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Linguistics 101

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### A Language Hidden at Home

For my interview, I decided to interview someone who when I first met I did not see any apparent signs of being bilingual from an outside perspective. I was curious to see what their perspective was on their bilingual experience from the point of view of someone who does not obviously display it. Christina, a junior at Haverford College who was born in Queens, New York and grew up in Long Island, New York grew up learning both Hungarian and English from her parents. She considers herself to be fluent in both English and Hungarian (**Question 6**). Although she primarily learned Hungarian from her parents who both are native speakers of Hungarian, she considers English to be her primary language which she did not begin learning until daycare (**Question 7 and 11**). Due to having learned both languages so early in her life, she never recalled having to actually learn them (**Question 12**). However, over time, each language began to manifest itself in separate areas of her life; Christina reserved Hungarian for home and family life whereas English took its place with friends and school life (**Questions 8 and 10**). This reservation of her Hungarian to primarily her home and family life is what she believes brings up the illusion that she is not bilingual to those who view her from the outside (**Question 29**). In fact, she comments, “most people don’t judge me for my bilingualism since most people actually seem rather surprised when I tell them I speak Hungarian!” (**Question 32**) .

Being born and raised in the United States posed a great emphasis on learning and developing English over Hungarian; especially since in the United States she always found it difficult to find other speakers of Hungarian. Most people she encounters for the first time or even those she has known for some while would say she is definitely a native speaker of English but many would never guess that she ever spoke another language, let alone Hungarian (**Question 29**). The fact that Hungarian never played a significant role in school is a reason she feels that her vocabulary is limited to that of only home and family related topics. She quickly realized the extent of her vocabulary when she began to meet with a Hungarian tutor during her first year at college; her efforts at discussing topics beyond those

related to the household, such as describing in detail her courses in college, brought about obstacles in her language that she had not encountered before (**Question 20**). A reason for this she explains could be because she primarily associates her school and social life with English whereas her home life is more defined by her Hungarian language and culture (**Question 20**).

Christina's personal definition of what it means to be a native speaker of Hungarian does not allow her to consider herself a native speaker. A native speaker to Christina is somebody who she associates having grown up in the country where a language is spoken. She explains, "I consider myself a fluent speaker but not a native speaker since I associate being a native speaker with having grown up in the country where a language is spoken." (**Question 18**). Nevertheless, she does not feel less towards the language even if she does not consider herself a native speaker. She has noticed that most native speakers of Hungarian would recognize that she was not born in Hungary. She recounts, "as for Hungarian, I think if I speak to people often enough they realize that I don't have the vocabular "flexibility" and I don't know certain colloquial and Hungarian jargon." (**Question 29**) Yet this does not stop her from identifying with the Hungarian culture. Her home life is heavily influenced, not only by the Hungarian language, but also by Hungarian food and tradition. In contrast to the strong American influence and emphasis on English she feels outside, at home, Hungarian tradition defines her life. Christina recounts an interesting Easter tradition that Hungarians normally performed on Easter Monday where the males in the family would sprinkle perfume on the females and recite an old Hungarian poem; chuckling, she mentioned that she has actually memorized the short poem after having heard her father recite it countless times to her mother. She recites, "Zöld erdőben jártam, kék ibolyát láttam, el akart hervadni, szabad-e locsolni?." Which when literally translated means "I was walking in a green wood, I saw a blue violet, it wanted to wilt, can I water you?"

Nevertheless she does not completely remove English from her home life. This inclusion of English is partly since both her parents are bilingual as well (**Question 9**). In fact, as a child, she used to primarily speak and listen to her parents in Hungarian, but as she grew older she more often spoke in English but continued to listen to her parents in Hungarian (**Question 10**). Interestingly, she never mixes her languages by accident; on the contrary, she cleverly mixes both languages at home for convenience. (**Question 17**). For example, certain words in Hungarian such as the word for computer – "számítógép" – are much simpler to say in English; she also uses Hungarian instead of English when she

encounters words for things that English does not have. Most of these missing words usually occur for Hungarian dishes (**Question 26**). She takes on a more casual and relaxed tone when interacting with older people in Hungarian than in English as well. She explains, “I usually interact more with elderly people when I speak Hungarian. ‘csokolom’ – the formal greeting (which when translated literally means ‘I kiss you’) I don’t use for anyone who is older than me.” (**Question 28**). While the amount of speakers in Hungarian is not as prevalent as, say, Spanish or Chinese in the United States, Christina. Even spending one month in Hungary has had significant effects in the way she thinks and even dreams. Normally, she dreams in English, but when immersed in Hungarian, she begins to dream in Hungarian (**Question 15**).

Interestingly, the emphasis on English placed on her daily life and the lack thereof for Hungarian in the United States has not made any significant dent in her fluency and understanding of the language (**Question 6**). This may be attributable to Hungarian being present at home; however, after living for nearly three years away from her parents and not having visited Hungary since 10<sup>th</sup> grade, she has maintained a strong grip on the language in an English dominated arena.

Even while being immersed in a primarily English environment and away from home, Hungarian is still a language that is prevalent in her life. To her, certain activities and words will always be associated to their Hungarian form. For example, whenever she thinks about laundry in general, she naturally thinks of the Hungarian word for it. Nevertheless, she primarily thinks in English in the United States, but she is no foreigner to thinking in Hungarian since she has effortlessly thought in Hungarian after having spent a month at a summer camp in Hungary (**Question 14**). Her only regret about knowing Hungarian is that “my language isn’t that widespread.” Regardless, Christina finds the silver lining and remarks, “one pro of knowing Hungarian is that when you don’t want to be understood by other people, it’s really easy. It’s nice for phone conversations.” (**Question 31**)