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Introduction to Linguistics

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Being Russian in New York City

Nicole Litvitskiy (1)

Age 19 (2)

Abstract: Nicole Litvitsky has grown up her entire life in Brooklyn, New York City, in a neighborhood that was predominantly Russian and Jewish. She learned Russian as her first language through her parents and grandparents, and later learned English from her sister and her parents before starting grade school. The abundance of multilingualism in her schools and her upbringing in general has shaped her view on being bilingual, and how it relates to her self-identity. As a first generation American, she hopes to preserve her first language and her culture by teaching her future children the Russian language and traditions.

After noticing the way Nicole—a friend that lives in my apartment—would talk to her mom on the phone in a beautiful Russian-English mix of words and sentences that seemed to interweave seamlessly, I knew she would be a perfect interviewee for our multilingualism project. Nicole Litvitskiy has lived in Brooklyn her entire life. She was born on April 2nd, 1998, 5 years after her parents moved from Russia during the mass post-Soviet emigration to the United States. (3) She grew up in Coney Island, in the southern end of Brooklyn near Brighton Beach, a neighborhood that houses a large population of Russian-speaking immigrants. New York City in this way is known for having large neighborhoods of immigrant families of the same cultural heritages, creating a sense of communal identity in a widely diverse city. Because of this, Nicole's identity as a first-generation American was profoundly influenced by her first language and the culture of her family, friends, and neighborhood.

Nicole learned Russian as her first language because of the prevalence of the language in her home and her community. (11) She learned Russian primarily from her grandparents, who often took care of her while her parents were at work. Nicole later learned English at around 3

years old, with the help of her older sister and the interaction with public schools that she went to in the Bensonhurst neighborhood. (5) Her sister, who is four and a half years older than her, had taken an ESL (English as a Second Language) class and was able to help her learn grammatically correct English. Nicole remembers her sister teaching her how to say "May I please use the restroom?" when she started the Pre-K at her local public preschool. However, as she described her high school as being "95% multilingual people", she never felt out of place in the English-dominated Brooklyn school system she was a part of. Moreover, she mostly spoke English with her friends and classmates early on in grade school and the second language quickly became her most dominant.

Nicole now considers English to be her dominant language, as she has had to predominantly use the language throughout her life, with the exception of speaking to her Russian-speaking family members and occasional phrases with her Russian-speaking friends. Because of this, she is fluent in English and has been since before grade school, with only a slight roll of her R's to give a hint that she is bilingual. (6, 7) Even so, Nicole considers herself and has always considered herself to be Russian, as opposed to Russian American. She explains that this is quite possibly due to the climate of New York City and the way in which people define their heritage as based on the country that their family is from. "A lot of it is regional. Nobody from New York calls themselves 'something-American.' A lot of those people are first-generation Americans. By newspapers and stuff, we are definitely referred to as Russian-American and Chinese-American, but nobody in those communities refers to themselves that way." She also gives me the example that her friends from Bangladesh described themselves as Bengali as opposed to Bengali American. We talk about how New York City has a very large immigrant population, and that these immigrants from the same countries generally tend to settle in the same neighborhoods. She poses that these close-knit linguistically and culturally similar neighborhoods as a possible reason why first-generation immigrants still refer to themselves as Bengali or Russian.

Like many other first-generation Americans, Nicole learned English out of necessity, but made a conscious decision in high school to keep a fluent understanding of Russian in order to communicate with members of her family that couldn't speak English, like her grandparents. (9, 10) She has both school friends and friends that she made in upstate New York who speak Russian but she tells me she mostly speaks English with her friends and practices her Russian

primarily with her mom. Her and her mom have phone conversations where Nicole speaks a mix of Russian and English, and her mom speaks only in Russian as a way of keeping her proficient in the oral language. She told me part of the reason for this 'Runglish' is that it is very easy and fluid to transition from Russian to English in the middle of sentences, and that some phrases were easier to convey through Russian or vice versa. (30) For example, she told me that phrases beginning with the word "so" was easier to convey in English as opposed to Russian, and that she still uses the word "like" as a space-filler even when she was speaking in Russian. Although she lost a good amount of her Russian conversational skill in elementary and middle school because of English dominating her social life, she was able to regain fluency in high school and now in college through conscious effort and the help of her mom.

Nicole started to consciously work on her conversational skill in Russian starting in high school when she began working at a Russian-speaking daycare, where she continued to work for two summers. She also practiced her Russian at a Russian-speaking psychiatric office, and continued her conversational proficiency there. She now considers herself orally fluent in Russian from this deliberate relearning, but is taking Russian independent studies classes here in order to understand the grammar rules behind her first language. Nicole found it interesting how she first learned Russian naturally through listening to her family, but never actually learned the grammatical rules behind it. Nicole didn't know the full Russian alphabet and was not able to read or write in Russian before she came to Haverford. She talks about how "the Russian alphabet has multiple letters to signify different sounds that in English are normally only formed by one letter or combinations of letters," and in many common Russian words, the vowel sounds don't match up with the way the word is colloquially said. (12) Needless to say, learning an alphabet with new characters that look similar to English letters but have completely separate meanings is very confusing and takes time to learn. She is dedicated, however, to be able to become fully fluent in reading, writing, and speaking in Russian, deciding that "it would pay off more" to practice her skills with a language that she was already very familiar with, as opposed to Spanish, which she had taken for six years but still did not feel nearly proficient in.

Not only can the Russian alphabet confusing, but Nicole also t1ells me how she comes across instances in her life when the nature of formality in spoken Russian can get a bit confusing. Because there is a formal and informal way to say "you" in Russian, she gets a little confused at times on how to address her elders in Russian. For example, she almost exclusively

used the formal version of you, “vy,” at her psychiatric office assistant job, but uses the informal version, “ty,” when speaking to her elder close family friends that she met during summers in upstate New York. (28) When talking to her stepmom, she is often confused about whether or not to say “you” in the formal or informal grammatical tense. The formality of “you” in Russian differs among different soviet states and regions. For example, in Russia it is acceptable to refer to close family members by the informal version of you, but in places like Uzbekistan and Kazhakstan and other eastern Soviet Union countries, one must strictly adhere to the formal version of “you” to anyone that is your elder, regardless of family ties. Despite the confusing lexicon, Nicole still associates a strong familial tie with Russian as this was the language and culture around which she grew up. (20)

Nicole sees her bilingualism in a different light after coming to college at Haverford, her first long period of exposure to the more homogenous side of America. She explained how, in her words “it wasn’t so odd to me before because New York is so multilingual, and so I was always with people who were bilingual.” She goes on to tell me how she took a class last semester at Haverford called “English Learners in the U.S.” and how she learned about the ways in which the English language is very dominant in this country, and how success is highly contingent on learning the language. “Bilingualism is such a valuable skill, and there is so much policy from the government that pushes into an English-only style of teaching and being as a nation… that English is the right language, and that’s it.” (31) Nicole’s bilingualism seemed to have become much more valuable to her after being exposed to this, and she replied with a firm head nod when asked if she wanted her children to be bilingual like her.

Nicole’s experience with bilingualism growing up in the diverse New York City has given her a unique perspective on the way cultural identity is formed for first-generation citizens. She considers multilingualism and a diversity of cultures to be an essential exposure to everyone, and considers her bilingual and multicultural experience in the Big Apple as one that has helped her gain a perspective on the world that has ultimately made her a better person.