A STRUGGLE OF IDENTITY

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Nowadays, having a bicultural identity, in which an individual becomes fully immersed in a second language other than his or her mother tongue, has become the norm. Jeffrey Nelson, a writer for LivingBilingual, states that individuals start to learn characteristics of a new language and culture which “in turn combine with the old and create a new hybrid identity.” However, people take this process of “molding and remolding” bicultural identity for granted (Nelson). Learning a new language, to some degree, is on a pendulum between the fluency of two languages as “opposed to being at two fixed points” at the same time (Nelson). If an individual becomes better at a certain language, he or she will lose fluency in another language. Inevitably, immersing oneself into the more prevalent culture allows one to move towards the other end of the pendulum.

A highly-ranked university, a social network of English-speaking friends, and even an opportunity to eventually work in the United States—these are the benefits that speaking English has given me, someone who was born and raised in China. My assimilation to the local U.S. culture brings me a flamboyant identity that most of my friends back home are jealous of—a bilingual prodigy who is fluent in both English and Chinese. Little do they know that I am not great at either language. I struggle to look for adequate vocabulary when writing an English essay, and tend to forget the spelling of a Chinese character when texting my friends. My English-speaking friends for-
give my use of awkward phrasing by comforting me, saying that English is a second language for me. My friends back in China accept my misspelling or misuse of a Chinese phrase, saying that it is a common phenomenon since I have stayed abroad for too long. There is an old saying in China: “you can’t have both fish and bear’s paw.” It means that one can not achieve two goals simultaneously. I want to shine in both languages, but unfortunately, I am not great at either of them. Learning two languages at the same time actually slowed down my ability to excel in both languages. I did not get the fish or the bear’s paw, I only got half of each.

When facing the dilemma of always being second-best at everything, perhaps simply picking a side might be the most efficient means. In his essay “Memoir of A Bilingual Childhood,” author Richard Rodriguez encounters a similar problem, standing in between the Spanish-speaking culture in his house and the American-speaking culture in his school. Born in an American neighborhood, Rodriguez has to speak English with his friends at school. When he first goes to school, he barely knows “fifty stray English words” (Rodriguez 25). Entering a new culture with such a distinctive identity becomes problematic, and Rodriguez becomes the “problem student’ in class” (Rodriguez 25). He tries to catch up at first, but the fact is that speaking his native language back at home somehow troubles his ability to learn another language. English sounds so “exotic” to him (Rodriguez 27). To cope with this problem, he sacrifices one language for another. In order to do well in school and become more comfortable with his friends, Rodriguez starts to speak only English. His parents also start increasing the amount of English used at home. After several months, he finally manages to say something loud and clear enough that his classmates understand him for the first time. He is then “increasingly confident,” feeling “[that he belongs] in public” (Rodriguez 31).

The result is significant, but the side effect is obvious as well. He improves his English fluency dramatically over the years, but at the expense of his Spanish skills. He claims that Spanish is now no more than a “sound,” and even uncomfortable to him (Rodriguez 32). When his parents are speaking Spanish at home, he feels “[pushed]
away” (Rodriguez 32). He can no longer represent his native language. Biculturalism, for Rodriguez, means accepting a sacrifice.

However, the sacrifice of biculturalism means something different to Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Going from his essay “Decolonising the Mind,” Thiong’o might argue that achievement at the expense of one’s own language is worthless compared to its cost. He presents the essence of language and the process by which his native language, Gikuyu, was colonized by the British. Everything written in Gikuyu was suppressed and replaced by English. English became “the language” to learn, and anyone caught speaking Gikuyu was considered a “culprit” and punished severely (Thiong’o 334, 335). Thiong’o became concerned for the future of his country when a friend of his at the time excelled “in all subjects except English” and was forced to become “a turn boy in a bus company” (Thiong’o 335). Talented individuals were wasted, eliminated simply because they did poorly in English. This form of negative selection causes a serious problem for the future of the Gikuyu language. The author worries that “mental [colonization]” will lead to Gikuyu’s extinction (Thiong’o 339). When more and more people start to focus on English only for their own survival, learning their native language becomes redundant and it slowly vanishes when “[a] child would now only see the world as seen in the literature of his language of adoption” (Thiong’o 341). Thiong’o states that the intrusion of another language had broken the harmony of the connection between language and culture. Language is the “carrier of culture”—any culture is a product of a unique language that can not be replaced (Thiong’o 336). Language conveys a unique understanding of the values within a culture, something that cannot be understood through other languages. To Thiong’o, the forced colonization is detrimental to his language and culture. He can not afford the sacrifice of biculturalism when his native language is endangered.

