

STET | Speaking in tongues



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“Le Paradise n’est-ce pas artificiel
but spezzato, apparantly it exists
only in fragments unexpected excellent sausage,
the smell of mint, for example, Ladro the night cat ...”
—Ezra Pound, “The Pisan Cantos”

When linguists use the term “code-switching,” they mean something very specific — the fluid motion back and forth between two or more languages with which the speaker (and possibly the audience) is at least functionally familiar, if not fluent.

I’m thinking about this while I’m sitting on an orange IKEA sofa in my flat in Friedrichshain, in what used to be East Germany, watching *Dexter*, an American TV series about a morally righteous serial killer. The series is set in Miami, Florida, one of the great code-switching capitals of the world, and sure enough, the feisty Cuban-American police lieutenant has just said something like, “Oye, siéntate my friend. Hay que hablar contigo and it’s important.” My German boyfriend gets up and starts walking to the kitchen. He says, in English, “Do you want a glass of wine?” “The riesling?” I request. And then he uses one of my favorite German words. He says, “Genau.”

Genau. Exactly. Precisely. Yes. Cool. Totes. Yep. Genau.

Code-switching is different from borrowing. Borrowing is when a language (say, English) finds a tasty little morsel of vocab and appropriates it for the lexicon, without changing the borrowed word or the language in any appreciable way. Faux pas, cliché. Gesundheit. A lot of English words get borrowed into other languages, of course. “Text,” for instance, as both a noun and a verb and relating quite specifically to mobile phones, but not to a written document such as this one. And if, in Berlin, someone is actually sorry, they’ll say, “Entschuldigung.” I’m sorry, excuse me, beg pardon. If they feel

they *should* say they're sorry but they aren't really sorry (and anyone who rides a bicycle in Berlin has encountered this a few times) they'll just say, "Sorry." In English. Apparently the Anglophone world has given the strong impression that our apologies aren't entirely sincere.

Code-switching is also different from pidgin, wherein two (or possibly more) speakers share no common language, so they try to communicate by forming a new third language.

The abrupt shift in setting in this paragraph keeps the reader on her toes. —Ed.

I'm sitting at a picnic bench in northern Argentina, on the border with Brazil. It's a beautiful spring night in September, and the air is rich with smells — the wet red earth under our feet, the heavy rubbery green foliage around the patio clearing, the steaks and sausages grilling on the *parilla*, the tangy red wine in several glasses on the table. Our merry company includes two lanky young Germans, both of whom speak English, one of whom also speaks Spanish; two Americans, one of whom also speaks Spanish and — less well — Italian (that's me, by the way) and an ex-Army saxophone player teaching English in Brazil, who also speaks Portuguese. There are two very beautiful Brazilian women, one supermodel-thin and the other with a shape and voice that would make a perfect cello jealous, who speak only Portuguese, and one kind of scrawny but very smartly-dressed Brazilian fellow, a doctor, who also speaks some Spanish, as well as a Swiss rock climber who speaks no Spanish or Portuguese but does speak German, French, Italian, and a little heavily-accented English. Then there are four handsome young Argentine guys, three of them abundantly hair-gelled and the other with perfect Justin Bieber bangs, one of whom also speaks English and one of whom also speaks Italian and one of whom also speaks Portuguese. A fox, a goose, and a bag of grain have to get across the river in a boat that can only carry two at a time.

Fortunately, most of our languages have enough cognates, so we can be reasonably successful in what theorist Roman Jakobson calls the "referential function" of language. Salt, *salz*, *sal*, *sale*, *sel*. Wine, *wein*, *vin*, *vinho*, *vin*. And so in trying to reach through a babble of languages for something new, we somehow get back to the root of things.

Genau. You bet. Right on. Sure thing. Or just: Word.

About that boat. With the fox, goose, and grain. We were all there in that forest that night because we were going to visit the massive *cataratas* of Iguazú the following day. I prefer the word *cataratas* to the English "waterfall": it seems more onomatopoeic, more apt for describing the sheet of floodplain plummeting 300 feet along the two-mile hem of cliff separating the upper and lower Iguazú River. Famously, when Eleanor Roosevelt saw Iguazú for the first time, she said, "Poor, poor Niagara." The best way to see this monumental gush of river is to get into a boat with your heart pounding from your ankles to your sinuses, knowing full well that the notion of surviving a capsized boat into the bouldered churn

is just laughable, and allow yourself and your cheery fellow travelers to be expertly navigated up the river. The river has some strident opinions about where the boat should go, though it's no match for the good-natured and exceedingly watchful captain and crew, who bank the boat around first Scylla and then Charybdis, until we're sitting in the weighty mist coming off the waterfalls that are still many, many meters away. And then they drive you into them.

