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Bilingual identity: language and cultural shift in the experience of a Basque-Spanish immigrant to Australia

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Triunfos y tribulaciones de una bilingüe en Australia (Triumphs and tribulations of a bilingual in Australia)

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Introduction

This is a very personal account of a Spanish immigrant, Nerea, achieving bilingualism in Wollongong, NSW. The story raises questions of the complex development of identity, changing awareness of sociocultural practices in each language, and of the role played by attitudes in the surrounding community to a person's bilingualism. This article is in two parts: in the first part Nerea's story is told in her own voice, and in the second the authors connect Nerea's individual experience to wider social patterns concerning bilingualism, identity and aspects of recent immigration to Australia.

1. Nerea's story

I am a Basque-Spanish woman now living in Australia and raising two children. In Australia there are many cases like mine: a person who has migrated on her own and had poor English skills when she arrived in Australia. My first languages were Basque and Spanish.

After 20 years living here, I still feel the eternal identity issues every migrant does. However these identity issues were not totally new for me, being a Basque Spaniard. I was bilingual in Basque and Spanish until I was about 10 years old. I was born in Eibar, a town that became one of the most industrial towns in Spain in the fifties. For that reason it had a huge intake of 'Spanish' immigrants who came to get work, and who could not speak euskera [Basque]. Also in Franco's era it was illegal to conduct schools in euskera and the official language was Spanish. When I was six years old, I was the only child in my class of 50 students who could speak euskera. I used to speak the euskera of Eibar, the town where I was born. When Basque became an official language, along with Spanish, in the Basque country, the Basque dialects became one language (for practical and official reasons) called euskera batua (Unified Basque) but it was not the language that linked me with my parents and grandparents - that was either the euskera spoken in Eibar or Spanish. The Basque I had to learn in school did not carry the emotional resonance that linked me with the beautiful language of my family, and for me became a kind of commodity - something I needed in order to pass school proficiency tests rather than something linked with emotions and feelings. Still, one aspect of being Basque, is that you do not need to be able speak euskera to identify yourself as a Basque. So, I am Basque although now I would not be able to hold a conversation in euskera. The identity issues I had with English were, of course, totally different and they were and are constantly remarked on to me by others. People react with surprise or even look alarmed by my accent, ask me for repetition or simply get nervous. I have observed some changes lately, to my surprise, quite a lot of people commenting about how nice is my English accent! I certainly never expected that, I always considered it as a kind of handicap that made it difficult for people to understand me. Because of it I always have believed that accent is important in relation to my identity.

In considering becoming an Australian citizen I wonder: Does becoming an Australian citizen mean becoming Australian? Because I don't feel Australian. I feel Basque-Spanish. It is normal for second-generation immigrants in Australia to consider themselves or to be considered by others as Italians, French, Spanish, Lebanese or any other nationality, despite being born in Australia, and having a very Aussie accent.

I find it disturbing how in my 20 years of living in Australia my own identity and often my self-esteem has been influenced and conditioned by the way I have been perceived by others, including by my kids.

Even so, I am better positioned compared with other migrants because although Wollongong itself is ethnically diverse, many ethnic groups are concentrated in some suburbs, and we live in a suburb with few migrants where the vast majority of our neighbours are monolingual Anglo-Australians. As a consequence, for school children of our suburb these days it is 'curious' or even 'exotic' to come from a different country and to speak a different language. Considering the importance of socio-economic circumstances probably the attitudes of their peers might be very different, and more negative, if we were living in a different area.

What about the attitude that a person has toward his or her language? When I came to Australia my English was poor but I did not see this as a handicap. I accepted this as a natural state of being a foreigner in a new country, but looked forward to learning a second language fluently. I did not feel embarrassed about it. I was not aware of the word 'wog' (derogatory Australian term for an immigrant from Southern Europe or the Middle East) and its meaning until two years later. I was and am proud of my origins, and I have always spoken to my children in Spanish.

My very first year I went to Centrelink¹ to apply for a position in the Australian public service. I asked for the forms in my broken English to an employee who told me tactfully not to even try. He certainly thought that a person with difficulties with English could not pass any exams and probably he was equating language ability with intelligence as I have observed several times in other situations. I sat two of those tests, and in one of them I came in the top 20 - there were around 500 entrants - which made me feel very happy. Later on I was phoned by a woman to tell me that I could get a job as a public servant due to my high score, and she could not hide her irritation for we could hardly communicate.

I then realised that people were equating my level of English language with either my status or intelligence. Soon I observed that even my kids were reaching the same conclusion for they would sometimes tell me that "I could not even talk properly" when they wanted to avoid my interfering in their homework, (usually with the purpose to avoid doing it). We went through times when my daughter would say "Mum, please speak in English" when I collected her from school, and she would refuse to answer me in Spanish. She would apologise for me to her friends, saying "You know, my mum is Spanish, she does not talk English very well".

