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Linguistics 101

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The Divide Between Language and Culture

> Sunny is an 18-year-old bilingual speaker of English and a dialect of Mandarin. She was born in China, and learned English in school beginning in kindergarten. She generally speaks English in academic settings, and Mandarin both with friends and at home. In the interview, Mandarin is referred to as Chinese because that is the term she used. Overall, she views her bilingualism as something convenient and positive, but does not connect with American culture despite knowing English.

I used this interview as a chance to get to know my roommate better. Like me, Sunny is a first-year student at Bryn Mawr (3). Unlike me, she is bilingual. Last summer, when I found out that my roommate was going to be an international student, I was a little bit concerned. I had never shared a room with anyone before, and now I was going to be sharing a room with a stranger from another country, another culture, for an entire school year. I was nervous when I met her for the first time during orientation week, but much to my relief, she was quiet, studious, and wickedly funny. Since then, we have talked about politics, religion, sexism, racism, death, and a variety of other topics, and discovered that our biggest difference in opinion is about whether the windows should remain open or closed.

Sunny is 18, and was born and raised in Nanjing, China (1, 2, 3). She has a Chinese first name that close friends use, but she chose to use an English name whose meaning she liked better in Junior 1, (which is grade 7 in the U.S. system), and continued using it because she was irked by people's constant inability to pronounce her Chinese name correctly (1). Sunny came to visit the United States in her junior year of high school, but did not actually live here until she came for college (3). She still feels that China, where her parents live and where she spends her

breaks, is home. Although her current mailing address is a Bryn Mawr P.O. box, she asks, "How do you define the word "live"? I feel like I study in America, but I live in China" (3). Sunny speaks two languages, English and Chinese (4). When asked to clarify what she meant by Chinese, she explained that what people speak varies from region to region in China. About the particular version of Chinese she speaks, she says, "In my region, I know the kind of language we speak, I can listen to them and understand, but I don't know how to say it. The kind of Chinese I speak is like Mandarin," (4). She's a native speaker of Chinese, and started learning English in school long enough ago, most likely in kindergarten, that she doesn't remember the process (18, 5). She considers herself completely fluent in Chinese, her "mother tongue," but not nearly as fluent in English (6). Sunny supposes that she's fluent enough, considering that she lives in America, takes classes in America, and doesn't have many questions about things... "except for philosophy," she adds with a laugh (6). Fair enough; English is my native language, and even I struggle with philosophy.

Living in America has not changed the fact that Chinese is predominant in Sunny's life (7). She speaks Chinese at home, with her parents, with her friends, and most of the classmates she spends time with (8, 9, 10, 20). The social media she uses and the media she consumes (songs, shows, books, etc.) are in Chinese as well (8, 20). Sunny mainly uses English in academic settings, when talking to her American classmates and professors (and when talking to her roommate) (8, 20). As a result, she hasn't lost any proficiency in Chinese, and has gained proficiency in English (13). After I ask her if a native speaker English would consider *her* a native speaker, she looks at me a bit incredulously, and replies, "I don't think so…?" (29). Although Sunny's command of the language is stellar, she does have a noticeable accent, and occasionally has to look up a word on her phone to find its English translation. About her thought processes, she says, "I feel like when I speak I actually think of Chinese/in a Chinese way, but the language I speak, I don't really need to think of it in Chinese first and then translate it into English. If I want to say something, I just directly say it," (14). She finds it quite easy to switch between the two languages, and she and her friends often do so in casual conversation, dropping English words into a Chinese conversation (30, 17). Sunny doesn't behave differently in one language verses the other; any difference as a result of confidence issues with English are negated by the fact that she doesn't "like to speak a lot when there are a lot of people" in either language (27). When expressing strong emotions such as sadness or anger, what language she

uses is determined by why she is upset. She explained, “If I’m angry or sad because of what someone did, I have a reason, and sometimes the reason is kind of, like, built by English concepts, so language depends on why I get angry or sad,” (16). After so many years of learning English, speaking it comes naturally to her.

Sunny is not bilingual by choice; her knowledge is the product of her school system. She doesn’t regret that she can speak two languages, but she does have some mixed feelings about it. “I do feel like it is kind of convenient in America for me to know both of the languages, but sometimes I feel like that I am losing the part of Chinese culture I have,” (19, 31). She doesn’t identify with American culture at all. Firmly, Sunny states, “I just feel like I belong to the Chinese culture. Maybe after several years my answer to this question will be yes, but currently no,” (21). She sometimes feels out of place, not because of any language barriers, but because of cultural ones. She describes one such situation: “When a group of native speakers are talking and I am listening sometimes I just don’t know what they are talking about or why that is interesting and they’re laughing and I just don’t know why, so it really makes me…” She trails off, frustrated, before continuing. “The only thing I can do in that situation is to fake that I am laughing, just laugh with them, whether I know or not what they are talking about, or just lower my head and watch my cellphone (32). Sunny spends most of her time, both in and out of class, with her fellow Chinese international students, whom she has an easier time relating to. She’s not comfortable striking up conversations with non-Chinese students. Describing her reluctance, Sunny says, “For Americans, I don’t know what I should talk to them about. I don’t know what kind of thing you [Americans] are interested in, so for most of the time, like, even when there are only two people, I am silent, except when I have questions to ask,” (28).

Despite her feelings of cultural disconnect, Sunny hasn’t noticed much discrimination against her because of her bilingualism (32). The one thing she did note was that during the international student orientation, native English speakers spoke slower than usual to try and make sure they were understood, but she seemed more appreciative of that than resentful (32). Despite her fears about losing a part of her Chinese culture, she generally views being bilingual as a good thing. “You can go abroad, whether to travel or to study, or have other things, and it’s more convenient…and people just have this kind of feeling when they know more than one or two languages, of possibilities,” (31). Being bilingual opens doors, and for Sunny, it opened the

door to Bryn Mawr. Despite her difficulties with cultural differences, she is enjoying herself here. Overall, in America, being able to speak English and Chinese has been a positive thing for her. Curious, I wondered aloud if there were any situations back home in China where she would ever pretend that she wasn't bilingual (32). The interview ended on a comic note when Sunny laughed and replied, "I feel like the only answer for this question could be when your relatives ask, "Can you help my children to learn English much better than they do now?" And the answer to this is, "NO, no, no I don't know how to speak English!""