

### **Swimming in the Confluence**

Once, I was talking to my friends about my amazing trip to the holy area, Tibet, during last summer vacation through FACETIME. *“Can you imagine how blue the sky is? That’s...”* (In Chinese). “Awesome!” (In English). I spoke in a high tone, kept my eyes wide open and waved my hands to show my surprise while saying, *“I have never thought that there was such a wonderland-like place in China. (In Chinese).”* “Oops!” (In English). *“My classmate is calling me. I forgot to bring the paper to her. I gotta go.”* (In Chinese). “Chao! My friends.” (In Spanish).

I can say this way of speaking is definitely not the way I used to speak. As a person who is living in the United States and who has also studied Spanish for about two years, I find it’s not easy to resist the “attraction” of English and Spanish and to protect my own language totally away from these two languages. Therefore, that’s now my typical voice: speaking at a high speed, like all Spanish people do; using exaggerated tones and body languages like American people; combining Chinese words with some English exclamation words “awesome,” “oops” and some Spanish daisy expressions “chao” (means goodbye). I don’t speak these English and Spanish words while speaking Chinese on purpose to show off, I actually speak in this way subconsciously—being left in an English or Spanish environment for a long time results in my quick reaction of English or Spanish words to a certain description instead of Chinese words.

My mother is the first person to say that she doesn’t like the change of my way of speaking. Sometimes she even criticizes that it’s not right that I forget my own Chinese after learning foreign language. She says, “If this continues, I might need to wonder if you are my child. A Chinese child.” Her serious words lead me to think about the problem that I haven’t realized since I studied new languages. Can I still be considered as a real Chinese person when speaking English and Spanish words in Chinese sentences? Everyone who studies a

new language must have thought ourselves in this situation: learning a new language is like the merging of two rivers, the streams from two different rivers crash against each other violently and we are like swimmers who are left in the midst of them and are struggling: while we swim following the streams of one river and think we have the direction, the water from the other river just keep slapping us, trying to lead us to another direction.

In her essay “Speaking in Tongues”, Zadie Smith describes a play called *Pygmalion* in which a dirty, poor Cockney flower girl, Eliza Doolittle was taught to learn high-class languages in order to get into upper class, but at last, Eliza screamed:

I can't. I could have done it once; but now I can't go back to it. Last night, when I was wandering about, a girl spoke to me; and I tried to get back into the old way with her; but it was no use. You told me, you know, that when a child is brought to a foreign country, it picks up the language in a few weeks, and forgets its own. Well, I am a child in your country. I have forgotten my own language, and can speak nothing but yours. (3)

Smith concludes this story by saying, “Something's got to give—one voice must be sacrificed for the other. What is double must be made singular” (4).

Eliza couldn't come back to her old way of speaking because getting contact with a different language environment made her gradually forget her original language and she lost her voice along with herself—she became a between thing and couldn't get herself a clear identity—during this process of picking up a new language. It seems that we can't get all; we must sacrifice something of ourselves in order to get something new. Will I end up like the poor Eliza Doolittle in this play—forgetting my own language while studying foreign languages? Is my mother right about this? Is it possible that I lose my identity of a Chinese person when using new languages?

First of all, I admit learning new language has changed my way of speaking and changed who I am from the past, but I don't think my mother tongue, Chinese, can be easily get ride of. Nowadays, my English and Spanish teachers often point out that sometimes my thoughts and words can't be understood. I think it is because I still use the Chinese way of

thinking whenever in speaking or writing, and it really is a big problem that bothers me with regard to improving my English. Besides that, I find that when I am studying a new language, the first step is that I need to translate the phrases automatically into Chinese in my head in order to understand and master them. For example, when distinguishing “see” and “watch,” I’m accustomed to looking for Chinese phrases or situations that correspond to those two words and then I can remember their differences. In this sense, my studying of learning new languages is based on or relies on my mother tongue.

Sending me to English composition class every week and seeing my unsatisfactory scores in writing, my mother jokes, “After all, you are still a Chinese.” She must have realized that although I use foreign words daily, my ways of thinking are always Chinese. The appearance of my speaking may seem to change, but what is essential never changes.

Someone may ask what is the point of learning new languages if I essentially remain the same? We know that the merging of two rivers, at first, produces conflicts and is hard to deal with as a swimmer. Nevertheless, after they totally converge with each other, different languages rivers share their waters and connect with each other. Swimmers who are navigating freely in the confluence enjoy a new and wider space. Learning new languages give me this “connection” and “share” and this facilitates my exploration of a larger world.

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A few days after I came to the United States, my friends and I shopped in Giant Eagle to get some necessities of life. Due to the hot weather, we all want to eat ice creams to cool off. We stopped in front of the freezer and chose the taste we liked. Looking at the word “vanilla” in the packaging, one of my friends was confused and asked, “Does anyone know what vanilla means?” When other friends were hurried to take out their phones to look up in the dictionary, I responded quickly what vanilla means. My friends all astonished and asked me curiously, “Where did you learn this word? Have you been here before?” I answered

simply “No. But I have learned Spanish. Spanish has this word and I guess it has the same meaning in English.”

Therefore, I am more likely to consider learning new languages like a connection between old and new languages rather than a process of gaining and losing languages. Many languages share the same grammatical rules and same words, just like English word “restaurant” is equal to the Spanish word “restaurante”, though these two have different pronunciations. My learning of English actually benefits from my learning of Spanish: it’s easier for me to recognize some English words and understand better some English tenses. That’s why someone who knows Chinese characters can also understand some Japanese words.

Besides that, learning new languages really offers me a new wider world. Mastering a new language can’t be isolated from the culture of the country where this language is spoken. I have known many other ways of living in the world. This diversity lifts me from the small narrow well to a bright mountaintop, from which all cultures—Asian, American, European are presented in front of my eyes. What I will do is a simple word “share:” Sharing what I have learned from the western culture with my friends in my hometown, sharing what I have learned from growing up with foreigners who are curious to know.

Smith also presents President Obama as a positive example in her essay. Born in a multi-background family, Obama is able to understand better the culture differences between black and white people by speaking various voices with flexibility. Smith considers it as “addition,” which is different from “gaining a new, false voice at the expense of a true one” (5).

I think now my process of learning new languages is a kind of addition, too. I don’t forget my mother tongue and I understand better the different cultures in the world and I share them. Maybe mixing English and Spanish words with Chinese words is caused by the

lack of flexibility. I can't tell if I can succeed in overcoming this obstacle and becoming someone who masters three languages very well—speaking and acting according to different cultures like President Obama. However, it doesn't matter if I can't do that well because I consider it as my way of speaking, as a Chinese who studies English and Spanish, not others.

One language needn't to be substituted by another; one needn't become someone else by learning new languages. For everyone who is studying foreign languages, we are connected to the rest of the world and we are sharers.

#### Works Cited

Smith, Zadie. "Speaking in Tongues." *The New York Review of Books*. February 26, 2009.

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