



**California Institute  
of Integral Studies**

**International Journal of  
Transpersonal Studies**

Volume 35 | Issue 2

Article 3

7-1-2016

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## Recommended Citation

Lum, W. K., & Wade, J. (2016). Dreaming in two worlds and two languages: Bilingual dreams and acculturation challenges. *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, 35 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.24972/ijts.2016.35.2.1>



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# Dreaming in Two Worlds and Two Languages: Bilingual Dreams and Acculturation Challenges

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This study investigated the significance of first and second languages in the bilingual dreams of immigrant participants. A purposive sample of nine women and six men aged 20 to 71 whose first languages were Spanish, Thai, Italian, Tagalog, and French, and later acquired English, participated in semi-structured, open-ended interviews recalling a dream featuring both languages. Transcripts were thematically analyzed individually and across cases. The most important theme was the *ambicultural self* in the dream, referring to a culturally flexible dream figure able to speak the dreamer's first and second languages to bridge between the protagonist's two cultures to accomplish the dream task of somehow resolving cultural conflicts. The ambicultural self and dream tasks reflected challenges identified in Berry's acculturation model. Therapists can use bilingual dreams to help clients explore cultural identity conflicts and become more cross-culturally competent.

**Keywords:** *dream, bilingual, culture, identity, language, conflict, acculturation, immigrant*

Given an almost unprecedented rate of voluntary and involuntary migration today, vast numbers of people are living in a culture other than the one in which they were born. According to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, one of every 122 people in 2015 was involuntarily displaced from their homeland. In the United States alone an average of over one million people have legally obtained permanent resident status every year from 2000–2014 (Office of Immigration Statistics, 2016), and an estimated 11.4 million undocumented aliens resided in the United States in 2011 and 2012 (Baker & Retina, 2013). According to Eurostat's May 2016 figures, the official statistics arm of the European Union's executive, 3.8 million people immigrated to European Union countries, and 2.8 million emigrated from a European Union member state in 2014 ([http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration\\_and\\_migrant\\_population\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Migration_and_migrant_population_statistics)). Even when migration is voluntary, adjusting to a foreign culture is challenging. This study examined how experiencing and negotiating that challenge are revealed through the use of language in the bilingual dreams of immigrants to the United States.

## Language and Culture in Dreams

Besides the way culture is symbolized in dreams, the role of dreams in different cultures provides important context for their consideration. Psychotherapeutic processes in the West value dreams as representing unconscious reactions to external and internal realities as well as ways of coping with those realities (Eudell-Simmons & Hilseroth, 2007). Partly because of the focus of psychotherapy and the influence of Sigmund Freud (1938/1965), the Western emphasis on dreaming has been on finding the cause of repressed wishes in the dream to heal the individual by integrating that material with conscious awareness. Theorists believe these ways of functioning can be meaningfully pursued in therapy.

In many other cultures, however, especially indigenous cultures, dreams are studied to elicit information useful not only to individuals but also to the community, leading people to share their dreams for the benefit of all (Kuiken, 2006; Lawrence, 2003; Peluso, 2004; Tedlock, 2007). For example, Lincoln (1935) found that the Kwakwilt tribe relied on dreams for practical information about fishing and hunting conditions and used them as a resource for cultural change. According to George-

Joseph and Smith (2008), dreaming is an ongoing, transformative, creative process in the development of cultural expression. Dreams connect the dreamer to important aspects of culture (Hirst, 2005) as well as to supernatural wisdom about how to succeed in the life world (Hume, 2004; Schweitzer, 1996). This view is more congruent with Carl Jung's (1966), who emphasized the ability to promote psychological health through "big dreams" that have relevance beyond the individual's life, "collective dreams" that reveal "a collective problem that has not been recognized and appears as a personal problem" (Jung, 1960, p. 233). Thus, whereas an individual's dream may seem quite personal to the dreamer, it has the capacity to reveal information helpful to others on a much larger scale, and it was for the potential application of individual immigrant experiences to benefit the larger community of migrants that this study was undertaken.

In order to keep the research within manageable scope, the study focused on the use of language as a symbol of culture in dreams. As a primary communications medium that conveys ideas and information between people (Crystal, 2006; Harley, 1997), language is the "product of culture" (Hamers & Blanc, 2003, p. 8) as well as the "key vehicle of culture" (Chien & Benerjee, 2002, p. 211), suggesting that a dream containing both one's first, native language and a secondarily acquired language could be a valuable source of information in understanding a bilingual immigrant's unconscious attitudes toward the two worlds that he or she inhabits. Indeed, Ross, Xun, and Wilson (2002) found that bilingual individuals have separate cultural identities activated by the language of the culture.

Despite burgeoning research in code-switching, the term for using two or more languages in a communication interaction (Grosjean, 1982; Poplack, 1980), almost no research exists on the use of multiple languages in dreams. Code-switching is frequent and common in the spoken communication of bilingual people for strategic purposes. Sociolinguistic models postulate that daily conversation reveals spontaneous, more or less unconscious choices involving when, where, with whom, and to what end code-switching is used (e.g., Gardner-Chloros, 2009; Gumperz, 1971, 1976, 1977, 1982; Myer-Scotton, 1993; Ritchie & Bhatia, 2004). According to Myers-Scotton (1993), code-switching is a goal-oriented communication

strategy, in which speakers "exploit the possibility of linguistic choices in order to convey intentional meaning of a socio-pragmatic nature" (p. 57). In other words, a bilingual speaker's discourse strategies reveal the motivations behind these code-switches. It is this motivation that is central to the examination of code-switching in dreams.

