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Intro to Linguistics

Bilingual Identity in a World in Flux

Abstract: Dita is a 19-year-old whose family moved from her birthplace in Kosovo to New York City as refugees. She learned Albanian from her family, later learning English in school, though she is now more fluent in English because she uses Albanian more rarely. She speaks English with her peers and most people who are her age, whereas Albanian is mostly restricted to use with her parents and older relatives. Dita sometimes mixes the two and carefully notices the implications of her choices of which languages to use, especially with regards to her bilingual identity.

In a customs week packed with interesting people to meet, Dita was one of my favorite new hallmates. She currently lives in Manhattan, though she formerly resided in the Bronx. But before that, her family traveled to the US from Kosovo, a place that I'd barely ever heard of before meeting her. I'll relay the primer she gave me for any similarly ignorant people: Tensions between ethnic Albanians and Serbian forces eventually escalated into a war, in which Yugoslav forces attempting ethnic cleansing eventually drove out Albanians from Kosovo (Encyclopedia Brittanica). This included Dita's family, refugees who immigrated to New York. "See, the question 'Where are you from?' is very confusing to me," she tells me (1).

Considering her early life, Dita's bilingualism has clearly been very much out of necessity. Her family originally spoke Albanian, and she speaks it as her native language (18). But as New Yorkers, they eventually learned English. Though her older sister didn't know any English before attending preschool, Dita suspects that she must have known some (perhaps, she hypothesizes, from having watched too many cartoons) (5). School was certainly the catalyst for her acquisition of English, including an ESL class that she attended from kindergarten through second grade. She learned to read and write English at essentially the same time: "Learning to read English was a thing my mom did every night- we had a Hooked on Phonics thing, and she made us read, and she made us do all these things" (12). On the other hand, though Albanian was her first language, Dita never officially learned to read it like she did English. "I never had any formal education in Albanian aside from Saturday Albanian School, which, like, wasn't really a thing. We'd just dance and sing… Learning to read Albanian wasn't really a priority, because I wasn't in school for it" (12).

That's not to say that she never used her Albanian after learning English. She describes to me how the degree to which she uses it constantly changes: "In Kosovo, when I went to visit before my freshman year of high school, I came back and my primary language to speak would be Albanian. But once I was in school and got back to things, it was English. So it definitely depends on what's around me" (6). Her language usage, she notes, varies based almost entirely on her context. "Right now, since I'm not at home and I'm not speaking it, it's harder for me to, like, locate again. But... over the summer, if I'm at home and I'm speaking Albanian every day, then it's easier to fall back into" (6).

College isn't an environment that's conducive to her speaking Albanian; being at home, on the other hand, definitely is. She speaks Albanian with most of her older family members- her grandparents, for example, only know Albanian (though even her grandpa knows the English translations for "How are you?" and "Have a good day" and "Where's the milk?") (11). Despite exceptions like this one, Dita's use of Albanian versus English with her family is essentially all predicated on the contexts shown by age: "If I'm talking to my grandma, I'm not going to talk to her in half-English half Albanian, I'm going to talk to her in Albanian. If I'm talking to my mom, or if I'm talking to my aunt, I definitely switch between. But then if I'm talking to my sister, or my cousin that's my age, I would only speak English" (17). She describes to me how she occasionally mixes her languages with her family: for instance, they might ask "Where's the remote?" with the Albanian word for "remote" and the rest of the sentence in English. This is evidently true: Later in our conversation, she receives a text from her dad, asking a question in English, but ending with "te dua," Albanian for "I love you."

