

My Spanish Me

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“ Please, stop speaking to me in Spanish,” once said my eight-year-old daughter, crushing my heart.

At the time, we were living in Miami, a multicultural city where Spanish was spoken by at least sixty percent of the population. I grew up speaking Spanish and Portuguese and I wanted my daughter to speak more than English, so my husband and I decided that I would speak to Emma in Spanish and he would speak to her in English. When she was around five, during her first summer vacation in Portugal, Emma picked up the language with such ease that I decided to start speaking to her in Portuguese too. We’d speak Spanish during the week and Portuguese on weekends.

I was proud of how well she learned to express herself in the languages of my parents, especially when we traveled back to Madrid and Lisbon every summer and both sides of my family praised her fluency. I loved both languages, but having grown up mostly in Madrid, I loved Spanish the most.

When Emma decided she no longer wanted to speak in Spanish to me, I thought it might be one of those funny phases kids go through like when she was four and she told me she wanted to change her name. I remember one evening calling her downstairs for dinner, by her name, with my usual Spanish intonation, and getting no

response. I went looking for her and saw her standing, defiantly, at the top of the stairs in her Tinker Bell costume with her arms crossed and her lips tightly pressed. “My name is Flower!” she growled. Thankfully, two days later, she decided to change her name back to Emma.

This time things seemed more complicated because she was older. We were all sitting at the breakfast table—Emma, her father, and I—when she turned to me and said, “Please, stop speaking to me in Spanish. From now on, only speak to me in Portuguese.”

Her father and I looked at each other puzzled.

“When you speak to me in Portuguese,” she continued, “you sound sweet like you’re about to give me a hug, but when you speak to me in Spanish you sound like you’re going to spank me.”

My husband and I laughed at the overly dramatic comparison. But then, he narrowed his eyes as if trying to find a reasoning behind Emma’s request.

“Well....” He turned to me. “Let’s say it’s like comparing the smooth notes of bossa with the hard stamping of a feisty flamenco dancer. You do sound sweeter when you speak in Portuguese.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Ha!”

That morning, after they left for school and work, a crushing wave of sadness washed over me. I couldn’t stop thinking about Emma’s request. My daughter was asking me to stop speaking the language of my heart.

In an attempt to understand, I scanned my brain for the numerous more melodic tones of the Latin American accents that I habitually heard living in Miami, and realized that, in comparison, Castilian did sound quite dry and harsh. Was my Spanish as jagged as the scree in the poems of Antonio Machado’s *Fields of Castile*?

Looking back, when Emma was a baby, I do remember singing to her in Portuguese to lull her to sleep, not sure if by doing so I was trying to keep my mother’s memory present, as she had just passed away a few months before Emma’s birth, or because singing in Portuguese simply felt right, more gentle to a baby’s ears which could be due to its naturally softer intonation.

Could Emma be right? Did I sound that awful when I spoke in Spanish? Growing up, I remember every time my brothers and sisters and I traveled to Portugal with my mother we had to switch gears, Mother constantly reminding us to speak

softly, to say please, and to never drink from a can of soda, a practice the Portuguese regarded as barbaric. “Remember, we’re not in Spain,” she often repeated.

As the day went on, Emma’s request, to stop speaking to her in Spanish, kept buzzing in my head, prompting me to look closely at the different ways I expressed myself. In English, I seemed to use a more formal, neutral tone. In Portuguese, I spoke more carefully too and more gently but in Spanish, I was more articulate, more assertive, and much louder.

In English, I’m cautious. I pace myself, making sure I’m always polite and practical; in Portuguese, I slow down, as I don’t speak it as often and therefore have to think more but in Spanish nothing holds me back. I’m spontaneous and impulsive, and hardly ever find myself saying “please” or “thank you,” something in English or Portuguese I cannot do without. Years after moving to the US, I received a phone call from a friend in Madrid who spoke to me in Spanish and before hanging up I thanked her for calling.

She laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “Why would you thank me for something like that?” Clearly, my English-speaking politeness had seeped into my Spanish me for the better but, unfortunately, not enough for Emma.

For many years, often going back and forth between three languages while living in Miami, I had not realized I’d become three different people: the American diplomat, the Portuguese priestess, and the Spanish sergeant.

When it came to arguing, a Spanish switch flipped inside my brain, causing a flurry of feistiness to flood my mind. There’s a saying in Spain: *Al pan, pan y al vino, vino* which means: “Call a spade, a spade,” an expression I’ve faithfully lived by that sometimes clashes with my husband’s Caribbean and southern sensibilities as a Cuban who was raised in Virginia and Texas. His Spanish is warmed with tropical tones and peppered with “thank yous” and “pleases,” a cool summer breeze of niceties and patience, which sometimes can even further fuel my Spanish feistiness.

All goes well when we engage in English, the language he’s most comfortable with, but when we argue—usually about politics—instantly, the switch in my brain is flipped, releasing a swarm of swinging Spanish swords, slashing to bits every single word my husband says. He usually ends up responding with the same line “your words bounce off me like raindrops off the breastplate of a knight.” After twenty five years of marriage, he admits he’s gotten used to my feisty Spanish attitude and even

embraces my boldness when he says, “At least I know where the arrows are coming from.”

When I speak in Spanish, I can unleash my deepest feelings. In English, I feel reined in like a horse with blinders; say please, say thank you, if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all; all these constraints I barely heard growing up in the brusquer streets of Madrid. English was a gift I'd been given by accident, one that I treasured greatly as a teenager, but only used sparingly until I became an adult. Spanish is the language of my childhood, my memories, my dreams, my thoughts, and my prayers.

Before Emma's sudden request to stop speaking to her in Spanish, there were times when she and my husband liked to tease my feisty Spanish me and even enjoyed watching me get all worked up, especially on long hiking trips—not my thing—to remote places like the Fairy Pools in the isle of Skye in Scotland. While they gracefully skipped over the pools like gazelles, I'd cross myself before jumping from slippery boulder to slippery boulder, groaning and repeatedly blurting *¡Por Dios!* (God bless), *¡Virgen Santa!* (Holy Virgin!), *¿Quién me manda?* (What did I get myself into?). They'd turn around and mock me, roaring with laughter. Looking back, I guess laughter was a bonus of my Spanish me.

Going through these memories helped me understand there could be more ways, other than language, to transmit my Spanish spirit to my daughter. Humor was one and, just as important, was nourishment. Emma had always had a voracious appetite and her favorite food happened to be one of the most Spanish of all Spanish foods: *croquetas*.

I eagerly whipped up some béchamel and poached some chicken. I diced the meat into tiny bits and mixed it with the creamy sauce and stored it in the fridge to congeal for a while. Once ready, I shaped the mixture into small cylinders and rolled them in flour, dipped them in a bowl of beaten eggs, and covered them in breadcrumbs. I then lined them up on a tray and placed them in the freezer to fry right before dinner.

As usual, while driving on my way to pick up Emma from school, I turned on the radio and realized that music could be another way to keep the Spanish spirit alive. I scrolled through the dial, skipping through numerous Latin music stations blasting bachata and salsa until I tuned into a loud, melodramatic, Mexican ballad by

Luis Miguel hoping for a more subtle Spanish one to follow. It did. “*Héro*” by Enrique Iglesias came on. Emma jumped into the back of the car and leaned forward, between the two front seats, to raise the volume on the radio. “Nice,” she said gently bobbing her head.

That evening, at dinner, I placed the tray of golden *croquetas* in the center of the table. Emma’s eyes lit up like fireworks. A smile warmed my lips as I watched her bite into the crunchy shell, the creamy béchamel she loved so much, and, without saying a word, neither in Portuguese nor English. I sat back, hoping, in Spanish, that this would be just another phase.