Scant literature treats the role language plays in monolingual dreams, although this area was pioneered by Freud (1938), who believed that speech in dreams was contextually appropriate and that discontinuities in speech in waking life were expressions of unconscious conflict (1965). Heynick (1993) cited studies of monolingual dreams supporting Freud's hypothesis. Demangeat (1989) further speculated that a bilingual client using a language other than the one usually used in therapy could reveal an unconscious conflict. As Adler (1956) noted, dreams are keys to perceiving and explaining the unique meaning of an individual's life challenges, especially in areas where people feel inferior in relationship to others.

Although not discussing dreams, some psychotherapists have examined the emotional significance of code-switching in the self-narratives of bilingual patients during counseling sessions (e.g., Clauss, 1988; Flegenheimer, 1989; Gutfreund, 1990; Javier, 1989; Pérez Foster, 1998). Emotionally charged content, especially that associated with suppressed material and early memories when the first language was used, may be more available to clients when using their first language (e.g., Altarriba & Morier, 2004; Aragno & Schlachet, 1996; Buxbaum, 1949; Greenson, 1950; Pérez Foster, 1998). The choice of the second language may be a defense mechanism, permitting greater detachment and intellectualization of emotionally difficult material (e.g., Bond & Lai, 1986; Dewaele, 2004; Harris, Gleason, & Ayçiçeği, 2006; Javier, 1989; Movahedi, 1996; Pavlenko, 2005; Rozensky & Gomez, 1983). It is reasonable to expect that code-switching during unconscious processes such as dreaming would be especially revealing of cultural conflicts, particularly among bilingual immigrants: "transnational dreams offer insight into how people are psychologically affected by and synthesize cultural incongruities" (Mageo, 2004, p. 11).

Bilingual individuals often feel in waking life that they have two different identities (Burck, 2004; Pang, 2009; Pavlenko, 2006), and that they have

separate identities that are activated by the language of the different cultures represented by those (Ross, Xun, & Wilson, 2002). According to Berry (2001), cultural identity consists of the attitudes individuals have about themselves in relation to membership in their cultural group. Harter (1983) put forth the idea that identity should be seen as a *psychological construct* that is ever-changing in response to perceived changes in social reality, a view strongly reinforced by Ting-Toomey (2005). In this sense, cultural identity would include self-perception and is an important aspect of self-esteem. When an individual is in the process of adjusting to a new culture, he or she is taking the self that is associated with the original culture and beginning to form a sense of self attached to the new culture. Success in retaining self-esteem attached to the original culture while adjusting to a new culture may depend on the person's acculturation strategy.

Berry (1980) conceptualized four distinct acculturation strategies (i.e., assimilation, separation, marginalization, and integration) immigrant bilingual individuals use while undergoing the process or adapting to a new culture. These help shape a bilingual immigrant's cultural identity. Individuals who use the assimilation strategy tend to identify strongly with the second-language culture (or host culture) because of a desire to belong and be successful in their new environment (Berry, 2003). Therefore, such individuals may have a strong identity with the host culture but experience some cultural loss and disconnection with their sense of self that is attached to their original culture. When immigrants use separation as a strategy, they strongly identify with the first-language culture, with a lesser or nonexistent identification with the host culture. Marginalization is characterized by lack of identification with either culture (Berry, 2003). Berry (1992) noted that conflict inevitably arises when one uses separation or marginalization because these strategies develop out of a desire to resist or react against the dominant culture. According to Berry (1992), individuals who use the strategy of integration manage to hold onto their original culture's values while making some accommodation to, and interacting daily with, the host culture in a balanced way, which permits a bicultural identity to develop. Although Berry seems to have suggested that integration is the most desirable strategy on a continuum of acculturation, that may not be true (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee & Morris, 2002; Ting-Toomey, 2005; Vedder & Virra, 2005).

Bicultural integration in the context of developing cultural identities has come to the forefront of recent research. Research has begun to investigate the extent to which bicultural Americans identify with two cultures, not only on a conscious level, but also on an unconscious one. Miramontez (2010) studied Mexican American college students' explicit and implicit self-concepts as they relate to culture. Implicit self-concept as applied to cultural identity includes unconscious endorsements of a given culture. Miramontez assessed how Mexican American participants integrated their cross-cultural experience and knowledge into their ethnic identity. In his first study, he utilized the Implicit Association Test (IAT; Greenwald, McGhree, & Schwartz, 1998) to measure the strength of participants' involuntary, automatic, or unconscious associations with their ethnic identity. He also used the IAT to assess participants' unconscious and conscious endorsements of acculturation strategies based on Berry's (1980) model. Miramontez' results "indicated that the Mexican American participants tend to assess the self in relation to explicit and implicit acculturation strategies quite differently" (p. 3). Mexican American participants endorsed the integration and marginalization strategies on explicit measures and endorsed the separation strategy on implicit measures. Those who implicitly endorsed the separation strategy, unconsciously self-identifying with the Mexican culture, were less proficient in English, acknowledged more depressive symptoms, and were less open towards the mainstream culture. Miramontez' findings provide evidence of the importance of measuring implicit bicultural identifications due to the differences in conscious and unconscious endorsements. His findings that Mexican Americans who unconsciously endorse the acculturation strategy of separation exhibit depressive symptoms are congruent with previous research that has found this type of adaptation to be less resilient than others (Da Costa, 2008).

