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Introduction to Linguistics

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A Woman of the World

I am curled up on a big fluffy couch, toes shoved between the cushions in an attempt to stave off the January air. Sitting across from me, hands wrapped around a steaming mug of tea, is Audrey Berg Clothier, a fellow snowbird who shares my distaste for the cold. Audrey is a 53-year-old native of Buenos Aires, Argentina; she moved to the US when she was 19 where she completed a major in Economics (she laughs at my face of disgust) and a minor in German at the University of Massachusetts. This was only her first excursion: she proceeded to live in Brazil, Mexico, and France. Though Audrey currently lives in Haverford, Pennsylvania, she lights up at the mention of her next big adventure: moving to Brussels, Belgium to be with her husband. When prompted if she plans on staying there permanently, she only waggles her eyebrow and says, “Oh, it depends, we’ll see.” This kind of humor is so ingrained in Audrey’s perspective on life. Even more than her linguistic ability, this wit lends her a sense of acceptance and exploration that paints her as a true woman of the world.

Audrey is currently fluent in an impressive four languages: Spanish, English, French, and Portuguese (4, 6). She picked up of her languages while she was living in different countries around the world (5, 11). For instance, she learned French when she and her family were living in France because it “seemed like the thing to do.” Her knowledge of Portuguese came from an interest in working with Latin America in her career. Audrey laughs as she recounts: “I got to be fluent in Portuguese and that was even funny because I was so immersed there that when I got back to Argentina I had a hard time speaking Spanish which caused great mirth amongst my family.” The idea of speaking four languages seems intimidating, but she just shrugs and takes a sip of her tea. “When you speak English and Spanish, if you have them kind of as a background, it makes it a heck of a lot easier to morph into French, and you know, French and Portuguese have a lot of overlap... I don’t think it takes an awful lot of credit.”

The two languages that Audrey most identifies with are Spanish and English. Specifically, she speaks Anglo-Argentine English, a dialect that has its own vocabulary, intonation, and “twist on things,” in addition to Argentine Spanish. She classifies herself as a part of the large Anglo-Argentine community in Argentina that came from the settlement of Welsh, Scottish, and English Europeans generations ago. There is a huge difference in the languages that she speaks with the different members of her family (9, 10). Though both of her parents were born and raised Argentine, she only speaks English with them; in contrast, she grew up speaking Spanish with her siblings “because Spanish was the cool language, so to speak... that’s what everyone spoke. That’s what your friends spoke.” Audrey starts laughing at the surprise in my voice and gives me an example of the language dynamics her family: “[My mother’s] brother that still lives in Argentina, I speak English if it’s just him and me. His wife is of Italian-Spanish family so she speaks Spanish. So, if the two of them [and I] are together we speak Spanish. When it’s just Uncle Tim and I we speak English. That’s just the way it is.”

“That’s just the way it is” seems to sum up most of Audrey’s multilingual experience. While her life seems exciting, to her, it’s simply quotidian. When asked if she ever notices her thoughts or dreams shifting from language to language, she looks at me funny, claiming she never really pays attention to that kind of thing (14, 15). However, her behavior does seem to change depending on the language she’s speaking (27, 20). “There’s different habits – in Argentina, you eat dinner much later than you do in the United States and almost always when you go out for dinner you will have an espresso after dinner. So, in Argentina, I will have an espresso after dinner, that’s the thing you do. I wouldn’t dream of having espresso after dinner over here.” She says it’s unclear whether this is due to the language or the culture. Audrey’s belief is that both are completely intertwined.

Audrey also claims that out of her multitude of languages, one does not stand out as dominant – then backs up, thinking (7). “When I do mental math, it tends to be in Spanish... I don’t even know [why], it was at some point I had to choose because the notation was different.” In Spanish, long division is done from bottom to top; Audrey shakes her head at me when I say division in English works from top to bottom. Then, a mischievous smirk: “And when I curse, I curse Spanish, but that was probably because my mother would wash out my mouth with soap if I had cursed in English” (16). She smiles fondly in thought around the rim of her tea mug. Since

she seems to have such a good grasp on her languages, I ask if she ever experienced mixing them up (17). Audrey immediately says she never mixes English and Spanish; it's not an issue. "I learned English and Spanish at the same time, you know, they have their own road." However, languages that she learned after her childhood seem to interact with each other depending on the order that they were learned. "One language will bubble up when you're trying to remember another, one will bubble up from below." She gives an example: "If I try and speak German, which is a language that I haven't spoken in a long time, Portuguese might bubble up because Portuguese was the language that I studied after German." Audrey continues to rather emphatically express that she wished she could take a linguistics course so she could figure this out; it seems to have a big impact on her life. "My theory is that they kind of install themselves on top of each other unless you make a distinct effort to keep them afloat." She points a stern finger in my direction with the instructions to figure this out in class by the end of the semester and report back to her. I salute with my mug.

