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A Menagerie of Language

Diane is a 19-year-old multilingual speaker of French, Haitian Creole, English, and basic Spanish. She was born in Boston but grew up in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. She came back to America five years ago to attend high school in Boston which is when she learned how to speak English. French and Haitian Creole used to be her dominant languages but now she also considers English among them and is fluent in all three. She mainly speaks with her parents and friends in Haiti in French and Haitian Creole while using English at school. However, she speaks all four of her languages at home because her family can speak all of them. She is positive about her multilingualism, finding it both useful as a way to more fully express herself and as a way to open up more opportunities for her. Her languages also often mix together and she ends up having to switch between all of them constantly and forgets some at times, usually after having spoken one for so long.

My discussion with my friend Diane started off on a light note, with her joking about her name, saying it was "Olivia Protsky" (it's not) (1). She continued this when she told me that she was born in the "United States of America" and had to be pressed for specifics until she told me that it was Massachusetts and then that it was Boston . She also gave me a half-confusing answer about where she lived, saying it was Boston, Haiti, and Haverford, while also noting that both of her parents lived in Boston and Haiti at the exact same time, somehow (they live exclusively in Haiti) (3). After this light-hearted intro, however, we really got into a serious discussion of her multilingual experience and it became clear pretty quickly that despite her multilingualism she still identifies strongly with Haiti.

Diane grew-up in Port-au-Prince, Haiti where they speak both French and Haitian Creole. However, to her both of these languages are interchangeable because Haitian Creole is "basically 80% French" (9). When she forgets a word in one of them, she substitutes it with a word from the other one because they are so similar. She also ended up having to learn some Spanish "for fun," as she and her parents used to take trips to the Dominican Republic and at one point they stopped translating for her, forcing her to learn a bit of Spanish (11). These were the only languages she could speak until she came to America for high school, when she had to learn English in order communicate with others. She mainly learned English by watching television with the subtitles on and also by having others correct her pronunciation of words (12). This is

because she considers English to be a “very lazy language” compared to French and Spanish, which she feels have more predictable grammars and sentence structures compared to English, with rules that can be followed in regard to these. As a result, she felt it was easier to learn English from television than by having lessons in it, which was helped by the fact that she knew some conversational English from primary school. It was at this point that she recalled the beginning of her time in high school when she would write essays in French before translating them into English. She did this until she was told not to, forcing her to both think and write in English when she would not otherwise (12). Because of the many languages she has learned, Diane now speaks multiple languages at home in Haiti because her family is also multilingual. They usually just “mix them all in” and she notes that they even “throw some German in there” (her family has visited Germany and Switzerland recently) as well in addition to French, Haitian Creole, English, and Spanish (10).

When we moved on to some of the deeper questions regarding her language use, she provided some very interesting responses. She thinks in French and Haitian Creole a lot of the time, which often results in her realizing that she needs to translate back into English because others don’t speak those languages (14). She also dreams in more than one language, with her romantic dreams usually in either French or Spanish and the ones where she’s stressing out about school in English. As well, she sometimes even dreams in Italian, German, and Russian. She’s not surprised by the first one as it is very similar to Spanish and French in structure and she’s been picking up German through her recent trips to Germany and Switzerland. However, she has no idea why she dreams in Russian sometimes because she doesn’t know how to speak it at all (15).

When it comes to thought and behavior, Diane says that one of the main things she notices is that her “voices changes when [she] is speaking every different language.” She finds French and Haitian Creole to be more expressive languages and has an easier time expressing her emotions through them. This is opposed to English, which she feels is more restrictive for her in expressing her emotions, despite the fact that she finds it easy to study and “looser” than French or Haitian Creole (27). As a result, she speaks French and Haitian Creole when she’s angry, but predominantly Haitian Creole because it is the “most vulgar language out of all four of them.” We proceeded to have an illuminating discussion about swearing, which Diane says come more

naturally to her in Haitian Creole because she grew up swearing in that language. She also says that sometimes if you "want to be very offensive to someone without them knowing, it's convenient" to do so in another language. When it comes to specific swear words, she says that Haitian Creole has much deeper insults than English does, saying that the equivalent of "motherf*****" is so insulting to one's mother that "it's the sort of thing that you would get punched or killed over" (16). All of this showed me how strong her connection to Haiti is through her usage of French and Haitian Creole.

With language usage, Diane mixes up her languages all of the time, especially after she has been speaking French and Haitian Creole for an extended period of time and then coming back to America. She also gets mixed up with false cognates in English, for example using "velocity" instead of "voltage" because that is similar to the French word for the same idea. She also tends to mix them up when she is sleep deprived and "completely forgets all words in English," so she ends up speaking in a "French-Haitian Creole-English hybrid and hoping it makes sense" (17). Despite this, it is usually instantaneous for her to switch between languages. The only time it is slower is also when she's coming back from Haiti and she has to switch from speaking French and Haitian Creole to English. For example, at customs when they are asking her questions there's often a delay in her remembering that she has to speak English and not French/Haitian Creole. She describes the transition as "when you come from cold water…and are going to go to warm water and it takes a while to adjust" (30). She also often finds herself encountering words and phrases that only exist in one of her languages and not the other, saying that this happens whenever she is trying to find the best way to express an idea. This usually comes up with proverbs, as there are certain proverbs in French and Haitian Creole that don't translate well to English. She gave an example of one; "bringing a snake to school is one, but making it learn is two/the second." She says it means something like "it's one thing to bring someone to school, but it's another thing to make them learn" (26). Obviously the literal translation doesn't make sense in English, but she says it has biblical roots in the sense that snakes are viewed as treacherous and inclined toward betrayal, so getting them to learn something different is quite a feat.

Despite the blending together of her languages in usage, she associates her languages with completely different countries, Haiti for French and Haitian Creole and America for

English. She sees things this way because she travels a lot so countries and their languages naturally go together for her. In addition, the French spoken in Haiti is different than the French spoken in France so it makes more sense for her to associate each variate of French with the country it is spoken in than with something else (20). However, it's completely different situation when it comes to culture. Even though she says she can be a "greedy, lazy American" or a "hot-headed Haitian," she ultimately identifies with Haiti and it values, saying that her familial and cultural ones are more in line with Haiti than with America (21). Her multilingualism has not caused her to lose sight of who she is and what culture she identifies with.

As Diane reflected on her multilingualism, she saw it as having a positive influence on her life. Among the benefits, she points out that she can travel to many places and can more easily express herself. She also says that it "kicks ass" and allows her to get better jobs. Finally, as she hesitated to remember what the word was in English, she said that it makes her "well-rounded" in a cultural sense. When it comes to drawbacks, she says that there are instances when she "slips out" of a language, as in she is thinking of a word in one language but forgets how to say it in the other, that results in a delay in being able to say something. There's also the fact that she's constantly translating and that even though she is good enough that she doesn't notice it, there are occasions where this breaks down and she ends up literally "lost in translation." She understandably finds it harder to remember English words than French or Haitian Creole ones (31). Diane encapsulated her attitude toward her multilingualism when she told me at the end of the interview that she "loves it when [she] start[s] speaking a different language if someone doesn't speak it." She enjoys being able to speak multiple languages, as she told me that it made her applications, especially her résumé, look really great. The only serious downside she finds in how others treat her is that people are always expecting her to translate things, which she finds annoying (32). Of course, that comes with knowing more than one language. Overall, Diane's multilingualism has not caused her to lose her identity and she remains deeply rooted in Haiti and its culture and values, even if her ability to speak other languages has proven to be an asset to her in life.