

Between Two Mirrors

I see my languages like two mirrors: one facing me and the other facing the back of my head. The space between these mirrors is my own, and I'm still trying to discover how I feel in this in between.

English has been the mirror I have spent an abundance of my time facing. Sometimes I have to remind myself that English was indeed not my first language, although I've grown to be most proficient in it. As a toddler, before I entered the school system, my primary language was Polish. It is the language of my household and my earliest memories. English squeezed its way in where it could—through Disney movies, toys, TV commercials airing in the background. But once I properly spoke English in school and with other kids, it was Polish that began settling into the background. It is the mirror that has become accustomed to viewing the back of my head, the back of my mind.

All the while I had been diving into an English-speaking pool and trying to stay afloat of the Polish waves, I regretfully receded into my memory how my own parents endured a language pool with even rougher waves. Unlike me, my immigrant parents had no formal English lessons. Having moved across the country, English was no longer a choice but a necessity. This necessity pushed my parents towards bilingualism, towards the ability to make a living in this country. Their prevalent Polish accent and imperfect grammar became a part of their English, but it did not define their English as “improper”. Their English connected them to the community, maintained a job for my father, and enabled them to create experiences. English was their language of opportunity, “imperfect” grammar and all.

However, the powerful strength of assimilation proved no match for my mother and father, for they were rooted to their culture. The roots of my parents, which inevitably grew on me, were my shield. This shield was carefully and meticulously crafted by my parents' language building. The least I could do in their honor was try keep swimming.

Growing up, Polish felt like a nuisance sometimes. I started associating the language with my annoyance over Saturdays spent in Polish school, my father's nagging words— “*W domu mówimy po Polsku!*” —spoken whenever I spent too long speaking English at home, and the furrowing of my brows when I put in the extra brain power to form a grammatically-correct Polish sentence. While I felt proud to

be bilingual, I also felt myself leaning towards how naturally English came to me thanks to being surrounded by a largely English-speaking environment. In turn, I was leaning further away from Polish, the language that requires a stronger grip but ultimately continues to hold me down to my roots.

This push and pull between my languages formed an inward focus unto myself. I saw my languages as interacting on and off switches, and my energy was spent turning these on and putting them out. Language became a complex skill set I held in my possession. It existed singularly in me. As a result, I pushed away what my bilingualism opened up for me. I pushed away the bigger picture it connected me to. What a lonely existence it became.

Over the summer I spoke to my grandmother on the phone before she went into surgery. It had been a while since I spoke to her last, and I had missed the warmth in her voice through the receiver. Suddenly, she paused mid-conversation. The radiance in her tone shone as she expressed her gratitude at our ability to communicate together, that we could understand each other. We were on opposite sides of the planet, and yet we built a bridge between us. Such a seemingly simple phenomenon, and yet it struck both of us with an unexpected intensity.

My conversation with my grandmother serves as a reminder for me that my bilingualism is never a burden nor an isolating weight on my shoulders. How *obnoxious* of me to grow frustrated over a language that enriches both my life and culture. How special it is to not only be proficient in one language, but in two. It is a gift to be able to speak with my grandmother over the phone. It is a gift to be able to use the Polish language as a vessel to carry my culture forward. It is a gift to use language as a tool to broaden my world.

I may not understand fully how I fit in between both of my language mirrors. Yet, I understand that they are more than simple mirrors, simple reflections. They are windows into a fuller perception of myself: every angle, every side, a full 360-degree view. These mirrors around me discourage my hiding of the parts of me I put to the side, rather, they keep them in full view. These mirrors represent all of me, the individual me reflected in a much larger culture. Looking even closer, I not only see myself in these mirrors, but my history, my culture, my family, my life. I see it in me. I see that I am not alone.