A counterpoint (or sometimes complement) to Jakobson's "referential function" of language is what he calls the "[poetic function](#)" of language. They aren't mutually exclusive, but the poetic function of language is not about communication. It's about language as a pure material. Perhaps this is why poets are among the most notorious code-switchers. The *Cantos* of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" are good examples, frustrating and bewildering undergraduates for decades with their seemingly snobbish hodgepodge of languages alive and dead. But language isn't always about clarity of expression. It's about magic. That feeling of recognition you get, when someone says something you might not exactly understand or feel able to paraphrase, and yet it makes perfect sense. (These, by the way, are the kinds of thoughts I have while I'm in a boat on a river zooming towards what I can only assume is yet another bad decision.)

Mixing argument and personal story can make both more compelling. Especially when the latter has a (in this case, literal) cliffhanger. —Ed.

Around me, people are shrieking happily in, like, a dozen different languages, only two of which I really know, but of course, I understand them all perfectly. Because that's not really when we need language the most. Sometimes I think we need language most when we're alone, in the quiet chamber of our own thoughts. And there, too, it doesn't necessarily have to refer to anything. It can come in fragmentary glimpses of our own perception, a kind of self-overhearing. What language do you think in? Cataratas. Or just as you're about to pass through a fifty-foot veil of mist into the thunderous unknown, a deep and wordless inhale.

My friend sitting next to me in the boat turns and says, "So, you ready for this?" I think, What the fuck. I say, "Como siempre."

Born ready. Sure thing. Porque no? Genau.

Now, let us return to the subject at hand. For neither pidgin nor code-switching should be mistaken for creole, which is when two languages merge to become a third. We most often associate these languages, today, with colonialism. There are French-based creoles in Louisiana, Haiti, Quebec. There are English-based creoles in Jamaica, India.

An abstract or technical topic can be made more relatable with language that is both casual and visual.

—Ed.

But if you go even further back, you might be able to argue that English itself is a kind of creole. It only really became the language we understand now during the Early Modern period, roughly around the time of Henry VIII and his impressive daughter, Elizabeth I. Once upon a time — think *Beowulf* here — the major language of what we now call England was Old English, or Anglo-Saxon (the hyphen suggesting its own creole roots, perhaps), a Germanic language belonging to the image you have in your head right now of pale-bearded warrior-types girded in stiff leather, wearing battered metal helmets and wielding corroded iron swords and axes. But in 1066, William the Conqueror beat those guys back and took charge of most of the island, and the language of nobility, aristocracy, power, and governance became Norman French, a Latinate language from within the bounds of the old Roman Empire. Over the centuries, the language of the Anglo-Saxon subjects and their Norman French rulers, like their cultures and bloodlines and whatnot, began to merge. Eventually, it would become Early and then Late Middle English, and with the emergence of Middle English as a literary language (thanks mostly to Geoffrey Chaucer, who wrote his *Canterbury Tales*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *Dream of the Rood*, and more in Middle English) the idiom eventually standardized, which of course eventually allowed for its evolution into Early Modern English. The poets writing during this period of linguistic transition from Middle to Early Modern English weren't just changing their literary tradition; they were changing their own language.

Here are a few words we still use that appear nowhere else before they appear in Chaucer's writings: bagpipe, clasp, knob, pardoner, whistling, funeral, intellect, cinnamon, sack, bribe, muse, seriously, victorious, caterwaul, lure, laureate, gaze, amble, resound, the phrase "thick and thin," and of course, magic. There are scores of others, including the word "score."

And even now, owing to its origins, we have two words for an awful lot of stuff — and still, after all these centuries, the word deriving from the Anglo-Saxon will sound coarser to us, while its Latinate synonym, from the aristocratic Norman French, will sound more highfalutin. So if you're just talking to a friend, you might say, "I'm gonna try." But if you're writing to a boss, a politician, a prospective client, you'll almost certainly choose, instead, "I will attempt." Right?

