

Essays on
Language Function and
Language Type

Dedicated to T. Givón

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OFFPRINT

(1997: J. Benjamins Publishing Co.)

Living in Three Languages

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Most people think that a linguist is a polyglot; when I say I am a linguist, people usually ask me immediately how many languages I speak. When this happens, I always launch into a little speech about linguists not being polyglots, then get tangled up in some feeble attempt at explaining that linguists study languages without learning to speak them, for the sake of seeing what they are made of, to finally admit that I myself speak three, but that it does not prove anything, it is just my story.

Three languages. Nothing, really. There are those who speak five, six or eight and don't think about it. I marvel at them, the way I marvel at left-handed people. How do they do it? Although speaking three languages or six could not be that different, and left-handed people baffle me in spite of the fact that I am myself left-handed...

I have had a hard time explaining what it means for me to 'speak' three languages. I don't think of it as 'speaking' them, it feels more like I live in them, I breathe them. There was a time in my life when I was trying to explain that I was not really multilingual, but rather monolingual in three languages. That's how it felt for those years when my life was really split between three worlds. Today I seem to have settled in a more integrated life style, one in which I weave in and out of my three languages and the various worlds they are attached to. I keep track of my relation to them, a complex relation, never stable, always powerful, sometimes frightening or embarrassing, at moments exhilarating, but never neutral, never matter of fact.

I can think of my life as an array of relations to languages, those that surrounded me as a background, those I refused to learn, those I badly wanted to learn, those I studied professionally, those — the intimate ones — I think in, write in, am funny in, work in. Sometimes I catch myself envying intensely those monolinguals that were born, grew up, have lived all their adult life in one

language. I miss the feeling of comfort, of certainty, of control I imagine they have, unaware as they usually are that it could be otherwise.

I am writing this for a fellow language cruncher, a buddy multilingual linguist from the same general parts of the world I came from, with whom I have shared for over a decade the life of exiles of sorts out there at the edge of the 'New World'. From the Mediterranean to the North West of the United States, with lots of forays in other lands, of Africa or Latin America, and many languages between the two of us. Although, for my part, after 27 years of that exile, I have just returned to the land of my first language, upsetting once again the tenuous balance of my languages. I came back for several reasons, but one of the strongest was just that simple one: to return to my language.

What follows are some thoughts and remembrances about the never-ending dance of languages in my life, of the kind that many friends and colleagues have asked me to write down over the years. It was the idea of one of the editors of this volume that, under the circumstances, it might be a more interesting piece than the somewhat belabored academic piece I was preparing: an article on Movima classifiers from my latest fieldwork in Bolivia. So as a gesture maybe more in keeping with the spirit and life energy of the man for whom this book is written, out goes straight linguistics that I thought I had to produce, and here comes a more personal piece of writing about an inside story of language acquisition, language maintenance, language attrition and linguistic fieldwork.

I was born in Algiers, Algeria, North Africa, then a French 'department'. My parents were French 'from France', which makes it so that I am not technically a real 'pied noir', although that is the 'ethnic' identity I feel most comfortable with. They arrived in Algeria just after World War II. My father was Alsatian, from Strasbourg, and grew up speaking Alsatian as his native language. French was the language of his formal education. He spoke it with extreme correctness, using all the proper forms of subjunctives we read in books but rarely heard other adults around us use. He was assigned to a position 'in the colonies' upon graduation from l'Ecole Normale Supérieure where he had studied to be a high school teacher of German. It was thought safer to ship all the Alsatian graduates with German sounding family names and German sounding Alsatian accents to the colonies, rather than to the provincial high schools of France where anti-German sentiments ran high. So it is that my father started teaching German in the boys' high school of Algiers by the fall of 1945.

I grew up in Bab-el-Oued, a racially mixed neighborhood of Algiers, surrounded by Arabic and Spanish speakers. I never learned Arabic. Tama, the Arabic woman who took care of me and called me Bolette spoke to us in some pidginized form of French. She sometimes took me to her home in an all-Arabic neighborhood near Notre Dame d'Afrique, a miniature two-room place where I

never figured out exactly how the seven people of her family slept at night. I did not understand anything that was said around me, but I felt safe and well treated. I did not understand anything either when I was sent to Djemaa Saaridj in the mountains of Kabilya, ostensibly for health problems that required 'fresh air'. There they spoke Kabyle, a Berber language. I stuck close to the girls of the house was staying in, afraid of losing them in the windy streets of the village, once again among people whose language I did not know and never learned, but who treated me well.

