

1. Shayan Hashemi

2. Age: 20

3. email: shashemi@haverford.edu

Consent to being recorded: Yes

Willing to be contacted later this semester to follow up: "Sure! Absolutely."

No One Answer:

The Ability To Connect

I wanted to learn about a bilingual experience tied to a cultural background with which I was not familiar. I decided to interview a person that had lived in Iran. More specifically, I interviewed someone from Tehran, the Capital of Iran; and learned about the bilingual experience of a Persian (Farsi) and English speaker, who does not have a definite answer for how multilingualism plays out in his life or affects his communications, yet knows for certain that his multilingual knowledge has given him the ability to connect with his past, his cultural background, his future, and the world and people around him. (3)(4)

Shayan Hashemi lived in Tehran, Iran until he was three; and later moved to a city in southern Iran because of his parents' jobs (1) (3). When he turned fifteen, he returned to Tehran (3). Yet, he did his last few years of high school in England. He is now twenty years old, and lives in Haverford, Pennsylvania (2)(3).

Shayan can speak English and Persian with native fluency. He also took, "five years of Arabic in Iran because its mandatory. You have to take certain courses, but that wasn't to know how to speak." (4) He clarified, "It was mainly grammar and just basically the skills we need to be able to read and write... I don't totally understand it..." (4) He added, "I took elementary Spanish at Haverford, so I have a basic understanding of Spanish as well." (4) Shayan learned Persian as his first language; and started learning English when he was around 6 or 7 years old (5). However, he feels that he didn't know English as well as he does now until he was around 14 or 15 years old (5). In fact, he said, "I basically learned most of it after the age of 15 or 14 (5)."

Shayan feels most fluent in Persian, which he can read, write, and speak easily (6). In English, though, he has close-to-native proficiency, “maybe a little lower than the native level, but close to that...full professional proficiency or near native.” (6) He is not as fluent in Spanish or Arabic, although he is familiar with both.

Spanish I know some basic vocabulary and grammatical rules, but I don't think I can really talk well, and Arabic I can't talk at all... I can just read and write... And part of the reason is that we have very similar alphabets in Persian, so it's kind of easy to understand that. (6)

He does not currently use Persian as often as he used to,

I think I'm the only student on campus who speaks Persian. I think there's maybe only one other student, so when I'm on campus, I just talk in English... I only speak Persian when I... talk to my parents, [and] my family. I have a lot of relatives in the U.S., so when I talk to them on the phone, I just speak Persian. Even English with them...but mostly I speak English because all my friends in college, they speak English so I would say, most of the time, English, but for example, I read news articles in Persian, my Facebook has a lot of Persian posts, so I just see a lot of Persian things, basically. But for speaking, mostly English. (8)

Not being able to speak Persian with anyone on campus makes it hard for Shayan to identify which language is more dominant in different aspects of life. In fact, to Shayan, whether or not one language is dominant is “a hard question” to answer, in general (7). He explained that because he has been living in the U.S. “for the past, almost, two years” and before then he lived in England for two years, it is difficult to answer whether or not he has a dominant language, and especially to identify which one is dominant. (7)

I can't really answer. I think, not a single language dominates, but I would say it's between Persian and English. Sometimes a little bit more English, sometimes a little more Persian. But of course, Persian is my first language, so I guess I'm better at that, for sure. (7)

But this does not mean that Shayan has a language preference, or is not comfortable with holding conversations in Persian. In fact, he makes an active effort to maintain his first language. (9)

I speak Persian to my parents, complete Persian. And I always try to not use any English words, when I talk to them. I just try to remember to speak Persian without forgetting words. I think it's important to remember my first language, because a lot of people, when they move to another country, they forget their first language. So, I think it's something that I really like. I don't really care that much, but it's something nice to just to speak the language itself without using words from other languages. (9)

His conscious choice of language comes down to necessity. "When I was a child I was in Iran so I spoke Persian; and right now, I'm in college, so I speak English..." (10) Ultimately, like Shayan said, what language is used depends on context and necessity. However, code-switching is not always a conscious choice for Shayan. It seems that most of the time, there are aspects of bilingualism that one does not think about, since it becomes a part of life—it becomes unconscious. Questions about unconscious experiences of code-switching were particularly hard for Shayan to be sure about. At times, it was hard for Shayan to think of an answer at all. Answering what language he thinks in was particularly tricky.

Oh, this is really hard to answer. It changes all the time. Sometimes I think in Persian, sometimes in English. And it depends. For example, if I visit my country for a month, then I just think only in Persian, but if I just don't talk to my parents or my relatives for a couple of weeks—that doesn't happen, but in case, when I really speak English a lot, constantly for some time, I just feel that I think primarily in English, and especially when I write essays or just read... But it changes. I don't have just one response. (14)

It seems that the multilingual experience not only varies among multilinguals, but throughout everyday dynamics of each multilingual individual. Shayan dreams in Persian, usually. He thinks it's due to it being his first language. "It's hard to answer. I think mostly Persian. Sometimes English, but mostly Persian. I guess that's because it's my first language." (15) Questions about unconscious experiences of code-switching were not just hard, but sometimes resulted in shocking answers. Shayan himself was surprised, when asked about the language he uses when he's angry or sad.

