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Linguistics 101

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Stuck at an Intersection

To learn more about what it means to be bilingual, I spoke to Sara, a student at Haverford College (1). Sara was born 18 years ago in Castro Valley, California, and she and her family have lived in Northern California ever since (2,3). Spanish was her first language and the one she's always spoken with her parents, but when Sara started first grade, she had to learn English (4,5,8,9,10,11). She described having difficulty at first, and she sometimes got into embarrassing situations. For example, because she had only a limited understanding of English grammar and vocabulary, she was often forced to simply repeat sentences she had heard other people say, even in the wrong context. "One time, the teacher was reading us a book, and one girl said, 'I can't see,' and then I said, 'I can't see,' even though I was in the front and I could see perfectly well." Another time, she accidentally signed up to sing "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" at a talent show. Sara didn't understand when she was told about rehearsals, and in the end, she had to pretend to know the lyrics in front of the entire school (12).

Sara's English improved rapidly, and she felt she was fluent by the time she reached the fourth grade (6). She also studied Spanish in school, although she noticed that the Spanish she learned in school differed from the dialect that she was used to speaking with her parents. For instance, she learned that her parents pronounced some words in a way that differed from the official pronunciation, like when they pronounced the word "*haya*" as though it were spelled "*haiga*." But even after learning the "proper" way of speaking Spanish, she never tried to correct

her parents' pronunciation. "I think it's wrong for me to go home and tell them that their language is incorrect," she said. "When I go home, I just talk to them how I normally would" (5,9,10).

Today, Sara feels that she is even more proficient in English than in Spanish. While she is still speaks fluent Spanish with her family, she primarily speaks in English at Haverford (6,8). She has even found that she usually thinks in English (14). There are some situations where that changes, though. Feeling strong emotions like anger can cause Sara's thoughts to switch to Spanish. "I'll talk to myself in Spanish just to comfort myself whenever I'm angry," she explained. Spanish reminds Sara of home and her family, and it helps her remain calm. Sometimes she remembers pieces of advice that her parents gave her in Spanish, and she feels strong and empowered (16).

Sara's relationships with Spanish-speaking friends are different from those with people who speak only English. To Sara, Spanish always means home and family, and so all relationships conducted in Spanish feel closer and more intimate to her. After spending long periods of time speaking in English, she explained, being able to switch back to Spanish evokes a feeling of nostalgia (20). She particularly appreciates the chance to talk to other bilingual people, because it allows her to switch back and forth between languages at will (28).

Sara also notices that some concepts are easier for her to express in one language than the other. For example, she finds that it's difficult to talk about social issues, like race and privilege, in Spanish. She often speaks about these topics in English, but when she tries to explain these concepts to her parents, she says, her explanations don't always make sense. Sara believes this difficulty is a result of differences not only in language but also in culture. On an American

college campus, she said, social issues are common topics of discussion, but in Mexican culture these issues aren't talked about as much (tangential to 26).

Language and identity are inseparable concepts to Sara. In fact, Sara explained that "being bilingual is like being stuck at this intersection between two cultures" (19). She isn't always sure exactly where she belongs. When she's at Haverford, she often feels out of place in American culture, but when she goes home, she's not sure if she entirely belongs there, either (21,31). She isn't sure if other people think of her differently because of her multicultural background, but it often feels to her as if they do. Sometimes, when she speaks in a class, she is self-conscious about her ability to express herself in comparison to native English speakers from wealthy backgrounds. "I become really nervous that…my language isn't going to sound as perfect as theirs," she explained. "I don't know if it's actually true…but in my head, I think it is" (32). Sara is unsure whether native English speakers view her as a native speaker of English. She thinks not having an accent helps her seem like a native speaker of English, but she sometimes feels embarrassed if she has to hesitate in the middle of a sentence to work out the proper phrasing. She's not even certain native speakers of Spanish view her as a native speaker of Spanish. Even though she is well-versed in the grammar and vocabulary of Spanish, she is painfully aware that she sometimes struggles to express herself in her first language (29).

At the same time, Sara also recognizes that being bilingual has its benefits. She appreciates having the ability to communicate with two entirely different cultures. She was able to put her language skills to use growing up, translating for her parents whenever they needed help communicating with English-speaking businesses, like banks. All in all, Sara doesn't feel that either of her languages is dominant—instead she realizes that each one is a valuable part of

her identity (7). Knowing two languages allows her to be part of two unique communities, and she appreciates the opportunities she has because she is bilingual (31).