Nevertheless, things do change and my impression is that things have changed in recent years, that many Australians have been opening up to the world, and become more interested in other cultures and have developed positive attitudes towards the most 'settled' migrants, such as Italians, Greeks or Spanish. I think that one of the reasons I have been accepted in my suburb is that I have never lost my positive attitude towards my mother tongue, and there has been a positive attitude developing towards it in the street where we live. We have many friends in the neighbourhood, have barbecues often and everybody has learnt a few words in Spanish, including the children. Most of them will greet me in Spanish, a few of them have expressed their wish to learn it and my children now see this as an acceptance and motive to be proud of their mother's first language. Remarkably, as my daughter neared adulthood, she began to regard my ability to speak Spanish as 'cool' and 'exotic' and something that made our family special.

Changing cultures

However, something I did not expect to happen is that I too was changing due to the influence of English-speaking culture in my life. It seems that my mannerisms, my way of interacting in Spanish and my Spanish ways were changing to some of the Australian ways.

On my second visit to our relatives in Spain my transference of English-speaking culture was clear when I asked my brother-in-law at a family meal:

Nerea: Fernando me pasas el pan por favor?
[Fernando could you pass me the bread please?]
Fernando: *(with a formal bow as he offered the bread)*
Es todo un placer
[It's a real pleasure]

In this interchange Fernando mocked the exaggerated formality of my request. In most of Spain we ask for such everyday things in the imperative, and do not use 'please', or the person's name, or a questioning intonation, hence: 'pásame el pan' [pass me the bread] is the normal way to ask. It was clear that I had transferred my second language norms concerning table manners to my first language.

I have often thought of myself as a different person in Spanish and in English, especially at the beginning of my life in Australia. In Spain, I considered myself a very social person, always feeling at ease in social interaction and with a liking for quick jokes or witty remarks. Suddenly, in Australia, in English I was this person who could not say anything but basic comments, unable to express in words more than a child could. I felt like a bad caricature of myself, with a silly smile on my face hardly understanding what was going on.

I went to intensive English classes where I met a group of Chileans. They must have thought I was the most talkative person in the world for I could not stop talking a lot and very fast, for the rest of my communication in my life was exclusively English. That had the advantage that I learned English fast.

At the same time, three years later in my first visit to Spain I found, too, that my ability to interrupt in Spanish and raise my voice in order to be heard was decreasing alarmingly for I could not get a chance to get into the conversation while 'waiting for my turn'. My friends after a while would comment "Nerea why are you so quiet?" One of my best friends in Spain noticed some 'change' in me expressing it with this sentence: "Nerea, te has vuelto como...light" [Nerea, you have become sort of ... soft], meaning (by her use of the English borrowing "light") 'soft or having less character' (as in "light" cigarettes).

Another example of the different ways in which culture is expressed through language, again concerning requests, happened when Angela was about 7 years of age.

Angela: May I have a glass of juice please?
Nerea: Claro cariño pero no me lo pidas 'por favor' que soy tu madre
[Of course darling, but don't say 'please' because I am your mother]

I of course was surprised - in my Spanish mind - by what I considered too formal a request, but it must have been confusing for Angela. Imagine, then, the much greater confusion of Angela's English-speaking friends when they asked me for a drink and I would tell them, with a big smile on my face *not* to say 'please'!

As I unconsciously absorbed more English-speaking cultural norms, my linguistic parenting practices changed accordingly. A typical interchange with Luca (the younger of my two children) at the same age shows how I had by this time adopted the Australian habit of expecting the children to say 'please':

Luca: Mum, I'm thirsty I want a drink

Nerea: Where are our manners? Where is the magic word?

Changing language

My Spanish is changing: it is showing influences from English, but further, my mother-tongue vocabulary is not expanding as it should with time and experience. For example, almost everything I have learnt about computers has been in English, and as a consequence my Spanish vocabulary related to computers is almost non-existent although in English it is fluent.

I believe that humour is often closely bound up with language and with your personal self, and one has to master language very well to reach this point. Also it may happen that you understand the language associated with some jokes but you don't find them funny because you have not grown up in that country and you have not had access to the information and cultural awareness needed to understand certain jokes. You feel like a caricature of yourself, unable to make jokes and express yourself with humour as you do in your own language. You feel like a poor version of yourself until you reach that level that allows you to be yourself. It has taken me almost 20 years!!!

I think that someone who moves easily through languages and cultures has a different worldview from someone limited to a single perspective of the world. I am now delighted at being able to move between Spanish and English easily, although of course, more easily in Spanish, but I think that it has opened my mind, made it easier for me to understand different views and has made me more tolerant.

2. Bilingualism, immigration and identity

There are many paths to bilingualism: through migration, being a refugee, growing up as a second or third generation migrant in a majority culture, or growing up in a bilingual community. Nerea became bilingual as a result of voluntary migration from Spain to Australia. These circumstances involve different choices and different experiences from those of, for example, growing up in Wales as a Welsh/English bilingual or in New York as part of a Puerto Rican family bilingual in Spanish and English. Nerea's experiences, then, are part and parcel of the story of Australia's migration history, of the particular ethnic, social and cultural milieu of Wollongong and of the attitudes prevailing there. It is worth therefore giving a brief snapshot of the sociolinguistic context as background to understanding Nerea's personal journey.