It is fair to say that the problems encountered by Rodriguez and Thiong’o are similar yet not congruent. Gikuyu is an extremely rare language that only a minor group of people utilize in Africa. With the intrusion of another language, Gikuyu was endangered. Thiong’o feels a sense of responsibility and urgency to rescue his own language. He wants to pass the language on to future generations and keep its
culture alive. On the other hand, Rodriguez does not share the equivalent urgency. His native language, Spanish, is considered the third largest language in the world. He is one out of billions that have chosen not to continue speaking Spanish. The base number is so huge that his own decision will not make a difference. Unlike Thiong'o, who adores Gikuyu especially when listening to local stories, Rodriguez does not like to speak Spanish. Rodriguez does not consider speaking Spanish a form of pleasure, but rather a burden that reminds him of his past as a “socially disadvantaged” boy (26). Indeed, being immersed in another language affects the original culture deeply. Inarguably, Rodriguez’s decision isn’t great for the sake of his culture, but he chooses the best solution for himself. Unlike Thiong’o, he does not need to worry about the growth of his language. Forgetting his native language will not become an issue.

The issue is when individuals like myself become confused about whether to forsake the mother language or to adapt to the new language. The inefficient learning of both languages reveals the concealed weakness under the bicultural identity. Even with his gentle assimilation, Rodriguez feels an aloofness between himself and his family. Staying with the people he loves is not as comfortable as before. The sound of a Spanish world becomes equally exotic as the English one was before. However, in “Advantages of Being Bicultural,” Dr. Francois Grosjean uses scientific data to examine an alternative answer to the fish or bear’s paw dilemma; getting half of each may be beneficial. He claims that bicultural people exhibit “more fluency…more flexibility . . . and more novelty” (Grosjean). The research examines the participants on their ability to think diversely in both virtual and real world scenarios. Participants are asked to give possible ways to use a random object. Those who have stayed in another country for at least four years come out with more solutions than those who have not. In another study that was conducted simultaneously, bicultural participants achieved “higher promotion rate” and had “more positive reputations” than those who were not bicultural (Grosjean). These are all attributed to “integrative complexity”—the ability to “forge conceptual links” from “multiple perspectives” (Grosjean). This ability is developed easily with a bicultural background. There is certainly no correlation between the study of lan-
guage and having a successful public identity. In fact, Rodriguez’s suc-
cess later in his life may be attributed to his bicultural identity, but not
his focus on a single language earlier in life. The sacrifice he paid to
his bicultural life is costly, but he was fortunate enough to have a
choice. Thiong’o, on the other hand, does not have any options. The
forced bilingual intrusion diluted his culture back in his home town.
It was an unsurpassable opportunity cost that can never be compen-
sated. Thiong’o does not worry about himself, but his beloved coun-
try.

In the article “Biculturalism, A Model of Effects of Second
Culture Exposure on Acculturation and Integrative Complexity,”
Carmit Tadmor and Philip Tetlock display a bicultural model that
complicates Grosjean’s conviction. When an individual is exposed to
a new “culture context,” they say that their “attention scope” widens
to receive more information, fostering diverse thinking (Tadmor and
Tetlock 176). Even though this benefit of biculturalism sounds
appealing, I certainly question the definition of “bicultural” by
Grosjean. In instances of biculturalism between similar cultures, it is
inarguably easier to assimilate, but what happens when it comes to
two distinctive cultures, such as Chinese culture and American cul-
ture? When there is a “strong dissonance” between two diverse cul-
tures, each “constituency possesses a strong argument” to safeguard its
“own position” (Tadmor and Tetlock 182). This impedes the assimi-
lation process and requires much more effort to overcome. An
“[acknowledgement] of legitimacy and [response] of criticism” from
both cultures is compulsory for successful assimilation (Tadmor and
Tetlock 182). Two people with distinctive personalities will just find
it difficult to get along with each other. However, in the case of
Rodriguez’s culture assimilation, the languages used by the two
nations are similar in grammar, spelling, and pronunciation to some
extent. The two nations are also geographically connected. The orig-
inal culture of the two will not vary drastically, making it easier to
assimilate. This model implies that it is not suitable for everyone fac-
ing biculturalism. With more divergent backgrounds, the cost of
biculturalism is inarguably higher.

Biculturalism involves sacrifice. Rodriguez successfully assimilates
into a different culture at the expense of his adequacy in his native
language. Thiong’o, who represents the people of Kenya, speaks fluent English at the cost of his endangered native language. It does not matter whether we voluntarily choose to ignore a portion of our culture or not. Every time we reach a destination, we pay tolls. That is the price of learning something new at the expense of something you have learned before. But there is not a defined solution to solve this problem due to biculturalism. There are too many factors to consider for each of us. Perhaps there is an optimal solution for each individual—but no one could find it except for that person. Whether you want more fish or more bear’s paw is totally up to you.

WORKS CITED


