

Encountering languages throughout my life

By Alesia Rengle

My first encounter with a foreign language was when I was around one year old, as a part of my family lives in Austria, and I used to visit them frequently when I was a child. However, the first time I realized that they did not speak the same language as I do was when I was around four years old, but I did not pay a lot of attention to that. They were speaking Romanian, the same language I did, when they were inside their house, but when they would leave their place, they would switch to German. That is when I started asking myself questions about why would they do that? How was it possible for them to use words that I did not understand, yet people around them understood them perfectly. That was the moment I learned what a language is.

When I was six years old, my mom sent me to Austria for three weeks, so I would spend time with my family there, as I cared for them very deeply and loved being around them. They would speak Romanian to me, so nothing looked or seemed foreign to me. I felt at home whenever I was with them, even though our cultures were a bit different. They spent most of their life in Romania, but after more than fifteen years spent in another country, they had to change so they could adapt to the new environment.

During my three weeks there, I met their friends and neighbors. Of all these people, one of them stood out. It was an elderly lady, named Linda, who was living next door. She was around seventy-five years old, in a very good shape, living in a huge house all by herself. She had been married a long time ago, but her husband died. She never had kids, but she had the most adorable cat. Cat's name was Katy. Lady Linda and Katy were my first Austrian friends, besides my family. One might wonder how I would communicate with this nice lady. The answer is that I cannot

explain it, not even today. I knew about twenty words in German, and she knew zero words in Romanian. However, I would spend hours at her house, listening and doing things with her. I did not understand the words she used, yet I could understand her. I knew what she was trying to say. Probably not word for word, but I understood the main ideas. We had our own way of communicating, that nobody was able to figure out, not even us.

Before I went home, my aunt came with me to Lady Linda's house to say goodbye to her and her cat. I remember being a bit sad that I was not going to see her again very soon. However, I knew that I was going to see her the next summer, as I was going to Austria again. My aunt and Lady Linda talked for about half an hour, in German, and their assumption was that I had no clue what they were discussing. They were right, as my knowledge of German did not increase considerably during those three weeks, but somehow, I understood their whole conversation. I got to my aunt's house afterwards, and she started to tell me what they were talking about, but I stopped her, and told her that I already knew. She had all the reasons not to believe me, but I proved her wrong. I told her what they talked about, but I was not able to understand all the details. She was shocked, but I did not understand why.

I know that children use their brains in different ways than adults do and are able to understand the world around them through other means. But how can a child do that? I remember looking for clues in what she was saying: the way she would look or point at things would make me aware or what she was talking about. The sound of her voice was changing depending on the subject she approached. The expressions on her face and her body language would give her away. All these things plus knowing a few words in German, would make me able to communicate with this woman. However, I don't know how she understood me, as I was speaking Romanian with her, yet she knew what I was saying.

I had a completely different experience in the summer of 2022 when I first came to the US. I was speaking English for the first time in an English-speaking country. Back home, I studied English for more than ten years, and I considered myself a good speaker and writer. The first day moving in at University of Pittsburgh proved me wrong. I met with my older roommate, Lydia, who helped me move in and acclimate to the new environment. I was able to distinguish what she was saying to me, yet the word choice and order was unexpected. The English I learned in school was completely different from the English she was using. She tried her best to speak her most academic English so it would be easy for me to understand her.

My biggest difficulty was when I was listening to other people's conversations. They were talking very fast and using words that I have never heard before. They had their own street language, that even if I would look it up online, I would not find the meaning of it. There was something else interesting about the way they talked: they would not talk in complete sentences, that have verbs and nouns connected; they would mix up some words, that made sense individually but not in the same sentence, and they would understand each other. I tried my best to figure out their half sentences, but not even today, after six months spend in this country, I am not able to fully understand what are they saying.

I was thinking that maybe another reason why I had trouble comprehending the English around me might have been due to the British English I learned at school. I knew that there are some differences between British English and American English, and because of that I started to surround myself with American music and movies before moving to the US. I was carefully paying attention to the differences between accents, word choice, and voice tonality. American English sounds happier, more positive and more relaxed, but also louder. Americans come up with

ingenious way of talking about different matters, they are more playful with the language, especially when compared to the rigorous structure of British English.

I realized that as a young adult it is more complicated to understand people that are not speaking the same language as you do. The cues I used as a child to talk to lady Linda do not apply anymore. Only by looking at a person's body language and facial expressions is not enough to know what they want to say. Probably that is because a child's brain is working very different than an adult's one; kids are more engaged in the present, paying more attention to what is around them. Children's brains are not fully developed, making it easier to adapt to the world around them; this world around them can mean both a new place or a new language that they encounter.

My story with lady Linda is very similar to the story of Richard Rodriguez in his essay called "Aria". He talked about how he perceived the new world he moved into when he was just a six-year-old boy. He was a Mexican child moving in the US, without knowing any English. He was able to distinguish even the finest differences between sounds and accents. He was able to understand the layers of the language better than any adult or native speaker. He could perceive the world around him without filters, because kids do not have filters. He saw the world as it was, without trying to fit it into a frame. I did the exact same thing as a kid, without even realizing it. I was able to understand German without even knowing German. I was listening to the language as it was, without trying to compare it or finding similarities with my mother tongue, Romanian. I took the language as it was, only thinking about how German worked, as a language of its own. However, this is not how I understand English now. I do not see it as a language of its own. I always try to compare it with what I speak best, which is Romanian. When I heard English words or phrases around me, I always try to put them into a Romanian context so I would know how to

react or what to answer. What I keep forgetting is that this not only a different language, but also a different culture, and the underlayers of English and Romanian are very different. An answer in Romanian might be appropriate, but in English might be a total disaster. Then how do you know what to say or what to answer if someone talks to you in a foreign language?

I believe that we should do our best to try to understand a language without putting barriers between what we know about different languages and how this new language is. Every language has a strong bond with the population that speaks it, and their culture has a lot to say in how the population uses the language. We should try to be kids when speaking another language, free our mind and just trying to understand to world around us. We should try to pay attention to native speakers' body language, but without trying to alter it with our personal perception. We should try to observe how they act in certain situations and maybe ask them questions about how they felt during that interaction, so we would be starting to create a new frame for this new language that would enable us to understand it more deeply but without altering with your perception about your own language.