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Nomad: Crossing Countries, Continents, and Languages

If you were to ask Maria Victoria Russo (Mary) what home was like to her, she would reply, “Home? What do you mean by home [1]?” Upon closer inspection it makes sense why the twenty-three-year-old native-born Italian would respond this way due to her frequent travels [2,3]. After living in Rome, Italy where she spoke Italian and English and learned French, and later ventured to college in Pennsylvania during which she spent two years abroad in France, Mary Russo balanced several cultures [4,5]. “I had to sort of find a home everywhere I went and so I think I ended up finding more of an idea of home. And I feel like wherever I was able to connect with people and sort of find a sense of peace that’s where I called home.” Throughout her traveling, she found that whichever language was mostly spoken in a region would come most naturally even to the point of thinking in that language [14]. Thus, she does not consider any to be dominant and maintains fluency in Italian, English, and French [6, 7]. However, she considers Italian as coming most naturally to her, as she spoke it the earliest from birth and continues to choose it primarily for conversing with family although the other two languages that Mary speaks are also known by her relatives [8,9,10].

As a child, Mary grew up speaking Italian with her parents and closest friends. Because of these intimate ties and the early stage in which she began speaking Italian, Mary considers Italian the language she feels closest to. “It’s a language I find mostly more comfortable and the language that I would fall back to every time. Yes, I can speak these other languages. But then there is this thing that is innate about Italian and it’s because it’s the first language I spoke. And from the moment I was born has followed me all the way through.” Mary’s parents then sent her to an English international school, where Mary strengthened her handle on English as a second language [5]. In middle school, Mary picked up French which was not unusual due to her belonging to a trilingual family. She continued her French through high school and finally perfected it in college [5]. “I think I really felt the most comfortable speaking French when I moved to France and I was forced to speak French all the time.”

But communication was not the only consequence in speaking French. Mary also experienced effects on an emotional level after acquiring French. “Whenever I speak French...it reminds me of the old time I had in France. It’s like language carries a lot of memories and it carries a whole baggage.”

It seems as if the more intimately connected the experiences Mary had while speaking her languages, the closer she draws to that specific language. “I feel like languages have these levels of depth and Italian is just a very deep language that I carry and it’s very natural. And there are English and French—now both at the same level really, but they are less closer to who I am.” Mary affirms that by speaking other languages one can find different sides of oneself and discover different perceptions from those who listen, but she insists that she herself does not change while speaking another language only the way people perceive her. For instance, while speaking French in Paris during her study abroad, many Native-French speakers identified Mary as being from southern France. However, in America, most people do not know which region to associate her with. Due to her slight accent Mary is labeled as ‘foreigner’, a label which Mary views as being forced onto her despite her speaking each language fluently.

But in the midst of her migrating from one language to the next, there are some aspects of Mary’s behavior that seem to shape-shift [27]. Mary revealed that one of such aspects that suffers the most is her sense of humor. In contrast to her native language Italian, French, during her first experiences in her study abroad, presented an uncharted territory in which Mary was less familiar with expressions and references to use within informal conversations. “When I was surrounded by my French friends, it was hard to say a joke and not feel embarrassed because you have to look for the word. I had to think about how to say things and I just couldn’t react immediately to things with jokes.”

Furthermore, the expression of Mary’s anger seems obstructed as she travels farther from where Italian, the language she conveys her anger the most easily, is mostly used [16]. Mary portrays one of the most frustrating instances in the multilingual experience as being one in which she was angry in France and could not verbally express how she felt due to her having to sift through a rush of English and Italian words mentally to translate them to French. In a moment of such emotional intensity, Mary finds it disadvantageous to try to find the right words to say.

In addition, there are more challenges to which Mary must adapt as a denizen of several languages. Mary finds that not having a native speaker’s knowledge of slang is one of the hardest aspects of speaking any language [31]. Holding a casual conversation with a close friend can be difficult without an awareness of the informal references and phrases of a culture. However, Mary feels as if the major difficulty of speaking more than one language is the tendency to not

fully settle into one. “I feel like I speak them well, but I don’t speak them perfectly. I don’t think I’ve mastered all of them, and when I speak one of them long enough I start losing the other two.”

But Mary sees the advantage in speaking multiple languages as using them as auxiliaries in connecting with people of a broader spectrum, a feature which Mary identifies as having helped her navigate the rough terrains of life. Mary recalls the period of her junior excursion to France as a difficult time in her life, and that the friends she made in France truly supported her in the journey. “Whenever I see them, I just feel very honest. How can I say it? It’s just that everything is so familiar and so pure. I feel home inside. But it’s hard. This idea of home is very strange for me, because I really try to reach an understanding that maybe home is something that you carry with you wherever you go. And it’s more of a shared experience than a physical place.”

Mary thus concludes that when she returns to Italy, she will have to go back to France as well to truly have the feeling that she has been back home.