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ABSTRACT

The daughter of a Puerto Rican immigrant mother and an American father describes her mother's early experiences with English language use and ethnic bias, her family's language use patterns, family sensitivity to language attitudes, school experiences with language use and language learning, and her feelings of low self-esteem and frustration as a result of linguistic repression. She recounts the effects of this "forced non-bilingualism" on her ability to use her native Spanish, English, and her chosen third language, French, and supports the use of transitional and maintenance bilingual education programs to enhance bilingual children's self-esteem and to avoid the problems of her own experience. (MSE)

PITFALLS OF "FORCED NON-BILINGUALISM"

JOSEPHINE A. SCHMIDT

Perhaps the book that has taught me the most about loss of language among Hispanic-Americans is Richard Rodriguez's autobigraphy, Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez.[1] It is a highly controversial book for its negative stance on bilingual education. Many Chicano activists view him as a traitor of sorts. I, too, disagree with his opposition to bilingual education. But I empathize with the rejection he experienced as a Spanish-speaker in an Anglo environment, and his book has had a profound effect on what I will now address as the pitfalls of my own "forced non-bilingualism"[2] in Spanish.

As Rodriguez states, "...the act of revelation helps the writer to better understand his own feelings." He adds, "There are things so deeply personal that they can be revealed only to strangers."[3] In the same vein, I address my own experiences as a person of half-Puerto Rican, half-Anglo descent, whose opportunity to be bilingual in Spanish and English was severely hampered by "forced non-bilingualism," which occurred in a predominantly Anglo environment that actively suppressed my bilingualism. I will

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explain the effect this had on me throughout my schooling and subsequent training as a Ph.D. in French language and literature. But first, I will discuss my family background and how language became a central issue in my life.

My introduction to bilingualism was made possible because my mother, a native-born Puerto Rican, married an American officer during World War II. She was born in 1917, the same year the Jones Act took effect in Puerto Rico, which had become a U.S. possession on December 10, 1898 after the Spanish-American War. The Jones Act declared that all Puerto Ricans were, as of 1917, citizens of the United States.

My mother grew up under American governorships of the island. She experienced "forced bilingualism."[4] As a result, during her schooling in a public high school in San Juan, English was introduced into all of her classes except Spanish literature. This practice led to her becoming bilingual. Eleanor Meyer Rogg's description of the Puerto Rican condition is particularly apt for my mother, "...Puerto Ricans found themselves involunatry residents of the ited States, as did Mexican-Americans." Rogg is also accurate when she comments more generally about Hispanics in America:

> The way that many Americans of Spanish-speaking origin have been introduced to American society has been so different from the experiences of European immigrants that we cannot use the European immigration model to understand the Hispanic American role in American history.[5]

My mother's bilingualism was a necessity. Many of her high school teachers were Americans who sought teaching jobs in

San Juan. By the time my mother entered secretarial school, she was on her way to being bilingual in Spanish and English. Her first job was in civil service for the Puerto Rican Reconstruction Movement, a program introduced by Franklin D. Roosevelt. Later she worked for the army base at Fort Buchanan in San Juan, where, eventually, she became an executive secretary. It was there that she met my father. As much as she could be, in the San Juan of World War II, my mother was Americanized before she ever stepped foot on the U.S. mainland. Before the war ended, my parents were married in San Juan. Shortly after, my father was transferred to an army base in Virginia. He left the island without his wife. Six months later he sent her a boat ticket for travel to Florida. She had her work papers transferred to Virginia and embarked on her first trip to the U.S.

My mother's first impression of the United States was not a positive one. She entered a bus in Miami and sat in the back but was immediately told to move to the front because only "coloreds" sat in the back. She had never really witnessed racism so overtly in Puerto Rico, where inter-racial marriages were fairly common and a virtual spectrum of skin colors existed. Also, in Puerto Rico, there was no formal government program to separate races, such as Spanish from Indian or Indian from Black.

