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Immersed in Language

My father, Pablo Meninato (1), has always instilled in me a love and appreciation for language. From an early age I remember riding in the back of our red Volvo in the Argentine Pampas (plains), cruising by green, fertile fields, and hearing Brazilian songs in harmony with the hum of the car. Knowing his fondness for language, I was curious how bilingualism has impacted his life experiences. We had previously discussed how certain words were false cognates in the two languages we both speak (English and Spanish, but he is also fluent in Portuguese (4)), like "compromiso" which means a commitment in Spanish, while "compromise" in English is an agreement or a mutual concession in an argument/negotiation (26). These beautiful quirks and blemishes of language provide a unique window for thinking about one's dominant language, and for understanding how someone else might conceptualize ideas differently because of the inherent differences in language.

My father grew up in Belgrano, an English neighborhood in Buenos Aires, Argentina (3). Belgrano boasts old cobble stone roads, lined with bits of moss and small stones lodged in the cracks. Part of the beauty of Buenos Aires is how the architecture can vary dramatically across neighborhoods. Belgrano has English red brick houses that were used to house British engineers and workers (and their families) for the railroads in Argentina. The neighborhood still has a central athletic club (the Belgrano Athletic Club) and many private schools were founded by the British (which my father attended). His parents both spoke English well, but Spanish was the dominant language in the family, as it now is in our family (10). He is now an architect by profession. Before the proliferation of the internet and media, it was difficult to be exposed to different forms of architecture, so the most prized lecturers at his university were those that had huge boxes and long cabinets of slides with pictures of buildings across the world. To be a successful architect at the time meant to be well-traveled. Although he noted that it was a different time, he backpacked to different countries and cities in South America. In particular, he

made several trips as a twenty year old to Brazil. There he was exposed to the language. With little money and only a backpack, he was forced to, but clearly enjoyed, communicate with Brazilians. With knowledge of a few Portuguese words and a common understanding of some Spanish words he could successfully converse with locals. These experiences later on encouraged him to seek his doctorate from a Brazilian university, so thirty years later he spent six months becoming fluent in Portuguese in order to pass a written and oral exam in Portuguese to obtain his doctorate (11).

He feels strongly that what allowed him to become fluent with relative ease was that he knowingly immersed himself in Brazilian culture and the Portuguese language (12). To him this meant constantly listening to Brazilian musicians in the car, and while working he would listen to Brazilian radio for the news (I can attest to being initially confused as to why I was hearing Portuguese all day as I worked next to him). I was surprised to learn that he felt strongly about not mixing languages. However, I would assume that it's very common in bilingual households to mix words, for instance my father acknowledged that some Latin-American communities might often say something like "me podes pasar el 'tea cup'?" would mean "could you pass me the tea cup?", and bilingual speakers would know exactly what was meant. But my father felt that while acquiring a new language, language mixing could lead to an "inadvertent" mixing of language later on so he "makes an effort not to mix languages" (17). And although he did take some formal English classes in grade school, he mainly learned English from fully immersing himself in the language by going to university in the US and being forced to communicate in English (17).

In terms of self-expression and comfort, he does admit that he uses his three languages, English and Spanish in particular, for different purposes. The language he thinks in depends on the context, and he primarily dreams in Spanish, but occasionally in English, but interestingly for his profession he can prefer to use English, which he does not consider his most dominant language(14,15). To him, Spanish can sometimes be an excessively "adorned and poetic" language compared to English, which he feels can be more "precise" (20). So for a presentation or for teaching a class, he might prefer to speak in English where he feels he can communicate ideas more clearly. Similarly, amongst family and friends he feels that he can better communicate

himself with Spanish. He says that perhaps for the same reason, that is why he cannot curse or insult very well in English. So in an emotional outburst, if he is either sad or angry, he would likely default to Spanish, but again it would depend on the context. He tends to be more careful with his word choice in English, thus he feels he is less fluid in his English conversations (16, 28). He notes that because he has only "needed" Portuguese for his doctorate, since then he has already lost some proficiency in the language because he has not needed to use it. However, he is confident his Portuguese language skills would re-sharpen with some practice.

Similar to how "compromiso" was not a cognate for "compromise" he also pointed to "layering" as an example of a difficult to translate expression (26). I was curious if my father had learned of words or phrases in Portuguese that either were false cognates, or if were not easily translatable to other languages. He responded that his favorite word in Portuguese was "saudade" which roughly translates to a deep, emotional and nostalgic feelings towards something (26). He explained the concept of "saudade" like a kind of homesickness, but towards something that was not necessarily your home. For example, perhaps sunny Rio, with its pale sand, warm waters, and looming *Cristo Redentor* could produce feelings of saudade for my father, although it would be a forlorn nostalgia and pseudo-homesickness for places he only had fleeting or temporary connections with.

When I asked him what it meant to be bilingual, he remembered marveling at how the daughter of a friend of his could say something in French to her father, respond back to her mother in Spanish, and then address him in English. To him, her ability to know another language was like "a password to a different culture" (19, 31). When our family left Argentina to live in the United States in 2001 because of the recession, he was heartened by the fact that his children would at least have the "keys" to two different cultures and languages. Further, he notes that when composing essays or arguments, the innate ability to think about language problems from multiple perspectives and languages seems immensely useful and valuable. This is further compounded by his confession that he himself had trouble understanding whether it was his language or culture that shaped his worldview. So a greater understanding of different cultures, alongside his bilingualism, allowed him further insight into his architecture and thinking about general sociocultural issues.