Although in Miramontez's study (2010), participants were not successful at bridging their two cultural worlds and identities, other research shows that bilingual, bicultural individuals who are successful in doing so evidence a kind of resilient emotional capacity congruent with Eng, Kuiken, Temme, and Sharma's study (2005) called *bicultural competency*. Eng et al. (2005) believed that the flexibility associated

with bicultural competence provides greater ability to cope with stress. They suggested that individuals who experience emotional events involving more than one culture develop an *emotional resiliency* that allows them not to judge too quickly when the emotional expressions belonging to one culture may seem improper in light of their own cultural expectations (Eng et al., 2005). Thus, they develop tolerance for behavior they take to be ambiguous. This ability to not feel offended, no matter what awkward situation emerges in a second-language culture, allows for comfort with complex emotional situations others might find stressful, and it shows alternative ways of expressing themselves offered by both cultures. They have a broader ability to identify, understand, and communicate their feelings when dealing with stress as well as to attune with both cultures in which they live (Eng et al., 2005).

Given that bicultural competency and emotional resiliency are central to the acculturation strategies that bilingual, bicultural individuals utilize in coping with the two cultures they inhabit; that speech in dreams appears to be contextually appropriate; and that language in therapy and in dreams is activated by cultural identities and cultural conflict, this study examined the languages used in dreams and how these worked within the dream dynamics.

### Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of language in bilingual dreams among people who had migrated to the United States. Participants were recruited from the San Francisco Bay Area in California, through flyers posted in various universities in print and on-line newspapers. To qualify participants had to have grown up with their first language in their native culture, but to have used English extensively since arriving in the United States; in other words, they had to be somewhat proficient in both languages. In addition, participants had to have lived in the United States long enough to have had a bilingual dream in which both languages were present and to be able to remember the details of it, especially around language, to articulate meaningful information for this study. Out of 28 volunteers who responded to the study, 15, nine women and six men, met the screening criteria administered via a survey that gathered demographic data, including length of residency in the United States, age they acquired English, levels of fluency, attitudes toward, and daily use of, first

and second languages (see Appendix for demographic questionnaire). Seven of the participants identified as Latino/Latina (five from Mexico; two from South and Central America), five identified as Asian (four from Thailand; one from the Philippines), one identified as American, and one each came from Italy and West Africa. Fourteen were born and raised outside the United States. Although one Latino was born in the United States, he and his family left when he was age 1 and did not return until he was age 8. Eight spoke Spanish as their first language, the most frequent language among the participants. The second most frequent language was Thai (four speakers). Others spoke Italian, Tagalog, and French as their first language. Fourteen spoke English as their second language, and for one the second language was Russian.

Participants, for the most part, came to their second-language country early in life, with the majority arriving prior to the age of 30. Five participants acquired their second language before age 10; eight before age 20; and two before age 30. All but one was living in the United States, their second-language country, for a period ranging from 6 months to 60 years.

Nine participants had completed at least one year of college, and six had college degrees. Nine were students, three were retired, and four were working in different professions.

Participants engaged in a one-hour semi-structured interview in a non-clinical setting in relaxed conversation in English, conducted in person by the researcher, except for two participants who lived in Los Angeles and Seattle and were interviewed over the telephone. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the primary researcher. Participants were asked to describe the dream in the present tense to avoid creating a barrier between “the waking mind and the dream experience . . . [which might] obscure and obliterate these subtle and meaningful elements of the dream experience” (Taylor, 1983, p. 43). The interview questions probed the participants’ feelings, attitudes, and associations to the dream, elements in the dream, and the languages used by the dream figures. The participants’ first language that appeared in the dream was spoken in that language and later verbally translated into English by the participant, and was transcribed verbatim into the manuscript. These



phrases were repeated back to participants to elicit clarification; for example, in one dream entitled, *You Went Abroad*:

Researcher: So you had mentioned in the dream you asked in Thai, “C., how come your skin is so dark?” Is this a phrase or expression that you have heard of in Thai before?”

Participant: Yes. You know, when I went to school in Hawaii, and then came home after I graduated—I remember the first thing that my father said to me was, “How come your skin is so dark?” Because, you know, for Thai people, it’s opposite of here. They like you to have fair skin. And to have dark skin is just like, you know, like—this is my father’s words—he says that, “You went abroad.” It means you have changed.

The participants were also asked about the events that were going on in their lives at the time of the dream and their associations to the dream and waking life events surrounding the dream.

The study took a heuristic approach to data analysis in addition to utilizing standard thematic analysis. The analysis consisted of two parts. First each of the 15 dreams was individually analyzed for its themes, and then themes were compared across dreams. Analysis of each dream entailed examination of the participant’s relationship with the dream figures who used first and second languages, as well as his or her associations to the first and second languages and to the dream symbols. Conflict in each dream was identified by abrupt shifts in dream settings and obvious relationship conflicts between dream figures. Using the thematic analysis steps described by Braun and Clarke (2006), transcripts and initial analyses of the individual dreams were reviewed, and then some salient categories were created intuitively without consulting the data directly before examining the data again for patterns common across the dreams, and delving into those patterns. For example, it was evident early on that many dreams featured vehicles, that all dreams seemed to have an identifiable dream task, and that most had conflict represented by sudden shift in dream setting and/or unresolved issues that seemed to be related to language and culture. To validate the data, examine the findings, and verify the interpretation of the themes, researchers with bilingual, multilingual, and dream expertise were consulted and reviewed the analysis.

## Results

Eight major themes arose from the data, presented here from simplest to most complex for ease of understanding the data; discussion is limited to the three most significant, owing to length constraints. The three simplest themes are: 1) *Language choice in bilingual dreams related to persons*—most participants (14) used the same language with a dream character they used with the person the dream character represented in waking life. 2) *Participants’ attitudes and associations toward first language and second language in waking life*—the majority of participants had positive attitudes towards their first language and felt at ease and able to express their emotions with it. They stressed that their first language reminded them about their early personal relationships in their native culture. Nine participants associated their second language variously with being concise or technical, a necessity, less emotionally sensitive and expressive than their first language, and/or difficult to learn. 3) *Familiarity of first- and second-language figures*—13 dreams featured first-language figures the participant knew in waking life whereas the second-language figures represented both strangers (six) and familiar figures (eight).