Once Mother joined my father in Virginia, she was introduced to a slice of American life for which she was unprepared. Although bilingual in Spanish and English, she had never made an effort to rid herself of her Spanish accent in English that Spanish-

speaking kept fresh in her life. Throughout her marriage she was able to return to Puerto Rico almost every year because it was only three hours away by plane from her home in New York City. As Rogg notes:

> ...the proximity of the Island and the ease of return seem to prompt the Puerto Ricans to find in the Island the sense of strength, support and identity which former immigrants found in the clusters of their own kind in the immigrant communities of American cities. There is a great deal of truth in the comment that this is not a Puerto Rican migration, but a process of Puerto Rican commuting.[6]

My mother remains one of those Puerto Rican commuters. She returns almost yearly to her homeland and, as a result, has little incentive to lose her Spanish accent. In fact, she likes it. However, as she has moved through American society in her 41 years in this country, she has always been aware of some people's demeaning comments about her accent. Thus she has suffered from being part of a group of people lumped together as Hispanics, whom the rest of American society often regard with some contempt.

For me, "forced non-bilingualism" came about at home and in public during early schooling. Before I was born, my mother invited her divorced sister and this sister's five-year-old to leave Puerto Rico and live in New York City with my father, my oldest sister, and her. My mother was lonely and felt isolated from her Spanish-speaking family. Although my father had studied five foreign languages--Latin, Greek, French, German and Spanish--he did not converse with anyone in Spanish. He spoke English to

everyone. My mother, on the other hand, usually spoke Spanish to him, as well as to her sister, her niece and my sister.

My sister, who was then nearly two, had barely uttered a word in either English or Spanish. So my worried parents took her to a doctor, who advised them to speak to her in English only, until her English was strong, and then to reintroduce Spanish. Although at that time, in 1949, little information was available on children in bilingual homes, today that doctor's advice conforms perfectly with Francois Grosjean's suggestion that for such children one should, "...let one language dominate until a certain age."[7] However, my parents never formally reintroduced my sister to Spanish.

When I was three, I attended a nursery school in San Juan for eight months. When I returned to the U.S., I could not speak English at all. After one incident when I got lost in our apartment building, Mother panicked because I could not speak English. My father's reaction was to insist that from that time I be encouraged to speak English only.

Because my father was ultra-sensitive to prejudice against Hispanics, especially in regard to Puerto Ricans, in the New York City of the late forties and fifties, he decided to have his children speak English, primarily to protect us. As a result, my father spoke English to us. My mother would speak Spanish and English; however, we were encouraged to answer in English only.

When I began the first grade in a primarily Anglo parochial school, I was made aware that I was different from the others

because my mother had an accent and was Puerto Rican. That I did not have a Spanish surname made no difference to my Anglo schoolmates. The first day at primary school and the continued ridicule I experienced from my peers led to years when I was deeply ashamed of my mother. Thus began my alienation from Spanish. Although our situations are not identical--for example, I was not underprivileged and I did not have a Spanish surname--I identified with Rodriguez when he described his own alienation from Spanish, his shyness and mumbling when speaking English for the first time as a public language in school, and the beginnings of his poor self-image and low self-esteem.

I began to feel humiliated when my mother spoke Spanish to me in public. I would ask her to stop because I did not want to be different from the other children in my school. Some children had already begun calling me a "Spic." I internalized this negative judgment, and my self-esteem began to diminish. As a result, I felt the increasing need to hide my ability to understand Spanish and to hide my Spanish roots. I became what Grosjean has called, "...a covert bilingual concealing his or her knowledge of the minority language." I also began to have a progressively more difficult relationship with my mother. Soon I hated the fact that she was Hispanic. Grosjean also comments on the situation of the child who has a parent who speaks a minority language:

> In addition, the parent speaking the minority language may be in a difficult position when conversing with the child outside the home, especially if that language is looked down upon by the majority group.

> Such a situation may occur when the child is with playmates and does not wish to be singled out; in these cases, the parent often switches over to the majority language in order not to embarrass the child.