We direct the conversation back towards her experiences with Spanish with a particular focus on the huge variety of Spanish across the world. When prompted, Audrey immediately laughs and says "it's hysterical." One of her favorite authors is from Spain; when she first picked up one of the author's books, she had no idea what a whole bunch of words meant. Another funny anecdote happened when she was in Houston for a wedding. There was a knock on her hotel door and in came the maid. "And I look at her and she looks like a little Mexican woman, so I say *hola* or *buenos días* or whatever. And she says to me '*Gusta que le vacíe la carpeta?*' And I'm looking at her going, I've spoken Spanish all of my life and I have no idea what this woman just said to me." We both take a moment to laugh. The scandalized look on Audrey's face is hilarious. "And then it dawned on me, she spoke some kind of hybrid, you know, Spanglish. *Vacíe* must be a vacuum, *la carpeta* is the carpet. Now in Argentina *la carpeta* is a folder and in some places, it's like an accordion folder. It is *not* a carpet," she spits with no small amount of derision (26). There is clearly a divide between the Spanish that this woman spoke and what Audrey calls her native language, so I ask her what her take was on other dialects. She waves her mug around in front of her, "You know, it's like a family that has genetic traits that get passed on and mutate... The Spanish in Columbia is *exquisite*, they speak this beautiful language. Cuba is miserable, they sound like they have a potato stuck in their mouth. And

Spanish in Puerto Rico – it's like they they're a caricature of themselves, like they can't pronounce certain letters.”

It turns out there is also a kind of hierarchy between these dialects in which some of them are more “respectable” than others. Audrey likens it to the class distinctions between different British accents. Even within Argentine Spanish there is a “high class” and “low class” Spanish – though Audrey is slightly embarrassed to admit it. “That’s how it is with language. No question, [wherever you are] you open your mouth and within two seconds people will place you for better or for worse. They will place you geographically, they will place you socially, there's all sorts of things, you know, without getting into what the person has to say.” This was especially relevant to her when she was living in Mexico with her husband and three sons. She describes how the corruption in the Mexican government is very visible, especially in the mundane details. “If I happened to be in a car accident, just by virtue of opening my mouth I knew that I was hosed. Because the Mexican was always going to be able to figure out the best way to bribe whomever needed to get bribed... I felt like I had one hand tied behind my back because I didn’t speak the *right* Spanish” (29, 32) Audrey rolls her eyes and takes another sip of tea.

Though there may be eye-roll-worthy incidents along the way, Audrey continues to express how much she appreciates being multilingual. Audrey’s thrill for language feels deeply ingrained in the experience of the related culture. However, she still holds very tightly to her Argentine roots (21). First and foremost, she is Argentine. “Most definitely, which is why I still hold that citizenship and not US.” She also identifies as Hispanic because, “if you hit me with a brick I’ll curse at you in Spanish” and Shakira is her happy music. “But you know, I do consider myself American. I am American, I was born in Argentina. Which is in America. There you go.” This is a very sharp point for her: “To this day, you’ll get me pissed off when people talk about America. America is a *continent*.” There is a lot of emphatic mug waving.

While her own culture seems definitional to her identity, Audrey delights in exploring the multitude of cultures around the world. This ability to hold on to her culture as an Argentine while still being able to embrace the cultures of others seems to be aided by her lingual knowledge. She has made seemingly innumerable friends through her travels and, smiling, recounts the fun of being able to speak multiple language with them. “I think it's kind of wonderful if someone shares your language because it's such a cultural context too” (28). When

asked if she felt there were any cons to her multilingualism, Audrey shakes her head (31). “I don’t think there’s any cons at all. I think it’s all pros. I think it enriches your life tremendously because I think every language has kind of cultural connotations. I think being able to read a book or an article in the original language is almost always superior to reading it, you know, in the translated version and I think that the language does reflect the culture.”

The interview ends with two empty cups of tea. My toes slowly uncurl from where they’ve been shoved into the cushions and Audrey stands, stretches, yawns. She’s off to go finish closing up the house in preparation for her trip to Brussels where she’ll spend months in yet another culture practicing one of her favorite languages. I grab the mugs and take them to the sink to wash when I start to hear someone singing an off-key Shakira song. While her linguistic ability is impressive, it is Audrey’s exploration of culture and her appreciation and acceptance of diversity that sets her apart as a true woman of the world.