Becoming bilingual in a situated social context

Wollongong is a city of 200,000 people, set in an extraordinarily beautiful location between the Pacific Ocean and a steep sandstone escarpment rising 1000 metres and clothed in thick bush with patches of lush rainforest. Located 80 km south of Sydney, it is best known for its coal mines and its steel works, and these industries have given the city its blue-collar identity. Wollongong's population is extremely varied ethnically and linguistically, since the city's steelworks attracted thousands of migrants from Southern Europe, the Baltic States and the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s. Australia now identifies itself as a multicultural country, but in the not-so-distant past boasted a White Australia Policy, and the early immigrants described here drew derogatory names

such as ‘wogs’ ‘reffos’ (refugees) and ‘Balts’ (from the Baltic States). Before more inclusive policies were introduced in the 1970s, immigrants were expected to learn English quickly and assimilate to white Anglo-Australia, which was not known for embracing cultural diversity, or for valuing foreign languages.

The Spanish-speaking community tends to have a high proportion of older people, since there has been little immigration from Spanish-speaking countries in recent years, and most of that has been from Central and South America rather than from Spain. Residents of the suburb where Nerea lives, though, are almost exclusively English-speaking of Anglo-Australian heritage. Nerea, then, while a well-educated and well-travelled voluntary migrant, could be positioned, on her arrival in Australia, by those who chose to do so, as one of the great wave of lowly-paid manual workers who rarely managed to learn English beyond a basic level, huddled in ethnic enclaves, and could easily be written off as just another ‘wog’. The mere possession of an ‘accent’ in Wollongong can conjure up this identity. Added to this is that native English-speaking Australians rarely learn a second language, and this tends to lead to a ‘monolingual mindset’ (Clyne 2005, Ellis 2006) whereby those who do speak another language are somewhat ‘othered’.

While Nerea’s first language in the sense of emotional investment was Basque, the province’s adoption of Euskera batua introduced a version for which she held no ‘affiliation’ (Rampton 1990), and as an adult it was Spanish which carried her emotional heritage.

Bilinguals who feel comfortable with both languages and cultures can see the world from two different perspectives, for with each language go “...ways of understanding and interpreting the world, ideas and beliefs, ways of thinking and drinking, crying and loving, eating and caring, ways of joking and mourning” (Baker and Prys-Jones 1998:7) This can help them to be more inclined to understand, accept and enjoy diversity. Competence in two languages does not automatically lead to such attitudes, but it does provide the precondition for them (Liddicoat 2002).

Identity

Identity as enacted in language is indeed complex and multi-dimensional (see for example Norton Peirce 1995). One of the few studies in Australia to explore the views of bilingual families on growing up with two languages shows how identity negotiation in everyday lived experiences, such as those described by Nerea, emphasise its nature as “transformative, changeable and hybrid” (Jones Diaz, 2005). Nerea has moved full-circle from being a competent, literate adult in Spain, to being a “poor migrant” and an “embarrassing Mum” back to being a “cool, exotic mother” and bilingual citizen of the world in the eyes of her children and her neighbours. Her inability to express complex thoughts and to engage in social banter in the early years trapped her within an identity constructed by others and one quite alien to her own strong sense of self, of language, culture and worth as a human being. Bialystok expresses the central role of language as determining how we are perceived of by others in the following way:

[Language]... stands as the expression of the individual – I am what I speak. We believe this because speaking is so fundamental to our constructed identity. We describe people in terms of their interactive discourse styles – gregarious, taciturn, and inscrutable” (Bialystok 2001:239-240).

Nerea, in speaking English soon after her arrival, was made to feel insecure because of her faulty pronunciation, inappropriate words and inability to understand the colloquial Australian English of her Wollongong neighbours. According to Spolsky (Baker 1993:83), the social context of second language learning has two influences: firstly on language attitudes (which in turn leads to

motivation within the individual) and secondly on learning opportunities (e.g. in formal education and informally in the community).

Nerea, confident in her own linguistic and social skills, was able over time to assert her social identity and develop an 'emergent voice' (Winter and Pauwels 2007:187) in the same way as did the migrant mothers in Norton Peirce's (1995) study. She continued to be proud of her language and origins, ensured the children were exposed to books and videos in Spanish, and took them to visit their grandparents and other relatives in Spain as often as finances allowed. In time she has won over her neighbours in quite a remarkable way: she has re-asserted her identity as a savvy, competent bilingual.

Edwards (2003:41) reminds us that "beyond utilitarian and unemotional instrumentality, the heart of bilingualism is belonging". Hence losing one language and culture means losing the potential for belonging - not only to language and country but to extended networks of family and friends. Nerea's triumph has been to maintain Spanish as an important part of her identity while achieving the ability to live much of her life in English: truly belonging in two worlds.

Endnotes

1. Centrelink is the Australian government welfare agency, which also used to act as a job broker.

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