But my mother never felt the need to switch back to English when speaking to me. She was most comfortable speaking Spanish to me and wanted me, despite the "forced non-bilingualism" of our environment, to be able to understand her language, the private, intimate Spanish of the home that Rodriguez speaks about, the language that gave my mother comfort, despite the heavy rejection she experienced among Anglos. In a different way from me, as Richard Rodriguez's English grew stronger, he became less concerned with his parents' thick Spanish accents:

> Only when I was with them in public would I grow alert to their accents. Though, even then, their sound caused me less and less concern. For I was increasingly confident of my own public identity.[8]

By contrast, I became, despite the fact that I spoke English, more and more alienated from becoming bilingual in Spanish and English. I would not speak Spanish to my mother.

Curiously, I had another major upset about language in the primary grades. There were several fifth grade classes in my school. A foreign language was going to be introduced, as an experiment, into one of them. I remember vividly the deep disappointment of the day when my fifth grade teacher said that our class had not been selected for the experiment. From then on, that feeling of being deprived stuck with me as did the name of the language we did not get to study: French. This language began

at once to seem more appealing to me; it was different and exotic, and, most of all perhaps, I had not heard anyone malign it in any way.

As Grosjean stresses, "...the learner's attitude toward the other linguistic group and his or her willingness to identify with that group"[9] are two important factors to consider in a person's willingness to learn a language. He also states that, "... the psychosocial factors that surround language acquisition are of primary importance in determining the extent of the child's bilingualism." Although I had no problem identifying with my mother before I started school, it was after my identity became public in school that I began to feel that the inhibitions and even fear concerning my Hispanic identity had been forced on me. But the problem of being positive about speaking Spanish publicly or even privately with my mother had begun earlier because my father did not want his children to speak anything but English at home.

Thus knowing Spanish was never presented to me in an advantageous light. If I spoke Spanish with my mother, I would further identify myself with a minority group that was the cause for much ridicule from our largely Anglo environment. Such psychosocial factors created a mental block toward speaking Spanish. I also found it hard to concentrate in school and developed a difficulty in reading comprehension that stayed with me throughout high school.

By the time I began high school, I experienced several levels of cultural shock. I was accepted to a private high school

for girls, where all students had to learn French because the nuns who ran this school were a teaching order founded in France. Therefore, French was promoted over all other languages. Although we had some foreign students in the school, there were no other Hispanics. Puerto Ricans were definitely not socially acceptable there. However, I was finally in an environment that promoted a foreign language. French, furthermore, struck me as very different from Spanish. I made rapid progress in French, partly because of an ability to pick up the sounds and repeat them with a good accent. My motivation to learn French was high, while my motivation to learn Spanish continued to diminish. Although some Spanish was offered in the high school, I never ventured into such a class. Instead, I chose four years of Latin, four years of English, and four years of French and decided that French would be my major in college. My appreciation of Spanish was still nonexistent. It seemed to be associated with anti-Hispanic sentiments, particularly in New York City. I continued to suffer from low self-esteem about my Hispanic heritage; and problems with English lingered, despite my overall academic success in a private school.

While somewhat mitigated, as will be discussed, the effects on me of "forced non-bilingualism" continued throughout college and for about half of my graduate school years. Whenever I visited my Spanish-speaking relatives in Puerto Rico, I felt and acted like a tongue-tied fool who could not speak Spanish. My relatives would talk to me in Spanish, and, even though I understood everything they said, I would answer them in English. I felt almost paralyzed

when I tried to speak Spanish. Rodriguez has well expressed the pain of the type of mental block that I experienced:

> I grew up victim to a disabling confusion. As I grew fluent in English, I no longer could speak Spanish with confidence. I continued to understand spoken Spanish. And in high school, I learned how to read and write Spanish. But for many years I could not pronounce it. A powerful guilt blocked my spoken words; an essential glue was missing whenever I'd try to connect words to form sentences. I would be unable to break a barrier of sound, to speak freely. I would speak, or try to speak Spanish, and I would manage to utter halting, hiccuping sounds that betrayed my unease.[10]

I, too, felt a guilt that paralyzed me in a way like that which Rodriguez describes:

> I was cursed with guilt. Each time I'd hear myself addressed in Spanish, I would be unable to respond with any success. I'd know the words I wanted to say, but I couldn't manage to say them. I would try to speak, but everything I said seemed to me horribly Anglicized. My mouth would not form the words right. My jaw would tremble. After a phrase or two, I'd cough up a warm, silvery sound. And stop.