Themes involving non-human symbols focused in two areas. *Dwellings*—eight dreams featured a house in the first- or second-language cultural setting. *Travel symbols* were defined as objects that transport a dream figure from one place or state to another, and they appeared in 12 of the 15 dreams. Most were more or less literal conveyances, such as trains (3), cars (2), bicycles (2), planes (1), motorcycles (1), dray animals (1), and a rope. Metaphorical travel between cultural states in the dreams was symbolized by a computer (2), a dictionary (1), and a telephone (1). For example in the dream *St. Petersburg*, a train was waiting for the protagonist and friends representing his first- and second-language relationships. The protagonist ultimately boarded the train with representatives of his first-language culture, leaving the second-language representative behind. The train was going to take them on the next leg of their journey, which would ultimately be a first-language environment. This dream also included a plane, which took the protagonist and his first- and second-language relationship figures to a second-language environment. But some travel symbols were metaphorical devices that helped transport the

protagonist from one state to another, particularly by bridging communication gaps. In the dream *Computer Upgrade*, the participant helped his first-language self assemble a computer for “processing words” with more powerful components for communicating in his second-language environment to accomplish a goal. In *Dictionary*, Participant 5 helped her first-language self find meaning in the second-language culture by using a dream dictionary. Thirteen dreams featured a journey, with four involving reaching their destination using a vehicle during the dream, and another three beginning with the dreamer having arrived at a new destination when the dream began. For instance, the dream *Graduate School Student on Vacation* began with the protagonist finding himself in a vacation location notable for its food and people.

The three most complex themes, the *Dream task*, *Conflicts*, and the *Ambicultural Self* are discussed at length below.

#### **Dream Task**

The *dream task*, defined as a goal that the dream protagonist was trying to accomplish within the dream, appeared in 11 dreams, and in all of them, the protagonist needed both languages to complete the task. As noted above, in *Computer Upgrade*, the protagonist’s dream task was to help his first-language friend build a more powerful computer that would enable him to communicate more effectively. The protagonist spoke Spanish to his friend but needed to use English, his second language, for the technical terms of the computer components. He was successful in accomplishing this task.

In three dreams, the protagonist, despite using both language, was unable to accomplish the dream task. For instance in the dream *St. Petersburg*, the dream task was to have a good time with both a first-language (French) relationship represented by a male friend in the dream and a second-language (Russian) relationship represented by a girl friend in the dream traveling to the first-language country from a second-language environment (Kazakhstan). In the first leg of their journey, the dream figures were still in a second-language environment, Moscow, where the girlfriend wanted to stay longer and visit St. Petersburg. However, the protagonist’s male friend, who may represent his first-language self, was unwilling. The protagonist in the dream felt torn between the two, who seemed to have divergent interests. In the end, his

girlfriend refused to go with them. Thus, the dream task of having a good time with representatives of both cultures was not accomplished.

Interestingly, in seven dreams the dream task was to have a good time, which only three dream protagonists accomplished.

#### **Conflicts**

Nine dreams had an identifiable conflict, usually concerning tensions between the participant’s two cultures. Eight participants, in discussing their waking lives, appeared to be feeling trapped in the second-language environment, including feeling isolated and restricted in expressing themselves emotionally in their second language, within their second-language relationships, and in the second-language environment. They seemed to feel ineffective in resolving conflict between their two cultures. One participant who used marginalization as an acculturation strategy (Berry, 1992), for example, isolated himself from the Mexican culture, seemed to feel that success in the U.S. culture was inaccessible to him, and was living a “dangerous” life with drug-addicted, marginalized people. Participants married to second-language speakers and relatively more isolated from important aspects of their first-language environment had dreams that reflected these themes. They did not appear to be thriving or enjoying themselves in their host culture.

Conflicts in the dream settings appeared as unresolved situations, obvious differences, and/or abrupt shifts in the dream setting. For example, not being able to accomplish the dream task or reach the dream destination was considered an indication of an unresolved conflict. One example dream is *Island*, which took place in the participant’s first-language environment, where the protagonist wanted to have fun with his girlfriend (second-language relationship). She was driving around with friends and refused to join him. Even though he wound up in the car with her and her friends, he felt trapped, isolated, and unable to thrive or accomplish his desire. In seven dreams, the protagonist felt excluded by the second-language culture, usually by dream figures behaving in rejecting, attacking, abusive, or unresponsive ways to the protagonist.

In three dreams, the protagonists escaped conflict in their second-language environment through a sudden shift into a setting where the dream

figures speak and comprehend the participant's first language. Dreams reflecting this theme suggested a need to escape the harsh realities arising from conflicts with the second-language environment in waking life, especially an inability to assert oneself in that environment, by seeking the nurturing environment of the first-language culture. For example, in one dream, *From BART to Heaven*, the protagonist, who is unable to get second-language speakers to help her get to her destination on public transportation despite speaking their language, suddenly finds herself in heaven feeling blissful and talking to a first-language-speaking God. The central figures in these dreams seemed to be lost, confused, isolated, and unsure of their reality in the second-language environment. The individuals who had these dreams seemed to be having difficulty in establishing satisfying connections with second-language people in waking life. For example, one participant reported that English is "the only way [she] can communicate with both of her daughters [who] only speak English" and that it is difficult to express her "feelings and thoughts accurately" in English; she has found herself "confused and frustrated."