Oh, this is really interesting. English comes out. So usually, when I'm a little bit sad or a little bit angry, I just think more in English, and I find that really interesting, because normally, I should—I guess I should speak in Persian or think in Persian when I'm sad or angry, it doesn't happen often,

rarely... But I think I think more in English when I'm not happy with something, and I don't know why. It's something that's really interesting to me as well. (16)

Shayan does not act differently depending on the language he uses, but is clear that there is no one way, at least for Shayan, to answer how multilingualism plays out. (27)

There is also no one way in which multilingualism affects Shayan's daily conversations. On the one hand, he thinks that there are aspects of multilingualism that might cause others to treat one differently.

...I used to have a... stronger accent when I first left my country. So maybe that could've affected the way people basically acted with me at the time in High School, and possibly in college. I don't know. I have no idea, but I think... having a foreign accent... it's just something that could make others treat you a little bit differently. Not necessarily negative at all, maybe even positive... just something that I think really affects daily communications. (32)

On the other hand, most of Shayan's bilingual experience, if not all, has been positive. "Well I'm not sure about cons really but there are lots of Pros... I can't think of any particular cons actually I think there's nothing really negative about knowing more than one language." (31) "I wouldn't say I've been judged negatively for being bilingual, but positively for sure. When I go to my country and speak English, a lot of people quite like it. So, I would say that's kind of the positive aspect of it..." (32)

An effect of multilingualism that Shayan is aware of, however, is that it allows him to connect with his past, his cultural background, his future, and the world and people around him. For instance, he associates each language with different things. Shayan associates Farsi with his past and his cultural background.

Persian/ Farsi it's just something that, well, I associate my country with it for sure because I think Iran is, I mean there are a few countries that speak Persian, but Iran is the only country that speaks the Persian, that I know of. So, there are two other countries that also their language is Persian, but the dialects are very different. So definitely I think it's something I think very particular to Iran, and it reminds me of my country, my classmates back in elementary school Junior high school part of my high school and my family and it's just something that I really ...I really love the language. Honestly,

I think it's a beautiful language (20). It has beautiful sounds and I can think of Persian culture, poetry and just Iran's history and I think those are the things that I mostly associate Persian with. (20)

English, though, he associates with very different things, primarily, he associates it with the ability to connect with a variety of people from different cultures and his future.

... when I think of English I think it's the most commonly used language, so I see it just as a tool to just be able to communicate with people from a variety of countries and cultures and to just learn a lot about the world and being able to just explore a lot of things, because without knowing English my world would've been completely different so I just see it as a really really awesome tool to just develop myself as an individual and I really like the language, of course. I really like English and its literature... I also like English accents a lot... I think they're really fascinating. Different accents, British, American, other accents in the English language, I think they're really interesting. (20)

Overall, to Shayan, being multilingual means that he can have a different experience while still being a regular person like everyone else; and allows him to connect with his past, his cultural background, the world and people around him, and his future. "To be honest, I think I'm the same person, so I don't think that using another language makes me a different person..." (19) Shayan does not think that multilingualism makes him different to others. He considers himself to be Persian.

I definitely consider myself an Iranian slash Persian I think that's really the culture that I belong to, but having lived outside of my country for almost 4 years. I went to an International School for part of my high school... it's hard to really learn everything about the American culture or the British culture in a few years, but I have an understanding of them as well also I would say Multicultural but specifically Persian if I have to choose only one. (21)

But, although Shayan does not think that multilingualism makes him different to others, he does think it affects the way one sees the world, how one connects with people, and what possibilities one's future holds. "...in some ways, you see the world differently when you think in one particular language. I don't know. I think that there's a connection between the way that we perceive things and the language that we think of them [in]..." (19)

...each language just is basically associated with their culture most languages and each language basically allows you to think from a particular perspective so I think this is really valuable and I see it is a privilege to be able to use my language abilities to just appreciate the world and in it understanding people and just everything. (31)

...I think it's something that has been really beneficial to me. I'm able to communicate with a lot of people, especially using my English; and, of course people, family, and my relatives who speak Persian. So, it's definitely, something that I use on a daily basis, and I really appreciate it... it's really helped me a lot. Especially in the past five years. Moving from my country to other countries and just learning a lot about people with different backgrounds and cultures and I really appreciate the fact that I've been able to learn a second language, which is English. And, basically, communicate with so many people using that language. (19)