Repetition is most effective when it includes variation. —Ed.

Ja. Si. Oui. Genau. Claro.

And this is where it gets a little tricky. Because even though linguists are fairly strict with their definition of code-switching, there are anthropologists and sociologists and philosophers and theorists who persuasively suggest that you can code-switch within a language depending on who you happen to be talking with, or your intention, based on relationships and personal and communal identities. Some

recent sociolinguistic studies suggested that people have a few basic reasons for code-switching. For one thing, we want to fit in, so we often code-switch as a way of showing solidarity. We sometimes code-switch subconsciously in this kind of situation. I'd intuitively choose the word "try," for instance, when I'm sitting on the Greyhound bus out of Salt Lake City, talking to the friendly trucker next to me who's deadheading back from LA to Indianapolis. We talked for, like, two hours about how to make the perfect Bolognese, and disagreed only about whether or not the milk was really important. But I'd probably intuitively go with "attempt" if I were asking a question of a panelist at an academic conference. Well, depending on the panel. People code-switch for all kinds of contexts, including social class, age, race, and other kinds of origin. A lot of us have identities that belong to more than one discourse. Of course, the darker side of solidarity is less about belonging and more about hiding. Or perhaps more aptly, passing.

When I first arrived in Buenos Aires, I had trouble understanding most of what Alejandra was saying to me. I understood she was telling me she'd lived in Brazil for a few years, and I recall wondering if she had inadvertently code-switched into Portuguese. Or, alternately, if those years in another language had affected her accent in Spanish. I grew up speaking Spanish, but even for Spanish-speakers, some accents are just difficult. In Chile, they drop their S's, so "Como estas?" sounds sort of like "Como 'ta?" Cubans are, for me, almost incomprehensible, because where Chileans drop the S, Cubans drop pretty much the end of any word whose last letter is a consonant. So, "Mis amigos tienen flores" becomes something like, "Mih amigoh tien' flore," and so forth. *Porteños*, folks from Buenos Aires, they say the double-L (ll, as in llama, which is pronounced more or less like a Y in most Spanish) more like a really soft J or G. So "calle" sounds like "cazhe" and "llama" sounds almost like "zhama." Since there are a surprising number of words with the double-L in them in everyday Spanish, and since that isn't the only idiosyncrasy of a *Porteño* accent, it can take awhile to learn how to hear words you cannot remember not knowing. Everywhere I went, each time someone spoke I had to ask, "What was that again?" and after every sentence I uttered, somebody asked, "So, where are you from?"

I have a kind of Colombian-Mexican-Castilian accent with a little dash of something-foreign thrown in there, owing to the community where I grew up, the places where I've spent the most time speaking Spanish, the people from whom I learned. But for me, it's a really annoying question, because first of all, it's not the question my interlocutor is really asking. They might be asking, "Why do you have a weird accent?" They might be asking something like, "Of what nation are you a citizen?" But mostly they aren't actually asking me where I'm from, which is just as well, because I don't have a really easy answer for that question. Because there's where I was born, which I don't even remember. Then there's where I grew up, and while "where I grew up" can still be found on a map and continues to have a political and geographical presence in the world, the place I knew doesn't really exist anymore, mostly thanks to a serious influx of money — and contrary to common parlance, a rising tide does not

necessarily lift all boats. Then there are the places I loved living the most. And then there is the place I lived, on and off, the longest. There's the place where my family now lives, but I never really lived there myself. And where I live now, well, that's here. I would never say I was from here, though I might sometimes wish it were so.

Maybe it was wanting people to stop asking, "Where are you from?" Maybe I wanted to become invisible in that particular way. Or maybe it was my subconscious wishing that I could belong in this beautiful Art Nouveau city with its rhodochrosite government palace and the sometimes-crumbling statuary of its eerie necropolis and the cobbled streets of my neighborhood, San Telmo, festooned with graffiti. The Sunday flea markets, giving way to the tango milongas, which look like a painting of Paris in the twenties. The glittering Teatro Colón, an Italianate splendor of red velvet and stained glass and gold, surrounded by svelte, elegant palm trees. Who wouldn't want to be a part of a place where people sit elbow-to-elbow late into the night, sawing through hunks of delicious local steak cooked to the Platonic ideal of medium-rare, nothing for seasoning but a perfect flame? But in any case, the next time I spoke Spanish with people I'd never met before, they didn't ask where I was from. They asked, "Are you from Argentina?" No. But. I was there for a time.

