

Grace Pindzola

Intro to Linguistics

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### A Complicated Identity

Nichole is an 18-year-old student at Haverford College who speaks English and Spanish. She was born and grew up in the United States in a Spanish-speaking household. She initially learned Spanish first then English because it was a necessity for life in the United States. She now uses English predominantly and, though she considers herself fluent in both, feels more comfortable speaking English than Spanish. Nichole speaks a mix of Spanish and English in her home where her aunt often says something in Spanish and she replies in English. In her day-to-day life Nichole uses English almost exclusively.

Nichole strikes me as a person who has everything all sorted out. She exudes confidence and boldly takes on new tasks in a way that stays true to her personality. In addition, Nichole is bilingual in English and Spanish (4). Her knowledge of Spanish comes from her family's Dominican cultural background and her English developed as a necessity in the United States where she has lived for her whole life. I wanted to know more about the relationship between her apparent self-confidence in her identity and the combination of languages and their related cultures in her life.

Nichole learned Spanish as her first language and picked up English when she started kindergarten so she could "survive in the US" (5, 11). She was born in Ohio but grew up in the Spanish Harlem neighborhood in New York City where she still lives when she is not at Haverford. Her neighborhood has a very strong latinx and hispanic identity with representation from many different Latin American countries especially the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. In Spanish Harlem, Nichole is frequently exposed to Spanish speakers and Latin American culture. As she got older, English became her dominant language since she was constantly surrounded by English speakers whenever she ventured beyond her Spanish-speaking home. Now she only uses Spanish to speak to older family members like her grandmother (7). She laughs that now she uses English "*all the time*" but only Spanish with older family members and relatives who still live in the Dominican Republic (8). Knowing Spanish gives her a way of connecting to her extended family. At home she uses a combination of the two languages; often her aunt asks her something in Spanish and she replies in English (9, 10). As she began using English more frequently, her home language shifted from Spanish exclusively to a mix.

Over the years, Nichole lost some of her confidence with Spanish. As she started speaking English more frequently, she began losing “the typical Dominican accent or Spanish accent” (13). She remembers being “criticized on the way [she] pronounced certain things in Spanish” by fellow native Spanish speakers (13). This feedback affected her confidence in her Spanish speaking ability, leading her to favor English even more. She began to wonder “If I’m gonna get criticised for the way I speak, why speak Spanish” (13). Despite the criticism concerning her mastery of her language, Nichole has never felt negatively judged or treated differently for being bilingual (32). Though finding a balance between Spanish and English use has stirred up some criticism, her bilingual identity in itself has never been the source of any judgement. She laughed at the notion of hiding her bilingualism because “there’s no point, really” (32).

Being bilingual has given Nichole the opportunity to understand and connect with more people. She appreciates the fact that she can identify fellow Spanish speakers and understand what they are saying (31). Identification of Spanish speakers is important to Nichole because it allows her to form a connection between herself and the other speaker through a shared piece of identity. Her ability to connect to others through language is not strictly limited to Spanish speakers though; she can even use her fluency in Spanish to understand languages similar to Spanish: “Sometimes I watch Italian movies and it’s similar... to Spanish... I don’t know exactly what they’re saying but I have an idea because I can figure out some of the words” (31). Her fluency in two languages makes understanding a third or a fourth less daunting, further broadening the scope of people with whom she can interact.

Nichole usually thinks in English until she runs into a word that does not translate between English and Spanish (14). Usually she tries to describe the word but often the attempt is fruitless. She experiences untranslatable words from time to time which she admits can be frustrating but it can also lead to hilarious translations (26). She laughed remembering a time “one of [her] aunts .... learned the word ‘ratchet’ and she was going around saying... ‘That’s so *ratchet*’ ... She’s seventy years old,” (26). Her aunt adopted an English word to supplement her Spanish vocabulary which lacked a word that could directly translate to the same meaning. Nichole encounters more English words that she cannot translate to Spanish than Spanish words

that she cannot translate to English. She thinks this is likely because she uses English more often and thinks primarily in English. Though she typically thinks in English, her dreams contain a mixture of English and Spanish (15). Which language predominates her dream depends on the situation and the people involved. It usually follows logically that when the people in her dream speak Spanish she speaks Spanish and vice versa with English. She has a fairly even number of Spanish and English dreams.

Though Nichole does not notice any differences in her behavior when speaking one language versus the other, she notes that her behavior when speaking English does mimic that of a typical Spanish speaker. She describes her behavior as “pretty animated” in both English and Spanish which is “a pretty Spanish thing to do” (27). This description held true throughout the interview, during which she emphatically used her hands, arms, and entire body to describe her bilingual experience. This crossing over of Spanish-speaking culture when she speaks English shows the mix of both cultures in her daily habits. At the question of whether she felt she belonged more to one of her cultures over the other, Nichole paused. This was the most difficult for her to answer because, she says, “for America I’m not American enough but to Dominicans I’m not Dominican enough,” (21). Her family has incorporated many aspects of Dominican culture and she has experienced American culture in her daily life since entering the world. This mixture of cultures has been a source of struggle in her life (21, 31). She combats this contention by defining her own identity, firmly telling the critics, “I don’t need to please any of you” (21). Whether she belongs fully in Dominican culture, American culture, both, or neither is unclear to herself and to others.

For Nichole, bilingualism has deep roots in cross-cultural identity. To her, being “bilingual is having a connection with two different cultures and being able to exist in both” (19). This definition is important to her dual identity as Dominican and American. However, the Spanish language also allows her to connect beyond the Dominican community to Spanish speakers from a wide variety of Spanish-speaking cultures. Fluency in Spanish and English helps Nichole communicate with people from many different cultural backgrounds. She feels privileged to have the ability to communicate with both Spanish speakers and English speakers

and describes it as a “freedom” (19). It is freeing for her to be able to cross the language barrier to understand others and to have them understand her.

Being bilingual has shaped Nichole’s personality in a very positive way. She is very personable and credits her communication skills to her bilingualism. Communication is a skill that Nichole holds to a high value and even a brief interaction with her demonstrates the ease with which she speaks. She knows that “not everyone has that skill and [she is] happy [to] have that skill because now [she is] not afraid to talk to random people.”(32). When she was young she had to act as a translator for her grandmother any time they went out. Needing to communicate with adults as a child forced her to become more comfortable talking to strangers. Now, she works as a caller for phonathon where she confidently speaks to strangers on the phone all the time. Over the years, she developed a very approachable personality; Nichole notes that often she will “be stopped in the street by a random Spanish lady asking for directions in Spanish” who just “assumes that you speak Spanish.” This kind of situation happens often enough that it has become part of her “daily life in New York City.” Being bilingual makes her accessible to more people and even passersby on the street seem to notice this. All in all, being bilingual has been an overwhelmingly positive experience for Nichole and has played a major role in shaping her personality and identity.