Another conflict, appearing in two dreams, involved the fear of losing or being rejected by the first-language culture by becoming too identified with the second-language culture. In one dream *Selling Roses at the Back Door*, a Thai participant with a second-language husband dreamed that she was not able to connect with a first-language relationship represented by the phone. Her first two attempts to communicate with her friend calling from Thailand were compromised by a phone connection that was too weak to hear and worries that the phone battery was running down. On the third attempt, she was interrupted by a second-language figure who tried to sell her roses from a back door that had been left open by her husband in the dream. She refused to buy the roses, which represented love, romance and beauty to her. The conflict in this dream appears to be that the participant feared she was unconsciously influenced by her second-language culture, which frustrated her attempts to connect with her first-language culture and/or relationships. The participant may have been unsure she wanted to "buy" these different cultural values. (In some cultures, such as the Thai culture, family and cultural loyalty are important aspects of psychological wellbeing; Lee, 1979). Another dream, *You Went Abroad*, from a Thai-language participant seemed to

reflect the participant's fear that the part of her that was identified with the second-language culture was becoming more dominant, aggressive, and bolder than she would like, and that it was changing her in a way that threatened her first-language loyalties. Her dream took place in her Thai friend's house with a bilingual couple and their adopted daughter who only spoke English. In the dream, her friend's English-speaking husband who does not speak Thai well was walking downstairs naked from the waist down. Her dream seemed to indicate an unconscious worry that under the influence of her "adopted culture" she might expose too much of her private self by expressing herself honestly and directly in public, which a speaker in her first-language culture would not do. These dream conflicts involve difficulty integrating both cultures into the participants' identity, a sense of guilt around disloyalty to their original culture, and feeling somewhat restricted from expressing themselves fully in both cultures, which prevented them from experiencing their authentic selves.

#### **Ambicultural Self**

The last, and perhaps most significant theme, is a dynamic called the *ambicultural self*, employing the Latin root signifying *both*, to distinguish the construct used here from the more traditional *bicultural*, which is used in the scholarly literature in ways that suggest the acceptance of values from, and adaptation to, two cultures, which may or may not involve bilingualism or a particular trajectory of acculturation in the life world (e.g., Berry's theory, 1992; cf., Norton, 1997). The ambicultural self refers a dream ego distinguished by two features: 1) its ability to bridge or mediate effectively the dream conflict between the first- and second-language cultures by using both languages, whether or not the conflict was resolved; and 2) its process of developing a cross-cultural competency that was more flexible in coping with the two cultures than other dream figures connected to the participant's first- or second-language cultures.

Ten dreams featured an identifiable ambicultural self. The following three dream narratives illustrate how the dynamic ambicultural self differs from other dream figures in managing cultural conflicts. The first, which lacks an ambicultural self, illustrates the kinds of conflicts that leave bilingual individuals feeling trapped or helpless in an unresponsive second-language environment and



escaping that environment by going to a first-language environment.

**Dream—From BART to Heaven.** The participant was a 48-year-old Latina college student attempting to get enough credits to enter a bachelor's program. She was born and grew up in Mexico and identified her ethnicity as Mexican. She acquired English when she arrived in the United States at age 28. She was married to an American who spoke only English. When asked about her feelings about English, she said that English was the language that she used at home and at work and it reminded her that she was "living in a different culture," one that was not her own. She added: "I know it's very difficult for me to fit into [this] culture." She also said, "I really love Spanish. I don't like English. In the university, you have to choose a language, and I didn't want to learn English." The dreamer had the following dream 14 years before the interview:

I'm at the BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] station in Fremont, and I start talking to people. I start making conversation with people, asking questions about San Francisco, where I'm going to go. I'm speaking in English and asking questions and suddenly nobody listens to me and I don't know why. And I keep asking questions and trying to make conversation. I was asking a person who was next to me, an older woman, "Oh, do you know how can I get to the Academy of Science?" For some reason, she didn't answer me. . . . I went to another person, and I asked, "Could you please tell me where I can get to this place?" And I got no response. So, what I do is, when I see myself, I'm totally in the sky. I'm flying—for some reason, I'm going higher and higher into the sky. What is happening there is I'm starting to feel a lot of light, incredible light. And I'm feeling that this incredible happiness, and I'm ecstatic about . . . the light that's around me—the light is around me, and I have this peace. I have this incredible peace in my mind, and from every part of my body, I feel this happiness. And when I look, the people are very small—very tiny. And suddenly I cannot even see them. And I'm still in the sky, and I am close to God. I feel Him next to me. But I don't see Him—I'm not seeing Him at this time. I don't see God at this time, but I feel in

every part of my body, I mean, all this happiness. Suddenly, I know—this lasts a while—suddenly I ask God in Spanish, "Please God, don't let me go back. Don't let me go back." And I know that I'm back on Earth . . . I feel all light and happy. And for some reason I can't open my eyes, but I try to open my eyes. I feel the light. I know I'm right now on Earth. And the reason I can't open my eyes is because my hands are covering my eyes. But it was my husband—giving me his back, and on his back I'm covering my eyes—and suddenly I separate my hands. I can't open my eyes, because I am close . . . very close to his back. So, even if I ask, and I pray to God to not let me come back, I know I am back. And I still feel this happiness.

The dream destination, the Academy of Sciences, could represent the participant's desire for intellectual stimulation or academic achievement, especially in English. The fact that she was unable to reach her destination indicates a conflict. She was not able to either make connections with or get help from people in her second-language culture even when she used their language.

