because of the ease with which he can communicate with the natives and understand their way of life from an insider’s perspective. He says “I am able to understand everything that is happening around me” and that is what makes him feel like he truly belongs to the community or place rather than being a mere tourist. He remembers his years in Spain where he felt more “secure” because he knew he could “defend” himself in Spanish. The thought that he “could belong to

multiple cultures” and make diverse places his home makes him more confident in his outlook towards life. To Joe, this flexibility is “an advantage that not many others have.” As an example of the confidence he derives from his multilingualism, he says that he can go to any small village in the hills of Columbia and still feel as though he has been staying there his whole life. Some of the other advantages of being multilingual include increased job opportunities, the ability to comfortably travel around the world and the confidence to interact with new people.

Joe acknowledges that multilingualism does have its own set of disadvantages. He has been made fun of for being multilingual because he has a different accent every time he speaks a different language (32). He says “it’s weird that people make fun of my accent” but this merely reassures him that he knows so many languages well. Despite this prejudice, he has never tried to hide his multilingualism (32). Another aspect that frustrates him is his ability to forget a language if he does not use it for a long period, just like how he lost German. He intends to study abroad in Germany or Portugal simply because he wants to revoke the life in a language he once knew.

Everything in Joe’s life revolves around languages. Multilingualism is an essential part of his identity that he is very proud of. Languages affect the way one sees the world and connects with people. It expands the possibilities one’s future can hold. Being multilingual not only develops one’s verbal but also spatial abilities. The knowledge of multiple languages allows one to better understand and appreciate people of different cultures, backgrounds and places. The only problem with learning new languages is that you can never learn enough.