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Linguistics 101

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Finding the Right Words: An interview with Itzél

Itzél is 22 years old, born in NYC, and grew up in Spanish Harlem. She currently lives in Philadelphia. She is fluent in both Spanish and English. She learned Spanish from birth and was later taught English in school. Itzél considers English to be more dominant at the present because she uses it to communicate in many aspects of her daily life. However, she uses Spanish to communicate with her mother and siblings and with some of her friends; she also uses it in the workplace fairly often. She now speaks English in her home, but spoke Spanish in her childhood home. This interview covers a variety of themes, with emphasis on the independent learning Itzél completed, the experience of judgement because of her bilingualism, and feeling a significant amount of responsibility to her family as a result of her English fluency.

Itzél was born in New York City and grew up in Spanish Harlem (1, 3). She currently lives in Philadelphia and is a Haverford House Fellow for the 2016-2017 year. Itzél graduated from Haverford College in 2016 and majored in Comparative Literature. Spanish and English are two languages that she is fluent in, having learned her first language—Spanish—from the time that she was “in the womb”, and continues to speak it today at 22 years old (2, 4). Itzél uses Spanish to communicate with her family, as that is the primary language spoken in her household (10). She learned her second language—English—from a young age in public school (5). Itzél is bilingual not by choice, but out of necessity. She was enrolled in bilingual classes where she received instruction in both English and Spanish when she first entered the school system. Around the time she turned 8 or 9 years old, she was moved to English-only classes. It was hard for her to keep up at first, because she was still learning how to read and write in Spanish. Itzél had to put in a lot of extra work outside of the classroom so that she would not fall behind, as there were many kids in her class and the teachers did not have the resources to provide the level of instruction that each student needed to thrive (12). To combat this, Itzél remembers going above and beyond the instruction that she received in school to become proficient in English. It was a solo effort because she could not ask her family for help as they do not speak English. She

would watch tv shows in English, like *Arthur* or other shows on PBS to practice speaking. She would also visit the library and check out children's books and then copy them, word-for-word, so that she could practice writing in English. Itzél did all of these things independently as a young child because there was no other option; she had no other choice but to learn English. Her experience, while rewarding, also meant that she had to conduct herself with a level of maturity and self-awareness that is uncommon for someone so young.

Itzél's identity as a bilingual individual is built upon the particular language that she chooses to use in each of her interactions, whether they be in personal or professional spheres. Itzél feels "very fluent" in both Spanish and English, and is able to converse freely in the two languages (6). In terms of language dominance, she maintains that it depends on the situation and her surroundings, and for the past few years, she has mostly spoken English (7). She attributes this to her time spent at Haverford, a place where English is the primary spoken language, as well as her current job where English is also the principal mode of communication (8). However, if she is with her mother or any one of her five siblings, she will speak Spanish (9). Now that she no longer lives in her childhood home but in a community house with five other recent Haverford graduates, Itzél continues to communicate predominantly in English (10). It is clear that the language she uses depends on her setting and the people that surround her, and is a significant aspect of Itzél's narrative as a bilingual person existing in a predominantly monolingual country. Furthermore, Itzél's language choice functions, in part, as a gatekeeper that separates two distinctive cultures that are central to Itzél's identity.

At times Itzél has accidentally mixed up both of her languages. Sometimes she will try to say something, but mix up the order of the words, as Spanish and English differ in their word order pattern. She goes on to say that "I also mix up my languages to jump back and forth between identities." (17) Being a Latina is an essential facet of her identity, and the use of Spanglish is a further aspect of her Latinidad. Itzél elaborates by stating "When I am speaking English with my Latino friends, I always want to include Spanish because I don't want to ever not include that part of me. Especially with other Latinos." She continues by adding, "And it's not because I feel pressured, but because I want them to know that I still feel connected to Mexico." Speaking Spanish is an important part of who she is as a Mexican-American, and she describes how the use of both languages to her is about "working through a duality" and that the

continued expression of her identity through the use of Spanish and English allows her to never leave each one of the cultures behind.

As a Mexican-American, Itzél has connections to both cultures (21). However, Itzél feels that she belongs more to Mexican culture, despite the fact that she now speaks English more often than Spanish. However, in reflecting on whether American culture accepts her she says, “I don’t feel like society sees me and thinks that my dominant language is English.” When speaking Spanish, she feels “rooted and grounded” in her upbringing. Her connection to Spanish culture is a combination of enjoying her Spanish roots but also feeling “pushed out” by American culture because she does not fit the traditional white American mold, and this causes her to retreat “back into my Spanish circle” at times. It becomes clear that Itzél has experienced differential treatment as a result of her bilingualism (32). She explains that she sometimes feels that people judge her based on her outward appearance, and expect that she will be unable to converse in English. It is a different story in her household, however. At home, her knowledge of English is valued because most of her family is monolingual. She feels a lot of responsibility, but also that she is an asset because she can use her English fluency to help her family. Itzél refers to herself as a “language broker” to describe her role as a translator or interpreter on behalf of her family. When she was still in the process of learning English, Itzél had to translate important documents for her family, and she felt obligated to give the best possible translation, even though this was not always feasible because she would come across words and concepts that she was unable to understand as a young child.

Itzél is also treated differently in her place of employment. She currently works at an organization that provides legal assistance to low-income populations, and her Spanish fluency is especially useful. Itzél generally enjoys using her Spanish to help clients; however, she sometimes feels that the other staff “unload their language burdens” on her because she is bilingual. Sometimes the staff assume that she is more available to complete language tasks because she is a native Spanish speaker.

As someone who assumes the role of an interpreter often, Itzél has experience with coming across words that exist in one of her languages but not the other. When this happens, she says she must “put a little bit more thought into finding the right words in that language. It is more than direct translation.” (26) It takes time because she wants to make sure that a particular word in a language is really getting the point across. For Itzél, it is important that she chooses the

words that most accurately represent what is being said because her translations have direct implications for the individuals they reflect, whether she is translating for her family or for clients.

Itzél summarizes her bilingual experience by stating, “It’s cool to be bilingual,” she pauses for a moment and adds, “but also tiring.” In saying this, Itzél chooses to frame her experience in a largely positive light, while still recognizing the tension that she feels in navigating the responsibilities of being bilingual.