

How I Learned the Language of Spicy Food

By Judith Parra

I possess all the perks of my ethnicity: thick, rich curls; skin that can withstand the scorching sun and result in a golden tan without bottles of aloe; and a moderate immunity to spicy food. There are downsides too: my hair responds to humidity faster than the local weatherman can post a warning of isolated thunderstorms, very unwelcomed and defined tan lines, and to my dentist's and my bathroom scale's disappointment, an extreme sweet tooth for sugary pastries and fried food. However, the one thing I wanted most I would have to strive to obtain despite the fact that nearly all Hispanic youths master its beautiful art by the time they are adolescents – the ability to speak the Spanish language.

As a child, the quick rolls of the tongue and seamless transitions from one phrase to the next were bewildering, but I was still mesmerized by the sounds surrounding me. The liveliness of the way the soft Ls followed the sharper sounds of the Cs, Ds, and Fs made its cadence undeniable, but the Spanish language was far from my own. Growing up I would only learn simple phrases from my parents, who had hoped that mastering English first would allow for a smooth transition into English speaking schools. However, this plan for assimilation seemed to bring more barriers than ease.

Walking into dominantly English-speaking classrooms, homes, and businesses was easy – a clear product of my parents' work to make me 'fit in' mainstream American society. However, this situation became difficult, and even caused anxiety when I entered predominantly Spanish-speaking areas, homes and businesses. As a child I would often watch as my Colombian grandmother sternly reminded my parents time and time again that I needed to learn

to speak Spanish like all the other Spanish kids my age. Her tone was firm and persistent yet concerned and at times, worried. I sat there silently, unaware of what the conversation entailed detail for detail, but I soon recognized that I and my siblings were the subjects of discussion when our names—one of the few words we were able to fully register without hesitation—were spoken.

Traveling to visit family in California and Mexico entailed more burdens and frustration than one would expect from a family vacation. My grandmother in Mexico would sit in her armchair and call me over to her, her dear granddaughter whom she only was able to see once every few years. She would begin by asking me something simple like “¿Como estás?” to which I would simply answer “*Bien.*” Without recalling my deficiency she’d continue by telling me a story of something that happened to her that day or when she was my age, an account that I would later have translated for me once the heightened emotions had long left her wrinkled face. I was missing out on valuable connections with my own family.

Communication between family members who only spoke Spanish was limited. An interpreter or middle person, typically my parents or a bilingual family member, was usually present if the conversation was to go beyond basic question and answer sessions. This need for a third party often made me feel like a burden, and made me hesitant to meet new people who only spoke Spanish. I wanted to be able to talk with the other kids my age at Spanish family parties. I wanted to have the option of speaking to people I didn’t know when I traveled to Spanish-speaking countries or heavily Spanish-populated areas in the United States, even if my parents had routinely warned me not to talk to strangers. I wanted to be able to order my own food in restaurants and be able to pronounce every striking sound with the finesse of a native speaker. Commands, questions, even friendly small talk rarely made it past the language barrier that

separated me from so much of my culture.

The physical characteristics I possessed that linked me to my culture seemed miniscule compared to the obstacles before me. My deficiency was quickly noticed by native Spanish speakers who watched me uncomfortably as I stumbled delivering a simple response to a simple statement or question. Though I could not fully comprehend what they muttered to one another when they thought I was out of earshot, the looks on their faces said it all. Fixed on their faces was a mixture of pity, disappointment and disapproval.

In several instances this occurred with my friends' parents who upon first glance were excited to have a fellow Latina in their home, but whose initial reactions were quick to change once the deer-in-the-headlights look hit my face. They spoke and I listened, but I knew that the volume would soon be muted once the conversation began to progress beyond standard greetings. Then the questions began to waterfall across their faces and for many, from their mouths: Why had I not learned the beautiful language my parents grew up speaking? Why could I not sing along to lively Spanish music and feel the depth of every verse sung? Was I ashamed of my culture? I felt accused by these questions and the looks that accompanied them. I wanted to answer, but more importantly do so with confidence. I was angry and frustrated but more hurt by the situation in which I was held captive. Once it was apparent that I differed from all the other children my age that looked like me, ate like me and had the same heritage as me, I lost a confidence that would take much time to rebuild.

Despite all of these substantial discouragements, there was still a strong part of me that was intrigued by the stunning language that was the key to such a dynamic culture. I witnessed conversations between children, parents, friends and even baby talk between animal owners and their pets and could not help but be interested and envious of the gift they possessed. To me it

was a secret language that I wanted to uncover, master and claim as my own. I wanted to use it to order my own food, to speak with family and friends, meet new people and understand what exactly Marc Anthony was saying in his vibrant music.

By the time I entered high school, I was determined to tear down the walls that stood between me and so much of my culture, my family, and a substantial portion of my confidence. I enrolled in Honors Spanish classes and passionately studied a language many of my peers merely saw as a graduation requirement. Earning As in Spanish meant much more to me than points on my GPA; it was a step closer to achieving my dream of being able to speak for myself in a language I admired dearly. I was eager to share what I knew with my peers. I tutored several of my friends in Spanish. They were simply looking to pass their next test and although I was well aware of this, part of me hoped that they too would find that spark and connection that I did with the language I had longed to learn.

Though I have come a long way from the days that I could hardly piece together a grammatically correct sentence or respond to a simple question, the hesitancy and timidity that consumed me before still exists. More often than I wish, I rely on English to speak with my parents. Changing that habit will come with time and dedication to taking a more difficult route. I still hesitate to speak Spanish in the real world as openly as I do in my Spanish classes in fear that my pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary will seem amateur or unnatural. Adjusting to this will come with consistent practice and putting myself out there despite my fear. I am not yet fluent. I have not yet mastered the Spanish language but what I have learned has given voice to a culture that for so long was muted to my ears. My skills in this language do not mirror those in English yet. I am not yet able to fool a native speaker that I learned the language in the same way that they did, but until I am, I'll take pride in being able to do the little things that I can, like

ordering spicy food.