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My Mother's Secret Language

Growing up with a mother who is bilingual was always very impressive to me. However, until this assignment, I never truly grasped how speaking two languages, English and Italian, has had such a significant effect on her and how it is an integral part of her character (4). Throughout my childhood, I often found myself overhearing my mother's conversations in Italian with my relatives, but I never fully appreciated how naturally it came for her to speak these two languages. Our extended family dinners consisted of listening to Italian conversations that had an eloquent flow, almost musical in nature, that at times escalated to a high pitch. Because of the strident tones in the conversation I would think that they were arguing, however I would later learn from my mother that it was a discussion about the food or the weather. Eventually, I realized that this is the way Italians express themselves and I became accustomed to their way of conversing. As I grew older, my sensibility to having a mother who has the extraordinary ability and gift to be bilingual heightened. Fortunately, after interviewing her about her bilingualism, I no longer pondered about how my mother learned to speak Italian. Since she was born in Queens, New York and now lives in Manhasset, New York with me, my father who is not Italian and my brother, her ability to maintain her bilingualism is truly remarkable (3). It has had a profound influence on her life.

My mother, Angela Iannacci, is 57 years old and is a first-generation Italian-American (1,2). Her parents were both born in different regions of Italy. Her father was from the Abruzzo region and her mother was from the Frosinone region of Italy. They met each other several years after they arrived in the United States and were married in Queens, New York. Her parents left Italy in their late teens with their entire immediate family members, while most members of their extended families still stayed in Italy. Since her parents were from different regions in Italy, her father's family spoke one Italian dialect and her mother's family spoke another. After my mother's parents got married in New York, they remained in Queens and raised their children in the same neighborhood that they lived in when they arrived from Italy. The street my mother grew up on in Queens was predominately occupied by Italian-Americans at that time (3). Her

grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, all lived within walking distance a few blocks from each other. So, growing up she was surrounded by large family and neighbors who spoke Italian to her every day, but she recalls that some had different Italian dialects depending upon which region of Italy they were from. “As a child, I learned Italian from my parents because that is what was mostly spoken in our home when I was growing up. Then I went on to study formal Italian in high school and college. And little by little, I became more fluent and proficient in the proper grammatical tenses and usage of the Italian language” (5). My mother recalls that learning Italian was both “circumstantial and elective”. Her parents were both born in Italy and spoke Italian, English was their second language, and she was surrounded by family who only spoke Italian, the intergenerational circumstances of her childhood required her to learn Italian. However, as a student she elected to study Italian in high school and college (11). As she studied Italian in school she “learned to appreciate and decipher the different dialects of the Italian language and also became cognitively aware of the various tenses in Italian” (12). Learning the nature of her bilingualism and all this information about her childhood left me curious to find out more.

While speaking Italian was a big part of her formative years since her parents are native Italian speakers, I never stopped to think about how being bilingual influenced her because she rarely speaks it at home. English is the dominant language in our household (7,10). I had always assumed that English was the dominant language in her household when she grew up because even though my grandparents speak Italian they also speak English. My mother confirmed that her parents and younger aunts and uncles were required to learn English in order to assimilate in the community so they would be able to attend school and work (10). After observing my mother speaking English every day while at home and at work, and then observing her easily and effortlessly switch to Italian when speaking to relatives from Italy or when conversing with other Italian-Americans, she has an innate ability to instinctively switch to speaking Italian (8). Now when I think about the time we visited my mother’s elderly aunt in Florida before she died, I recall that she spoke to my mother only in Italian and my mother responded without hesitation in Italian, thus observing first hand a circumstance of intergenerational transmission of knowledge and communication.

Bilingual language switching occurs for my mother both accidentally and purposefully. It is interesting to note that when my mother is in Italy totally immersed in Italian, she is acutely

aware and frustrated when she accidentally mixes her languages switching from Italian to English, especially when she is unnerved (17). However, when speaking with her parents and siblings, she switches her languages intentionally using both Italian and English depending on the situation. My mother admitted that she uses Italian with her sisters and parents when she does not want people who do not speak Italian to understand what she is saying, thereby effectively excluding the non-Italian speaking individuals from participating in the conversation. So, in certain instances switching languages is done purposefully (17). When this was disclosed, I began to recollect the numerous occasions when she switched from speaking English to speaking Italian in front of me, my brother and my cousins so we could not understand what she was talking about (9). When questioned about this during our interview, of course her delightful response was “see knowing two languages has many perks, if you learned Italian you would have become part of the secret dialogue” (9). Surrounded by people who are bilingual, if you are not, does make one feel excluded when they are speaking a language that you are not familiar with. My mother always felt badly, as though she was participating in a secret dialogue, when she was younger and would speak in front of her friends in Italian with her family members because her friends could not understand what was being discussed in Italian and she was concerned that they would feel excluded from the conversation even after translating what was being said.