The sudden shift in the dream setting most likely represents a magical escape from a difficult situation or conflict. In this case, the participant found herself next to God and extremely happy. In speaking Spanish, God seemed to represent her attitude towards her first language, but the divine dream figure is idealized and in a place removed from the participant's life on earth and disconnected from other human beings. The participant did not want to go back to her life on Earth, and when she did in the dream, even her husband was turning his back on her, making it difficult for her to see what was in front of her. The protagonist was not able to complete the dream task, nor did she use both languages to try to achieve it, only English. Although she spoke both languages in the dream, she was not effective in coping with conflict. At the time of the dream, the participant appeared to use the acculturation strategy of separation, consciously avoid interacting with the host culture while holding onto the valued aspects of the original culture (Berry, 1992).

The next two dreams illustrate the presence of an ambicultural self. One included a figure that

seemed to assist the participant in developing an ambicultural self, and the other included a figure that showed competency in both cultures.

**Dream—Nail in Lip.** The participant was a 28-year-old graduate student born in Mexico with Spanish as his native language. He identified as Mexican, saying “I think that nationally, I’m always going to say I’m Mexican. I love my country . . . I know my background, I know where I come from, and I’m always proud to say where I’m from.” He acquired English when he arrived in the United States at age 10. At the time of the study, he used Spanish with his parents and English at work daily. He said:

Spanish is a symbol of strength that I’m still who I am. You know, I’m still that person. Like, I haven’t changed. I try not to change, and I want—you know, I still want to be part of my culture. So if I was to forget my language, then I exclude myself from my culture. That’s what it means. . . . Probably Spanish to me is like holding my ground. Like, I don’t want to change my culture, so I’m going to speak Spanish . . . English is just something that I need to—it’s just a necessity to me.

The participant had the following dream 4 years before the interview:

I see myself walking in this place that looks like a desert. There’s just roads—there’s dirt roads and rocks. In the distance, I see a person that is dressed in black. He’s kind of like bald-headed. I mean, he has hair, but he looks like he shaved his headland has little hair growth. So I go after this person, and as I’m trying to reach this person, I see a train. And the view of the train, it’s like curvy. The train’s not moving; it’s stopped. And it’s one of those freight trains, kind of like the Union Pacific train—commerical train. I walk alongside of the train, and then I see that in the floor there’s shattered wood and rusted nails. And the wood actually looks old. And so I just walk and I’m walking over the wood and the nails, and I’m still trying to reach this person that is dressed in black. So, as I reach this person that is walking away from me and I get closer, I see that he has a lot of piercings in his face, kind of like a gothic-looking boy—like a 16-year-old boy. He has a lot

of piercings in his eyebrows, in his lips, in his nose, ears—a lot. It’s quite an impression. And then I see him and he pulls a nail out of his lip—like a piercing in his lip—it’s like a chrome nail, like very shiny chrome, and he holds it like this, and he puts it in my hand. And as he puts it in my hand and I hold it, the nail transforms into a sword. It’s a big sword. So then I grab the sword and then I just go like this [makes a motion like swinging a sword], and then I swing it, and as I swing it softly the sword just gets harder.

So he tells me in Spanish *no sé si te lo debería haber dado* which means, “I don’t know if I should have given it to you.” So I take the sword and I tell him, also in Spanish, “Teach me how to use it” [*Enséñame cómo usarla*] and then he says in English, “I have to go.”

So then he goes, and then I see myself walking again through my journey. And I see a warehouse, and I go inside this warehouse and there’s a group of people that have all the same shirt—they’re like uniform shirts—they have small squares on the shirts. And they have, like, a net made out of leaves—like, green leaves. And they are holding me together, and they’re all on top of me, and I’m struggling to get out, but they won’t [let me]. So then I finally free myself, and then I am running away from them and telling them, “I’m going to come back,” in English. And then finally I move away and I see the boy in black. And he’s walking away, but I see as he’s walking away, he’s looking back at me, and I’m trying to reach him. But as I try to reach him, the dream ends.

This dream portrays a conflict of feeling trapped in second-language environment and feeling not included by second-language culture. The dream figure that represented the participant was the only human being in the desert, indicating he felt alone, disconnected, and without resources. The train has stopped running, which might represent the participant’s immobility in reaching toward a new life, a feeling that he is not moving forward in his second-language environment. In addition, he seemed to feel trapped in the new culture net by second-language figures.

The gothic boy appears as a kind of inspiration for the protagonist because the gothic boy acts as the

ambicultural self, offering a resource in the form of a sword for being effective in the second-language culture. After the boy appears, the protagonist has something to reach for, the dream task is to get to the boy and learn how to use the sword. The rusty nails on the floor of the train could relate to the chrome nail in the boy's lip that was transformed into the resource, a mighty sword. The fact that the nail in the boy's lip became the sword seems to indicate that the tool the protagonist was given had to do with speech or language. Wielding the sword empowered the protagonist, thus using the second language could make the participant feel more effective in his second-language environment. In reference to the sword, the participant said, "It could be a skill . . . that's going to help me get ahead in my work. It's something that I have, but I do not know what it is." The sword seemed to represent a capacity that the participant has but may be afraid to use.

In the interview, the participant also said the gothic boy did not want to teach him how to use the sword because he was afraid that the protagonist might misuse it. In the dream, the protagonist had trouble wielding his power and forgets he has the sword when being held down by vines, a conflict about being more effective in the second-language environment. In the dream, the participant associated the people holding him down with people at a job where he used to work. He believed he was effective in his work, but that others were jealous or envious of his abilities. He said, "When I saw the train not going anywhere; that was the job."

The imagery suggests that at the time the dream occurred, the participant unconsciously wanted to hold onto his original culture but found it hard to be successful in his second-language environment. The protagonist did not seem able to fully realize his ambicultural capacity or to enjoy the second-language culture, but the gothic boy seems to indicate that the protagonist has the internal resources and resilience to succeed in the new culture. The participant seemed to fit into Berry's (1992) integration strategy despite having some difficulty fully identifying with or asserting himself in the second-language culture at the time of the dream. Therefore this dream indicates a developing cultural flexibility that is still short of the competency demonstrated in the next dream.

