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Not Totally Lost in Translation

In my personal narrative, I tell the story of how I came to unwittingly learn all the names of my animals in Spanish and how I finally learned my animal names in English. I explore the concept and question of how one can know what something is and the name of it, but stillnot know what something is and the name of it in another language. A good example of this enigma is in my own experience when “The picture [on the flashcard] showed me that what I saw [a cat], Still had four paw, And still went ‘meow,’ Even though it was a ‘Wow,’ For me to finally see, That I knew what a cat was but that it translated differently [where before I knew ‘cat’ as ‘gato,’ I finally realized that I knew what the creature was, even if I did not know the name in any particular language]” (Maynard, 2-3). I knew the name “gato” described a “cat.” Even though I knew of the feline species, the names were confusing. That did not alter the fact that I knew what I knew. I just had to learn a new name for what I know in order to communicate my knowledge to others. One can know something in one language, but not know it in another language, while continuing to hold to the understanding of the term in a precise, conceptual way (Maynard, 5-6). The exchange of knowledge in this story strikes at the heart of the bilingualism practiced in South Texas. The use of English or Spanish and the disdain for mixing the languages destroys the possibility of effective communication based on *both* languages. Suresh Canagarajah, in his book, *Translingual Practice*, confirms “the power of the monolingual orientation in social and educational institutions today” (Canagarajah, 1). The ability to express oneself in two languages *at the same time* goes against educational and social practice. Canagarajah further explains the use of more than one language at the same time through the writings of one of his students, Buthainah. She combines Arabic, English, and French and expressed that “she considered a merging of all of her linguistic repertoires as most effectively representing her identities and objectives” (Canagarajah, 2). This scenario plays out daily in countless ways in schools, businesses, and conversations in South Texas. Canagarajah’s term “translingual” encompasses the concept that “communication transcends individual languages” (Canagarajah, 6). The concept of translingualism would benefit this area by removing the boundaries that bilingualism creates.

The bilingual situation undoubtedly occurs on borders around the world and is different from international crossroads like Hong Kong. The “gato” episode confused my teachers. I spoke to other people in English and appeared to be comfortable with it. The idea that I did not know common animals in English made them wonder about what my language orientation was. If I were truly Spanish dominant, I should go to the “bilingual education section.” This is an educational code for classes in Spanish as many local children speak only Spanish. Their confusion worsened when they observed that I was dark-haired and dark-eyed. I was an enigma. “Even today I live knowing, That the cards she’d been showing, Were my first experiences with another ‘lengua,’ And it would never be quite the same, huh?” (Maynard, 8-9).

Canagarajah observed an association of monolingual ideologies that “suppressed” local translingualism in his native Sri Lanka (Canagarajah, 18). This idea is born out in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. In reality, Spanish was the dominant language among the Europeans as the Native Americans were displaced in the period from the 1500’s to the 1800’s. Therefore, there is a three-hundred year history of Spanish dominance. The region belonged to Spain until it changed to the hands of Mexico when they won their independence from Spain. When Texas won its independence from Mexico, Spanish continued to dominate. In the early 1900’s, development by American businessmen changed the main language to English. From this point on, there started a deliberate shift to do all school and government functions in English. This is in line with Caraganajah’s “power of monolingual orientation” argument (Canagarajah, 1). (This is America; speak English.) Important forms were available only in English. My mother was prohibited from speaking Spanish at school under threat of serious punishment. The school *especially* continued to operate in English. Thus, the Spanish I did know dwindled away over time, “Though it sounds trite, the penguin took flight. The things that we have known, Sometimes stay in the past like a stone.” (Maynard, 13-14).

The part that I did not previously express relates to the social impact of fluency in one language or the other. This area of the country suffers from multiple assumptions made about a person based on their dominant language. Exclusively English speaking people, especially those from other parts of the United States, encounter a predominance of Spanish in the local population. The problem concerns people that are self-conscious about their ignorance of Spanish and are unable or unwilling to attempt to communicate if you cannot talk to them in English. The assumption then becomes that the person that does not speak English is illiterate or uneducated. These people trap themselves into dealing only with the English speaking minority and adopt a sense of false arrogance about themselves in relation to the local population. This attitude is detrimental and demeaning. They are set apart by their unwillingness to communicate in any other way than their native tongue. The segment of this group that is hard to understand is the few German, Eastern European, and Vietnamese who had to learn English to survive and feel that others should have to do the same. The most dangerous assumption that English speakers make is that anyone that cannot speak English is an illegal immigrant. In fact, I have been told by older residents that land owners and farmers purposely did not teach any of the migrant workers English, so that the workers never completely understood how they got paid or the conditions in which they worked. Although most Valley residents hate this attitude, it is rare that anyone says anything to this clique. Therefore, they continue to function in their increasingly closed circles. They represent one “monolingual orientation.”

