

## Speaking Spanglish by Citlaly Hernandez Duran

“*Mija, como le pregunto en Ingles a mi patrón que color quiere que le pinte la pared?*”  
asked my dad (1).

“*Se dice, ‘What color do you want me to paint the wall?’*” I replied (2).

At a young age, I perfected the skill of translating Spanish to English and vice versa. In my family of Latino immigrants, Spanish is the language we first come to know. My whole world was in Spanish. Instead of going to the movies, I waited for them to come out in DVD with a Spanish translation. Instead of watching *Barney*, I watched *El Chapulín Colorado*. Instead of going to the mall, I went to *la pulga* (3), where I knew the vendor would greet me with *buenos días!* (4) However, it was school that began the crusade to drive my native tongue from me.

The crusade was slow because my English and Spanish world were neatly divided. English was contained in my academic sphere as Spanish was in my home. I learned the basics of English spelling and grammar at school, but continued speaking Spanish and movies in my native language. In fact, I watched all the *Shrek* movies in Spanish, and to this day I cannot watch them in English without cringing at their cold voices. I also continued saying *buenos días* to my favorite vendors at *la pulga*. The first sign that English was being assimilated in my home was when I traded *El Chapulín Colorado* for *Blues Clues*.

Watching English TV shows greatly expanded my vocabulary, and I had an older sister who was always willing to practice with me. At first, my English sounded like gibberish, but I quickly started to formulate full sentences. My parents were proud that I was learning English because they knew it was necessary for immigrants, like ourselves, trying to live the American Dream, and my dad knew that *el que sabe dos vale por dos* (5). At the time, my dad was also trying to learn English by taking a night class at a community college. Sometimes he asked me to help him even though I knew only as much English as he did. However, singlehandedly maintaining a family on minimum wage meant working more hours and studying less, so he quit night classes. Although he did not give up learning English, he could not learn as fast. Meanwhile, I continued expanding my vocabulary until English naturally rolled off my tongue.

The reality of learning a new language and assimilating into a new country did not have the outcome my parents had idealized. Me conversing in Spanish would get interrupted by English words. Soon, I was the one asking my dad to translate simple words like fence. I would ask, “¿*Como se dice, ‘fence’ en Español?* (6).” This greatly impacted my ability to converse with my parents about my everyday activities. My dad immediately noticed the shift in my dominant language and demanded that I speak to him only in Spanish. Initially, I could not understand his sudden resistance to my developing English skills, but I did not fight him because his firm look told me that preserving my Spanish was important to him. In retrospect, I should have realized that Spanish was

the only way I could communicate with my dad. He understood English, but could hold only simple conversations, and he wanted more than that with his growing daughter.

The separation of these two worlds improved my Spanish, but my English was not developing as quickly as it was for my classmates. I struggled to be at the standard reading and writing level for my grade. Thus, I was categorized an English language learner, which meant taking a standardized test every year until I proved to be proficient in English. I remember crying to my dad and begging him to not make me go to school on the day I had to take the test with the other students who were also Spanish native speakers. The test was cruel– it was a way to single out the students who did not belong in the American education system. However, my dad always calmed me down and reminded me that *el que sabe dos vale por dos* (7).



In middle school, I finally passed the English language learner test and was given a diploma that certified my English proficiency. My acceptance into academic English inspired me to immerse myself into English literature. I read *The Hunger Games*, *The Twilight Series*, and short stories. When my dad would catch me reading into the late night he would frown and say, “*Te voy a quitar ese libro* (8).” I used to get so mad at him for prohibiting me from reading my books, but I now realize that he did not mean to inhibit my development. In fact, my dad would encourage me to continue when he saw me reading books in Spanish. He would even inquire about the plot, the characters, and the literary elements, something he would never do when he saw me reading English books.

When I moved away for college, I did not realize the impact it would have on my Spanish skills. At first, I felt liberated to speak whatever language rolled off my tongue. I would code switch from Spanish to English and vice versa, but for obvious reasons, English became my dominant language. I would occasionally speak Spanish among my Latina friends. Surprisingly, speaking Spanish with them made me feel less homesick. However, the occasional Spanish conversations were not enough. When I went home, my dad would frown at me because my Spanish became broken again. I would ask,

“*Como se dice ‘seminar’ en Español?* (9).”

Before moving away to college, asking for translations did not bother me, but now it brought me shame. I realized I had completely assimilated into American culture, to the point almost of no return. What made me realize I needed to change was my dad's tearful eyes. Spanish is the only real connection I have to my family and my culture. Spanish is what still brings my family together despite their different interests. Spanish holds family secrets, traditions, and stories that we can pass down for generations. Realizing the importance of learning Spanish inspired me to minor in my native language. It is not enough to know simple conversational Spanish. To reinforce my Spanish, I need to practice it in an academic and professional setting. I am fortunate to be bilingual, and fortunate to have a father who knows the power of being bilingual; so, I will never give up on excelling in both languages.

*(1) "Daughter, how do I ask my boss what color he wants me to paint the wall?" (2) "You say, 'What color do you want me to paint the wall?'" (3) Swap meets (4) Good morning! (5) He who has the knowledge of two is worth two (6) "How do you say fence in Spanish?" (7) He who has the knowledge of two is worth two (8) "I'm gonna take that book away" (9) "How do you say seminar in Spanish?"*