**Dream—Wedding Dress.** The participant was a retired 66-year-old woman born in Thailand

speaking Thai who came to America when she was 41, 25 years before the interview. She acquired English when she was in the fifth grade. She used to dream in Thai when she first arrived in the United States, but her dreams had all been in English for many years. At the time of the dream, which occurred 3 months before the interview, she still used Thai daily at home and with her Thai friends and she had been anticipating going to Thailand for vacation. Her sister, who appears in the dream, had passed away 9 months before the interview:

I am in Thailand on vacation and visiting my family. My two nieces, my sister's daughters, ask me to go shopping with them (I speak English with Niece 1, and Thai with Niece 2 because Niece 2 cannot speak English that well.) We went to shop for a dress for their mother (my sister). This dress is for her to go to a wedding. We walk around and see a white lacy dress and they like it. Niece 1 says in English, "This is the dress, and Mom will like it." Niece 2 says in Thai, "I think the dress is a little too young for Mom." I look at the dress and say in English, "It should be okay if she likes it. The dress is off white, almost a beige color. Since she loves to be pretty and beautiful and most of all she likes the dress, it should be okay." I tell them in Thai, "I think this dress might be too big on her." I ask the saleslady in Thai, "We need one size smaller than this one." She comes back with the right size and says in Thai, "Do you know this dress comes with a pair of white shoes too?" I say in Thai, "Wow, it's perfect!" So I say to both of my nieces in English, "Okay, this is a perfect dress and we have a pair of shoes to go with it too. I can't wait to see her smiling face when she wears it!" They all agree (we are all smiling), so we buy the dress. I am very happy in my dream that we found a perfect dress for her. I was still happy when I woke up.

The conflict in this dream appears to be between the two nieces who seem to represent both aspects of the participant's ambicultural self. In waking life and in the dream, the participant used her native language with one niece and her second language with the other. In the dream, the second-language niece likes the dress for the participant's deceased sister but the niece associated with Thai

culture thinks it is too young for their mother. In the interview, the participant associated what the niece said about the dress being too young with the Thai culture, which is more conservative.

The central dream figure who seems to represent the participant, was identified as the ambicultural self attempting to bridge the conflict by using both languages, telling one in English and one in Thai, “It should be okay if she likes it.” The wedding that her sister, who might also represent the participant, was attending might also symbolize the bridging of the two cultures. The dress needed some adjustment, but the saleslady (representing the first language) told the protagonist that the dress came with the shoes, giving her a complete outfit to go to the wedding, and was able to find her the right fit. The dress and the shoes seemed to represent the participant’s ambicultural identity, perhaps indicating that the participant felt some acceptance of her ambicultural identity by her first-language culture. In this dream, the participant appeared to be using Berry’s (1992) integration strategy with less resistance and becoming fully identified with the second-language culture. Whereas the participant of *Nail in Lip* seemed to worry about losing his first-language cultural identity, the participant here seems to be able to successfully resolve conflict between cultural identities. Even though as shown in the dream, the outfit (the culture identity) was not a perfect match (off-beige dress and white shoes), the protagonist in the dream was “happy” and she thought it was a pleasing outfit, “perfect” and beautiful.

According to Eng et al.’s (2005) criteria of tolerance for differing cultural behaviors, attitudes, and flexibility in interacting in different social contexts regardless of cultural expectations, *Wedding Dress* demonstrated the protagonist’s sensitivity in recognizing different cultural views and her ability to gain the approval of a figure representing her first-language culture’s point of view, who went on to find the right fit for the dress and matching shoes, a “perfect” combination even though they were of varying colors. Furthermore, this dream portrays a kind of emotional resiliency in the participant’s ability to cope with the loss of her sister.

Enjoying life seems to be an attainable goal for those developing the capacity to function well within two different cultures with conflicting beliefs, attitudes, and values. From the data, many of these

participants were still in the process of negotiating conflicts between the two cultures and their cultural identities. Of the many (seven) protagonists who had as their dream task *to have a good time*, only two exhibited ambicultural competency in the study.

In another dream, *Graduate Student on Vacation*, people from both cultures sat and ate together and conversed in both languages in a peaceful, coastal, buffet-type second-language setting. The protagonist enjoyed himself eating (being nurtured), interacting with both his Spanish-speaking family and English-speaking acquaintances in his host-culture environment. They were nurturing one another and communicating in spite of their language and cultural differences. Unlike the majority of dreams in this study, there was no shift in the dream setting or unresolved relationship issues in the dream. The dream message appears to be telling the protagonist that he is doing well in his second-language environment.

Ways the ambicultural self is represented—when it appears—in a bilingual dream may show which strategies an individual is using in Berry’s mode. (1992). Some may form disparate identities that cannot be successfully bridged and that lead to their employing marginalization and separation acculturation strategies. Others may develop cross-cultural competency through the integration of both cultures into their identity. These could be relevant in therapy, as an indication of the client’s past or current acculturation.

Ten out of 15 participants whose dreams featured an ambicultural self seemed to be utilizing Berry’s (1992) integration strategy. They were interacting with both cultures daily and used their first and second languages to adapt to their second-language culture. Many of them spoke about the importance of holding onto their original cultural values in their waking life. It is significant that the majority of the dreams with an ambicultural self also had “having a good time” as a dream task.

Five participants whose dreams lacked an ambicultural self appeared to be using Berry’s (1992) other acculturation strategies—assimilation, separation, and marginalization—and to have more difficulties in their second-language cultures as shown by the unresolved situations and/or abrupt shifts in the dream settings from the second-language environment to the first-language environment, which was more nurturing.