Only those who have experienced "forced non-bilingualism," or loss of language, can fully appreciate Rodriguez's words.

Not until I reached college did I gradually begin to refamiliarize myself with Spanish by taking courses. In college, my increased ability in French changed my impression of Spanish. Each time I took a Spanish course I got an "A." Spanish became a pleasurable course of study, one that I enjoyed because it came easily to me. French, a "neutral language"[11] served me as a "substitute language,"[12]--that is, a language that serves as a surrogate for Spanish, without devaluing itself as an important code in its

own right. French functioned so that I was able to regain the possibility of bilingualism in my life and to have pride in my language acquisition and learning ability. My renewed interest in Spanish came while I was a student and persists now that I am a teacher of Spanish, as well as French.

Long study of French through the doctoral level has helped increase my knowledge of a foreign culture other than my own. Although French holds a great deal of prestige in the world, it was simply a neutral language for me. I have also found, through inference, that students of Hispanic origin often sign up for my French courses in order to divorce themselves, in a sense, from their home language, which is belittled and scorned by the dominant Anglo group. They want to learn another Romance language that is exotic because of its far removal from their environment. By learning French or any other neutral language, they can perhaps find the road to self-healing and self-love.

As a person who did not have access to bilingual education, I am keenly aware of the benefits of transitional and, most importantly, of maintenance bilingual education programs, particularly in such a largely Anglophone and geographically isolated country as the United States. For example, I believe that Spanish-English bilingualism serves as a reminder that a multi-lingual world is beyond our borders. I also believe that if I had been able to enter a bilingual education program, I would have been spared years of suffering from low self-esteem that being in an unpopular and even hated minority group instilled. I could have

felt pride in my language abilities.

Love of the French language and literature has removed the former reluctance to speak Spanish; and, although I am more fluent in French than in Spanish, I now consider myself fluent in both.

But most importantly, I have a much better relationship with my mother, partly because I speak Spanish to her three-fourths of the time. I can now see the strength of programs that present bilingualism in a positive light. The maintenance bilingual education programs, for example, can spare many Hispanic children from the experience of "forced non-bilingualism."

NOTES

[1]Richard Rodriguez, Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (New York: Bantam Books, 1982).

[2]I coined this term to suggest the extent to which bilingualism was suppressed in my environment.

[3]Rodriguez, p. 187 and 185.

[4]I coined this term to indicate the extent to which bilingualism was forced on many native-born Puerto Ricans born from 1917 on.

[5]Eleanor Meyer Rogg, "The Special Assimilation Problems of Americans of Spanish Speaking Origin," in Bilingual Education, ed. Hernan LaFontaine, Barry Persky, and Leonard H. Golubchick (Wayne, New Jersey; Avery Publishing Group, Inc., 1978), p. 76 and 77.

[6]Rogg is quoting Joseph P. Fitzpatrick's Puerto Rican Americans (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971).

[7]François Grosjean, Life With Two Languages: An Introduction to Bilingualism (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 174. The next two citations are from Grosjean, p. 172 and p. 175.

[8]Rodriguez, p. 25.

[9]This quotation and the next are from Grosjean, p. 193.

[10]This and the next quotation are from Rodriguez, p. 28.

[11]This term was coined by me to identify a language that has a positive connotation and is not associated with prejudice in the mind of the learner.

[12]I coined this term to identify a language that serves as a surrogate for a less well thought of minority language such as Spanish was for me.