There is a special spiritual connection with my mother’s identity, culture and heritage when she speaks Italian. I was not surprised when my mother said that although English is her mother-tongue and she is certainly more fluent in English, she feels like she “belongs to the Italian culture more” and identifies herself as being more Italian than American (6, 21). My mother associates English with her professional career, her studies, and her adult family life and she associates Italian with her childhood. The deep connection she has to her Italian roots has greatly influenced her in more ways than one. The way she forms relationships and connects with people who speak Italian is different from the relationships she develops with people who speak English because when she speaks Italian she feels a “special connection” with her culture, heritage and family (28). Her motivation and desire to speak Italian is greater because her opportunity to speak Italian at home is less than when she was younger (28). She now lives in a community that is not surrounded by Italian speaking people so her opportunity to speak Italian is less. Since my father, my brother, and I do not speak Italian, there is no constant conversation in Italian in our immediate household or in our family because her sisters also did not marry

Italian speaking men (20). Whenever she gets the opportunity to speak Italian she is elated. My mother states that since she no longer lives in an Italian household, she has definitely become less fluent in Italian in comparison to when she was younger. However, after our trips to Italy she feels as though her knowledge of the Italian language and expressions get “refreshed” (13). While in Italy, I noticed that she begins to behave differently when she is able to speak Italian the entire length of our vacation, not only with the locals of our hometown, but also with strangers. She “cherishes the ethnic diversity she has” (28). It is easier for her to shift from English to Italian in Italy because she is surrounded not only by individuals who speak Italian as their first language but also by being totally immersed in the language. When she is in Italy, she is able to drive a car, read street signs, and follow directions effortlessly and without any hints of distress, even if she gets lost. She acknowledged that she certainly does not behave so calmly when she drives when in New York City. When questioned about this change in behavior she said “there is a special connectivity in Italy, I develop the carefree persona of an Italian. I feel like I am able to go back to my roots and really reconnect with my family through the people of my parent’s native homeland. I act in a different way than when I am in New York” (27, 28). This personality shift is evident in my mother whenever she switches from speaking in English to Italian. This sparked my curiosity and I wanted to go deeper into questioning how each language is used differently for her. When I ask if she thinks in English or Italian, she states that she predominately thinks in English, however when she is in total immersion in Italy or in New York watching Italian television stations, news, or films her mind shifts and she begins to think in Italian (14). This intrigued me as I began to recall the numerous times I have walked into the den watching my mother sitting comfortably on the couch watching her Italian cooking shows thoughtfully writing notes in Italian for each of the recipes she wants to cook.

There is an emotional factor in language usage and dominance for bilinguals. When my mother is happy cooking a recipe with my grandmother especially when they are making fresh pasta, she becomes more animated with my grandmother as they speak Italian. But when she gets angry with my grandmother or grandfather, her arguments with them are in English, her dominant and native language, while my grandparents argue with her in Italian which is their dominant and native language. According to my mother, since her parents were born in Italy, Italian comes out naturally when they are angry because “when we are emotional our mind is most comfortable with idiomatic expressions that we have become culturally accustomed to”

(16). This was also very apparent especially after being in Italy and observing my mother getting annoyed at the car rental agent who attempted to overcharge us (16). As she became more and more frustrated, my mother switched back to arguing in English, her dominant language, instead of arguing in Italian as she attempted to explain to the representative that she was upset because she knew that he was overcharging us and that he was not being fair.

It is difficult to translate certain phrases, words or expressions from Italian to English because while the Italian community understands the expressions, phrases or words, and the message may be expressed in a synonym, there may not be an equivalent phrase, expression or word in English (26). Since my mother is a Judge there are words in English that do not exist in Italian, so she experiences how it becomes challenging to translate certain terms in Italian when she attempts to discuss her work in Italian. Also, my mother is amused by the numerous phrases my mother's family uses that my mother understands, but they cannot be fully translated with the same meaning to people who do not understand Italian, again, endearingly she calls it the secret dialogue (26). In this instance, my mother's usage of the phrase the secret dialogue is now associated with the issues of untranslatability. If an Italian word is unable to be translated for a non-Italian English speaker, then the Italian language has essentially excluded that person from the dialogue and then my mother's description of the secret dialogue occurs between and among people who speak the same Italian language.

My mother was always very proud of her bilingualism because it served as a thread to her childhood and it enabled her to have a connectivity and a deep understanding of her cultural background (19). She can identify more with her culture and heritage. Her bilingualism has helped create a special intergenerational bond with her parents and extended family members. My mother feels that being able to be bilingual makes her "more adaptable, flexible and comfortable speaking to people who speak with different native languages" (19). As a child my mother was continuously taunted by her friends because of being "too Italian" (32). My mother never chose to hide her bilingualism, she was and still is extremely proud of her cultural ethnicity (32). In fact, her friends would always be welcomed to her home for dinner and included with her family. They enjoyed the food that was served, and she always tried to translate what was being discussed so that her friends were comfortable and did not feel excluded ensuring that there was no secret dialogue among the Italian speaking members of the family.