

Abstract

My interviewee was a Haverford student named Cesar, from the class of 2020. He is turning 19 in March 2017. He is French by birth but has spent a large part of his life in Southeast Asia. He considers himself fluent in both English and French but thinks that English is his more dominant language since he has had more practice in it over the past few years. However, he considers himself more attached to the French language unlike what might be presumed from his fluency in English compared to French. This is probably because he was raised in a household where French and the French culture were an integral part of daily life. Apart from that, he has been taking Chinese language courses for the past three years.

The Dichotomy of Familiarity in a French World Traveler

When the details of the bilingualism project were being announced, I thought about interviewing someone outside the class who hasn't had any prior exposure to linguistics. That way, the answers to the question would not have as much linguistic nuance compared to someone interviewed in class. Therefore, being an international student myself, I started to think about all my multilingual international friends, but the person who claimed the major portion of my focus was Cesar. This is because his life story is a complicated one; it is one of traveling around the world with his parents and still firmly identifying as a French at heart. This complicated thought pattern has developed due to a series of quite fascinating events that happened up to the present. Cesar was born in Thailand, but he identifies as a French national since both of his parents are French. He spent the larger portion of his life travelling around Southeast Asia due to his parents' jobs. He graduated from high school in Philippines, and that is where he and his parents have resided for the past five years (3). However, his parents are set to move again in mid-2017, and it is not certain where. Regardless, Cesar considers his permanent residence as France since his parents are both French and citizens of France.

Being rooted in France, Cesar considers himself fluent in French as well as in English (4). However, when it came to the question of how many languages he has in his life, he went on to present quite an interesting story. He was born in Thailand, and according to his parents, the first two years of his time there, he became quite fluent in understanding Thai. However,

interestingly enough, he lost all his knowledge of Thai right after they moved away. Something similar also happened when he was in Italy. He says, “when I was 7 and 8 years old, I lived there and was becoming fluent enough in Italian to manage myself around the city for directions, order food and such within those two years. Italian was also taught in schools there so I was learning it. However, I lost it just like that after I moved away from Italy as well. (5, 11, 13)” He believes that Italian is something that would come back to him easier than Thai would due to the fact that he learned Italian later in his life as part of his institutional language and that Italian shares some of its aspects with French. He makes a similar connection between French and Spanish as well. However, he admits that he can only dabble in Spanish but is not fluent in it. He has also been taking Mandarin language courses for the last three years. (5) He is fairly confident in Mandarin but would not consider himself extremely fluent in it. He remembers his Chinese origin but asserts that the fact that he is 1/8th Chinese does not play any role into why he is learning the language.

English was an integral part of Cesar’s academic life and French was dominant in his household up until when he was 8 years old (8). His only experience with French during this time was not a formal school-based education. He attributes most of his familiarity with French to residing in France from when he was 8 to roughly 13 years old. French was the primary language of instruction in his school at that time. He feels that his English skills started to deteriorate due to the sudden shift in language usage at that time. However, since the level of French taught in 4th grade was not that of a novice level, he lacked some of basics that his peers had at that time. Thus, he spent those 5 years catching up his French skills before switching to an English system once again, when he came across a similar situation, except that this time he was honing his English skills but this time it was his French expertise that was slowly deteriorating. Thus, his grasps in neither of the two languages are “perfect or sophisticated” in his eyes. However, he feels that he is stronger in English than in French since he learned English more thoroughly and more recently in his life (7). Interestingly enough, he claims that even though English is his dominant language, he does not remember learning about the prescriptive grammar that comes along with learning it in school.

Outside the classroom and society, Cesar communicates with his parents in French almost all the time. With his sister, however, he cheerfully says that he completely speaks in

Frenglish (a mixture of French and English) and in fact has quite interesting conversations with her when he does that (10). He claims that this mixing of languages that he carries on does not happen as an active thought process but is rather involuntary (21). However, he also notes that he does not usually mix French with English when he talks to his French friends. Another interesting aspect that he noted was the placement of words in sentences that he spoke in when he used both languages to do that. He claims that he constantly violates the grammar structure in the language he speaks in when inserting a word from the other language into it.

One contradicting aspect of Cesar's bilingualism that I observed is that even though English is his dominant language, he feels that French is his "most intrinsic national one" (18). Thus, he does not necessarily see himself as a native speaker of English since he ties being a native speaker to having English origins. He puts emphasis on the fact that he feels a much deeper connection between French and his identity even though his French skillset is much weaker than his English one. He believes that this is because he was raised by French-cultured parents and thus experiences an attachment towards France and its language (21). However, he also feels that he is familiar enough with the two to call both his first languages. Similarly, he oscillates between thinking in English and French. "Sometimes I find myself counting in French, even when I am in a math class here (Haverford)", he says (14). He then speaks about a psychological study about how thinking in a different language changes the way one thinks. When it came to dreaming however, he said that he dreams in English whenever remembers dreaming at all (15).

Another interesting aspect of Cesar's bilingualism was his response to overwhelming feelings such as anger or sadness. He distinctly remembers thinking in French when he encounters emotions like the above. However, he also believes that the context in which these feelings are evoked matter to him. A fascinating idea that he expressed while on this topic was that thinking in French while in an English environment (and vice versa) helped him detach himself from the situation and see it from a third person point of view (16). Cesar also believes that he behaves differently when he is speaking in French or English. The gauge he set for this comparison is his perceived level of maturity. He thinks that he is much more serious when he is speaking in French than in English. He also believes that there is a certain change of tone and character when he talks in one language compared to the other. (27)

When asked about his views on the pros and cons of being bilingual, he expressed very positively that he is glad that he was raised as a bilingual person and had the opportunity to get acquainted with the diverse environments that he faced, which led him to be able to think in a wider range than he would if he knew only one language. The only major con he could think of was the “loss in touch of meaning sometimes or just being misunderstood in general”. He followed this statement with “That’s not what I wanted to say but that is how it came out”, which, I believe, is quite an apt example of the difficulties a multilingual individual might face while conversing with people (31). Another con he found mildly irritating was that of his apparent inability to switch accents. He says that even though he thinks his English accent is close to the American one, he has been reminded on quite a few occasions that he has a clearly French accent in his English, to which I would agree. Finally, when asked whether he would want his children to be multilingual, he replied, “Definitely. Absolutely. And multicultural. I want them to travel, get more experiences, not only because I think that makes you more intelligent in many ways and gives you a broader perspective, but also because I believe that sticking to a single place for the whole life is not the best way to lead it.” This is a very interesting point of view and it is always a curious aspect of multilingualism to look at. This is because his sense of identity (French) has not been affected by the fact that he had moved around the globe so much so far. But this might not be the same for his children. The cause of this possibility is worth delving deep into.