## Conclusion

Limitations of this study include the small, regional, relatively well-educated sample from diverse cultures, all of which reduce generalization. Different languages and cultures have different emotional representations. For example, despite research that some immigrants use the second language for distance from emotions (e.g., Altarriba & Morier, 2004; Buxbaum, 1949; Greenson, 1950; Pérez Foster, 1998), Pang (2009) found that some native Mandarin speakers felt more emotionally expressive when speaking English, as did Pavlenko (2005, 2006). The delimited sample is not representative of bilingual individuals who are not immigrants or members of an ethnic minority in their native country. For example, in Hong Kong and Taiwan, many native Chinese speakers are bilingual with English, their second language, and even though English is not the dominant language, it has a higher status than Chinese. Moreover, the research interviews were conducted in English, except when participants related use of their first language in dreams, when they reverted (and were asked to revert) to the first language in the narrative. Participants provided their own English interpretations of their first-language expressions. English is the second language of the researcher, and transcripts were carefully reviewed for clarity. Every effort was made to convey the intended meaning of the speakers by staying true to their words, but their message may be distorted in unknown ways.

Triangulating the qualitative findings with a quantitative approach would provide validation of some of the major findings. For pure research purposes, language proficiency measures might be appropriate to assess second-language fluency, but for clinical purposes, other assessments might be more useful; such as using an acculturation scale to assess the acculturation strategy of the participants and a measure designed to assess bicultural identity; for example, the Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) scale (Benet-Martínez and Haritatos, 2005) that assesses *cultural blendedness*, the extent to which attachment to the two cultures overlaps or is distant (or distinct) from one another, and *cultural harmony*, the extent to which harmony or conflict exists between the two cultures.

The ambicultural self in the dreams seemed to represent the capacity for resilience identified in Eng et al.'s (2005) research, in which bicultural competency

was related to flexibility that emerges from interacting within two varying cultures. The ambicultural self appears to be able to exhibit more authenticity, at least in the dreams, than those whose dreams reflected a constraint due to their loyalty and need for approval from their native culture. In addition, from their dreams and interviews, participants whose dreams featured an ambicultural self seemed to show a greater ability to enjoy their lives in the second-language culture and integrate valuable aspects of the second-language culture while sustaining their original values and beliefs. In contrast, the participants in whose dreams lacked an ambicultural self seemed to struggle with feeling included in the U.S. culture.

Therapists can seek information about clients' current language usage and attitudes towards code-switching, including their bilingual lived experience in the United States (Pang, 2009) in addition to exploring how each language relates to identity construction. Monolingual and bilingual therapists should be alert to and invite code-switching as a therapeutic tool to help clients express themselves and surface conflicts. Encouraging clients to express certain emotional terms in their first language and having them translate into the second language can benefit both client and clinician in uncovering areas of concern (Altarriba & Morier, 2004; Pérez Foster, 1998) and resources for resolution.

Although this study was not conducted in the clinical setting, by exploring bilingual dreams therapists may identify conflicts clients have about their cultural identities at the time of the dream, whether past or present, to observe their acculturation. Furthermore, such insights may increase clients' understanding of how these conflicts affect their self-esteem and ability to succeed in the second-language environment. Such explorations may help people who are reluctant to discuss discrimination and racism in the second-language culture. Bilingual dreams may uncover the nuances of feelings of isolation and help the therapist and client gain greater appreciation for these second-language environment experiences. Bilingual dreams appear to also offer repressed early life experiences or traumas associated with leaving the original culture. Finally, therapists with a psychodynamic orientation may be able to help their bilingual bicultural clients find out what restrains them from becoming more fully competent and emotionally resilient individuals in two cultures.



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## Notes

1. Author Note: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Winifred K. Lum at wlumphd@gmail.com. This article is based on dissertation research conducted under the aegis of an internal review board.

## Appendix: Demographic Questionnaire

- What is your name?  
What is your address?  
What is your age?  
Are you bilingual?  
What is your first language?  
How do you identify yourself in terms of ethnicity?  
Were you born in a country outside of the United States?  
Which country did you come from?  
What language did you grow up speaking?  
How long have you resided in this country?  
How old were you when you arrived in the United States?  
Is English your second language?  
When did you acquire it?  
How comfortable/fluent are you with English?  
How often you use your first language?  
Whom do you most often speak your first language with?  
Whom, among the people you grew up with, do you speak your first language with?  
Whom, among the people you grew up with, did you speak English with?  
Which language do you use at home?  
Which language do you use at work?  
Do you dream in both languages?  
What language do you primarily dream in?  
What comes to mind when you think of your first language?  
What comes to mind when you think of English?  
Can you remember a dream that had both languages in it?  
If yes, would you be able to retell that dream and talk about it?

### About the Authors

*Winifred Lum, PhD*, is a transpersonal psychologist, raised within Western and Eastern traditions. Her interest in bicultural bilingual individuals and dreams has been the inspiration for her research, writing and poetry. Her dissertation, *The Role Language Plays in Bilingual Dreams: An Exploratory Study* (2010), investigated the significance of first and second languages in the bilingual dreams of immigrant participants. She has been an art director, an educator (SFSU, CCSF, and Academy of Art University), and a clinical trainee at UCSF. She was a group facilitator in a mental health

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### About the Journal

The *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic journal in print since 1981. It is sponsored by the California Institute of Integral Studies, published by Floragldes Foundation, and serves as the official publication of the International Transpersonal Association. The journal is available online at [www.transpersonalstudies.org](http://www.transpersonalstudies.org), and in print through [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) (search for IJTS).