Though her use of Albanian and English is clearly based on context and the members of the conversation, certain connotations have developed based on her experience with each of the languages. "If I need to curse my little brother out," she notes, "I'll curse him out in Albanian rather than English ...When I'm angry, I'll definitely go more toward Albanian" (16). Dita believes this tendency originates with her parents. "There's a lot of Albanian curse words that I know because of my parents… When they're angry, they speak in Albanian curse words. And so I think it's easier for me to access them" (16). This amusing habit hints, of course, at ties between language and emotion. She provided further evidence of this phenomenon, noticing that she'll often resort to an Albanian term akin to "oh my God" as her "ultimate curse word," an instinctual reaction (14). I wondered whether this might point to a sort of nearly Whorfian effect

by which Dita becomes more aggressive when speaking Albanian more commonly or less aggressive when speaking English more commonly. She didn't quite think this was true, saying that the languages were essentially isolated to two separate contexts, and the differences in how she acts when speaking Albanian (mostly to older relatives) and English (mostly to classmates and siblings) were existent, but fairly simple- in Albanian, she believes she's more respectful, and in English she's funnier, and these differences certainly make sense considering whom she talks to in each language (27).

Despite what some of these anecdotes may imply, however, Dita's bilingualism is far more than an objective tool for interacting with her environment- it represents something far greater than this. Her Albanian is strongly tied to the culture of Kosovo and her love for her family. When I asked her about words or terms that exist in one language but not the other (a relatively impersonal question) she became focused on the answer, saying, "I'm trying to think of words. I could call my mom right now and ask her. I kind of want to know now" (26). As we waited for her mom to pick up, Dita started to tell me a story about her birthplace. "Yesterday was Kosovo's ninth year of independence. They have this sculpture in the capital--" Her mom answered the phone, cutting the anecdote short, but the exchange shows the strength of the relationship that her Albanian and bilingualism have to her family's history. (As an aside, her mom had several interesting answers to the question: One word for "to die" applies only to the deaths of men and bees, because both are seen as workers. Another aphorism proposes that children who eat the crusts of bread will grow up to be productive workers. These both point to a possible emphasis in Kosovo and Albania on productivity and hard work.)

Albanian represents many things to Dita. Her family. Their culture. The smell of roasted pepper (20). But she also notices that "what makes me not American is my Albanian-ness. I associate a difference with it- that's what doesn't make me fully part of one thing. Because I don't think I'm fully Albanian. And I also don't think I'm fully American" (20). To her, speaking Albanian feels like *difference* in the United States- and speaking English feels like *difference* in Kosovo. She fears that if people living in Kosovo heard her speaking English, they'd worriedly say, "'Oh, Dita, she's forgetting Albanian, we have to remind her'" (29). Because of all the people who left Kosovo for the United States, those who still live there feel as if America has taken their former compatriots from them, to some degree (32). To these residents

of Kosovo, each time that Dita and other refugees living in America speak, they make a statement about their identity.

Dita perceives this challenge in her life quite often. “There’s two different identities,” she tells me, “and sometimes it feels like you’re choosing one over the other. If I speak English with my mom, I know that she would much rather have me speak Albanian with her, so it always feels like there’s a choice being made... It’s definitely a weird split in identity, where it’s hard to be both at the same time, or you feel like you’re choosing the American side over your Albanian side” (19). The idea of trying to keep a balance between two different cultures evidences the dynamic nature of Dita’s bilingualism. It’s not static, standing still. Instead, her bilingualism is something constantly changing and evolving that she consciously attempts to keep in a state of equilibrium. Moreover, her constant struggle to support both sides of her identity through speaking Albanian and English isn’t isolated to her, as far as she can reckon. Though the fairly new population of Kosovo Albanians in the US may have many experiences in common with one another, Dita notices that “There isn’t really an Albanian-American identity, yet, as opposed to an Italian-American identity or an [Irish-American identity]. I’m in the generation that’s figuring it out right now, because our parents came from Kosovo and then they had kids that were raised here. And it’s on us to create this sub-identity. I am part of more than one culture, but those two cultures are pretty distinct from one another. And maybe as I grow older they’ll become more together” (21).

For Dita, bilingualism is a way that, by circumstance, she has to interact with her family, but it’s also a trait that informs her identity on a larger scale. It’s part of the way that she attempts to balance two parts of her heritage, and it’s part of a distinct moment in time for a group of children of immigrants. Through her dynamic, constantly changing bilingualism, she interacts with a world in flux.

Works Cited

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