

The Beauty of Being Bilingual

By Natalia Sylvester Sept. 20, 2019

My parents refused to let my sister and me forget how to speak Spanish by pretending they didn't understand when we spoke English. Spanish was the only language we were allowed to speak in our one-bedroom apartment in Miami in the late 1980s. We both graduated from English as a second language lessons in record time as kindergartners and first graders, and we longed to play and talk and live in English as if it were a shiny new toy.

"No te entiendo," my mother would say, shaking her head and shrugging in feigned confusion anytime we slipped into English. My sister and I would let out exasperated sighs at having to repeat ourselves in Spanish, only to be interrupted by a correction of our grammar and vocabulary after every other word. One day you'll thank me, my mother retorted.

That day has come to pass 30 years later in ordinary places like Goodwill, a Walmart parking lot, a Costco Tire Center.

I'm most thankful that I can speak Spanish because it has allowed me to help others. There was the young mother who wanted to know whether she could leave a cumbersome diaper bin aside at the register at Goodwill while she shopped. The cashier shook her head dismissively and said she didn't understand. It wasn't difficult to read the woman's gestures — she was struggling to push her baby's carriage while lugging the large box around the store. Even after I told the cashier what the woman was saying, her irritation was palpable.

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The air of judgment is one I've come to recognize: How dare this woman not speak English, how dare this other woman speak both English and Spanish. It was a small moment, but it speaks to how easy it would have been for the cashier to ignore a young Latina mother struggling to care for her child had there not been someone around to interpret. "I don't understand," she kept saying, though the mother's gestures transcended language. *I choose not to understand* is what she really meant.

Those of us who grew up bilingual understand the complexities of holding onto and embracing either language. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez recently [said](#) on Twitter, "Growing up, Spanish was my first language — but like many 1st generation Latinx Americans, I have to continuously work at it & improve. It's not perfect."

In the Spanish spoken by the children of immigrants, you'll hear the echoes of cousins laughing at our accents when we visited them in Latin America. If you go back one generation, you'll hear stories of people like my in-laws, whose teachers in Florida beat them for speaking in school the language they spoke at home. Go back yet another generation and you'll hear of the [state-sanctioned racial terror](#) inflicted on residents of Mexican descent in Texas in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

On videos circulating on social media you'll hear Americans harassing Spanish-speakers at [supermarkets](#) and [restaurants](#). This language of xenophobia and white supremacy is spoken fluently by [our own president](#), and is at the root of why generations of Latinx Americans' relationship with Spanish is [laced with pain](#).

Those whose parents tried to shield them from discrimination by not passing it on are often expected to be fluent in a language they never had the chance to forget. Those of us who managed to hold on to it, despite the pressures to assimilate, know that our imperfect Spanish is a privilege we are often shamed for both inside and outside of our communities. And those of us who speak only Spanish are too often dismissed and worse, targeted

— by women pushing shopping carts, by ICE raids, by gunmen with anti-immigrant manifestoes. Their terror makes victims of us all.

A few weeks before the election in 2016, a woman at a Walmart parking lot in Manor, Tex., ran to the tent where I was helping to register voters; she was in tears because her car had been stolen. In a town that's nearly 50 percent Latinx, none of the police officers on site could understand her. As she filed her police report, with me as an interpreter, I noticed how they made almost no eye contact with her. I was the one they could understand, so they saw only me. She confided that her immigration papers were in the car.

How do you translate fear to those you cannot trust?

At a Costco Tire Center in Texas this week, a woman asked the man who had just helped me whether he spoke Spanish. He answered no, flatly. I volunteered to interpret. As she reached for her membership card, a familiar image in her wallet, her green card, caught my eye. I recognized it from the thick magnetic strip in the back, the way it gleamed bluish-black.

I found myself interpreting her words verbatim, forgetting to switch from the first person to the third. "The car is under my daughter's name," I said. In her face I saw my friends, my mother, my grandmother and me, each of us with different degrees of Spanish and English, all rooted in a desire to feel accepted and understood.

I used to think that being bilingual is what made me a writer, but more and more I see it's deeper than that. It's the constant act of interpreting. The journeying back and forth. The discovery that language, and the stories it carries, is not a straight path. Those of us who've served as interpreters in everyday life know it's a bittersweet privilege. You find truths in the in-between spaces of language, but never the right words to express them. You hear the sound of someone being heard in your voice, and the sound of someone being unseen in the silence. You speak of simple things, hard things and joyous things, all diluted by the separation from their source. It

will never seem fair that a person's words are not enough.

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