I couldn't be from Argentina any more than I could be from Ireland, no matter how soft my T's get when I'm there. But try telling that to whatever part of the brain chooses how you sound when you aren't paying attention.

Another reason for code-switching, though, is almost the exact opposite of belonging (or even passing). Sometimes we code-switch to keep a secret. When I was living in Salt Lake City, my friends Aoife (pronounced EE-fah) and Glenn came from Ireland for a visit. Because it's a gas, I took them on a tour of the Mormon Temple. The Temple is at the center of the wide grid that organizes Salt Lake City, a place French philosopher Jean Baudrillard aptly described as "Pompous Mormon symmetry. Everywhere marble: flawless, funereal ... In fact the whole city has the transparency and supernatural, otherworldly cleanness of a thing from outer space. A symmetrical, luminous, overpowering abstraction."

Mormonspeak is itself a kind of language — a discourse, anyway: "Temple," "garment," even "family," these words weigh something different in a Mormon conversation than they do elsewhere. The Temple tours are guided by missionary pairs, usually two doe-eyed young women in long skirts and sensible shoes, but today, a retired couple. We're shown the sculptural rendition of the rescue of Mormon settlers' crops from a plague of locusts by an unlikely descent of seagulls; we're shown the original meeting hall, whose pine pillars were painstakingly hand painted to resemble Carrera marble, whose pine pews were lovingly lined and glazed to look just like East Coast oak. Appearances, it would seem, do matter here. We're herded into the Tabernacle, where we're bid to be quiet while a pin is dropped in

the front of the hall, its audible clatter a demonstration of the genuinely cool acoustics of the space. Then we're guided through a large rotunda where an enormous white statue of Jesus stands with arms outstretched in a gesture reminiscent of the Jesus Redentor found all over South America, the domed ceiling above him is painted to look sort of like the solar system. Space Jesus, we call him. He doesn't seem to mind. Then down through long halls of Mormon kitsch to the place where Questions are Asked and Answered.

Glenn, good Irish altar boy, wishes to know more about the prohibition against alcohol. After all, he points out, what about the miracle of the water into wine at the wedding of Canaan? "Well," says the sister missionary, removing her slim glasses and allowing them to hang on their beaded chain around her neck, "we believe they were actually drinkers of fresh juice." In the desert. Like, thousands of years before refrigeration. Genau. Aoife and Glenn turn towards each other and switch handily into Irish, a terrific language for situations like this, because there is zero possibility that anybody in the state of Utah, let alone this tour group, will be able to understand them.

"What were you saying there?" I ask later, over a beer.

"Pretty much what you'd imagine," Aoife laughs. There are only so many secrets a language can keep, after all.

We code-switch when we think it'll help us to persuade an audience or interlocutor — one sociolinguistic study found that waitresses in the South lay their accents on thicker when they're at work, because it results in substantially higher tips from customers. But also, multilinguals, polyglots, even people with just a kind of conversational command of multiple languages often code-switch just because the most precise or most fitting or preferred way of saying something is only available in one of our languages, and for whatever reason, gets lost in translation.

I live in Berlin now, though I'm still learning German. And since mostly I'm learning it from my boyfriend, a lot of my German is not suitable for general conversation. German is a very precise language in some ways, oddly lacking in precision in others. For example, there is a specific German word for coveting the food somebody else is eating — maybe the waiter brought theirs first, maybe you wish you'd ordered what they're having. Futterneid. Food-envy. And the word for "lint" in German is "fussel," which just sounds fuzzier, somehow lintier than "lint." But the only distinction in German between a friend and a person with whom you are romantic, intimate, and exclusive, is the use of a possessive before the noun. Friend is friend. But "my friend." Man is man. But "my man." On the other hand, maybe that is the only real distinction.

A language. My language. Our language, or languages.

In English, we say, “Small world.” Kind of boring, really. In Spanish, we might say, “El mundo es un pañuelo.” The world is a handkerchief. Small enough to keep in a pocket. If you crumple it up, it all touches.

Magic, no? Genau.