Exclusively Spanish speaking people comprise the other “monolingual orientation.” There are large numbers of this group in the Valley. They move easily in social situations, stores, churches, and restaurants. Some of these represent “the old guard.” If you do not speak Spanish, they simply avoid you. Many of them do indeed speak English, but avoid doing so because they are self-conscious that they are not native speakers. Canagarajah observes that “norms typically come from the native speaker’s use of the language” making them unwilling to *try* to communicate (Canagarajah, 1). Again, they restrict their activity to linguistically comfortable situations. This group is composed of many lower and middle class members. The other part of this group is a mix of professors and executives from other Spanish speaking countries that are here *so that they can speak their native tongue*. Some of these people have worked in Europe or Asia, and prefer to come to the Valley just for this purpose. One set of this group come from Mexico, especially Mexico City, where they feel that they are the pinnacle of culture. They believe that Mexico City is the center of culture in this hemisphere and that Mexico City was a metropolis centuries before New York “grew out of the swamp.” They do not tolerate non-Spanish speakers. Another example are bankers working for a bank that owns the largest bank in Mexico. Their purpose in South Texas in to facilitate trade with Mexico, and the fact that you do not speak Spanish virtually excludes you from their business and social world.

My point is that the people of the region would benefit immensely by adopting a “translingual” approach as defined by Canagarajah. It appears that the monolingual orientation has changed into two camps that refuse to see the benefit on a daily basis for “communication [that] transcends individual languages” (Canagarajah, 6). The time has come for all of those concerned to make a change. The basic understanding that must come about is explained by Canagarajah, “Languages are not necessarily at war with each other; they complement each other in communication. Therefore, we are to reconsider the dominant understanding that one language detrimentally ‘interferes’ with the learning and use of another. The influences of one language on the other can be creative, enabling, and offer possibilities for voice” (Canagarajah, 6). Since this is truly a game-changing concept of enormous consequences, I will consider examples related to one of my primary interests which is advertising. Mixed English and Spanish messages effectively transmit their point in billboards. An insurance company has an entire series of purposely mixed ads to reach both groups. One of these ads claims that their insurance is “More reliable than a molcajete.” A molcajete is a utensil for grinding spices that is usually made of solid stone and is frequently passed down from generation to generation. A successful exterminator coined the phrase, “Buenos noches (Good Night), Roaches!” Homophones are also used. An ad for World Cup Soccer uses a famous sports announcer’s cry of “Goooooooooal!” which is essentially the same in Spanish and English. A Coca-Cola bottle sitting in a bucket of ice takes advantage of the recognition of the internationally known product (especially when it is over 100˚!)

One step that everyone should take would be to get over the idea that they sound incompetent when they use a language that makes them uncomfortable. As Canagarajah demonstrated, there are different ways to communicate without the usual boundaries. He uses Buthainah to show that many people are made of a mixture of languages (Canagarajah, 1-2). The people of the Valley need to grasp this concept as the vast majority of people function in two languages every day. All English or all Spanish is outdated.

The Valley could also develop polyglot dialogue. Canagarajah shows effective communication between Rajani and his mother with one speaking in one language and the other answering in a different language. Their knowledge of the other language is enough to carry on a conversation (Canagarajah, 4-5). After years of being exposed to a language, some words and phrases become familiar. Native speakers hesitate to admit that they understand a conversation because they do not want to admit that they do not understand *all* of the conversation. It is considered socially incorrect if you cannot answer in the same language. This is another local habit that must change.

People’s embarrassment over mixing languages prevents them from using them even though they are usually understood. Buthainah combines languages and apparently upsets her other teachers, but her peers understand her meaning (Canagarajah, 2). The song from M.I.A., which is very diverse in its words, gets the message across to a wide audience (Canagarajah, 2-4). My point is that you can try to communicate using mixed languages and you will probably be more successful than you think. The hard part is getting people to try.

Business is one of the few places where general communication is important. We should follow their lead in supporting the use of *both* languages. As we see, there are many ways to work toward a translingual orientation. As we look forward to the future, new businesses come to the area. The arrival of Indians, Filipinos, and Chinese to do business in the Valley has changed the usual language conflicts. Adopting a more open and cosmopolitan attitude will undoubtedly benefit everyone involved and put us on track to move ahead in the future. The thing to remember is that “communication transcends individual languages” (Canagarajah, 6). Even though this may be true, I still have my concerns, exactly how much, or how far, does it truly transcend?

Works Cited

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