German

The experience of finding myself unable to understand the conversation around me, as if it was the normal state of affairs, something I had to get used to and live with, went beyond my Arabic and Kabyle experiences. On the home front, there were all the times my father spoke German, with visitors, with students, with my older brother. I never learned to speak German. I came to guess it in a gestalt way, to know what he was talking about, to be able to respond to his requests. It sounded familiar, like Arabic, like Kabyle, and I felt no need to learn to speak it. It turned out later that I was actually actively resisting learning it. When I was 11, my father sent me to Hamburg, Germany. My older brother went with me; he lived in a boarding school, with the students, and I lived with the family of the director. I think the idea was that I would learn German. The family sent me back after two months, mute as I had arrived. I don't remember other attempts at making me learn German on the part of my father. He concentrated his attention on my older brother who became fluent in it at an early age, and ended up as an adult directing on several occasions a theater school in Germany.

My next encounter with German, almost as unsuccessful, was in graduate school, when I had to fulfill the Harvard linguistics language requirement and had to have two of French, German and Russian. I spent a summer taking an intensive German reading course to prepare for the exam, but found myself totally baffled by having to study German through English. I was battling my old inner resistance to German, as well as the frustrating feeling of not being able to process directly English into German and back, and having to add a layer of French translations. I eventually passed the language test, but I believe it was mainly because the content of the article I was given to translate made enough sense to me from my budding knowledge of historical linguistics that I could once more 'guess' my way through German. I thought I was 'done' with German, but it is there again, staring at me in the face, as I need to cope with the writings of a prolific scholar of the languages of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, the German scholar Walter Lehmann, who produced the only published

accounts of the Rama language early this century in Berlin, in German, in elegant Gothic print.

Spanish

The stubborn independent daughter of a domineering Germanic father that I was chose first English, then Spanish as her two high school foreign languages. Choosing English first did not arouse too much criticism and was done at a time of separation from my father. But choosing Spanish — and not German — as the second language was a clear defiance of my father's authority. Spanish in his eyes was not a language of great civilization and culture. He considered it the easy way out, the avoiding getting a real education.

I chose Spanish to avoid taking German, but I was not doing well with it in school at first. So my parents decided to send me to Spain to improve my grades. Grades were of utmost importance in our family, absolute grades and class placements. My life seemed to evolve around them. My pocket money depended on my grades and placements, according to a complicated scheme that rewarded me for first, second or third placement, provided the grade was high enough, and where I had to pay money back for lower than average grades and low placements.

So I first went to Spain at age 14, because of bad grades. It was Easter vacation, the traditional Holy Week season. And something happened then that changed my life. It smelled like Algiers, it sounded like Algiers, I felt I had gone 'home', after years of feeling like a refugee in colder and more sedate France (where I had landed after leaving Algeria, at the height of the War of Independence of Algeria, at age 9). There in Spain, people lived in the streets, they lived with the windows open, housewives and maids shook sheets and blankets out the window before making the beds, they sang and laughed loudly and yelled to each other across the courtyards from one apartment to the other, like Algiers. And the stairways smelled like olive oil and garlic, like Algiers.

My luck was to land in a family of nine children with a matriarch of a mother who took me under her wing, added me to her children and took very seriously the task of teaching me Spanish that she had been given by the common friend who had brought me to her. Mayesa simply assumed it mean for me to eventually sound like one of her children. That was the standard she held up for me. I learned Spanish in her house in no time; she spent time with me making me speak and correcting me. Later I majored in Spanish at the University with studies of grammar, literature, history and civilization that made it so that I have more formal education in Spanish than in French.

Rapid-fire Castilian Spanish with a twist from the Aragon region is what I learned in Zaragoza with Mayesa: it is the variant of Spanish I feel most at

home in, viscerally so. And it is the kind of Spanish that people from Madrid consider provincial, and Catalans offensive. There were madrileños who thought they were so smug making fun of my accent, and who never realized that I personally took their denigrating remarks as a hidden compliment, ecstatic that I was being mistaken for an Aragonese from Zaragoza, me the kid from Algiers, the unhappy French refugee from Paris. And it was a shock to encounter the Catalan dislike (hatred?) of it recently when I suddenly slipped back into it again after I had spent the middle weekend of a two week course in Girona with a friend from Zaragoza. I had come directly to Girona from the US and had started teaching with the common Central American Spanish of my two decades of fieldwork in Guatemala and Nicaragua. When I switched to Castilian that second Monday, the director of the program took me aside and told me to wipe it out, that if it was tolerable for me to speak Spanish in an all Catalan university, it had better be a Latin American variant of it, because Castilian Spanish was not acceptable. He feared the class atmosphere would degenerate quickly if I insisted in that accent.

It is always powerful for me to return to that accent. When I hear people speak Castilian, my heart literally pounds and I feel sheer joy. No other accent of no other language does it to me. I feel good hearing it, the feeling good of dancing, of laughing, of everything being right. And I feel I am ok, everything is ok, when I hear that accent coming out of me. I follow people in US department stores if they speak that way, I invent whatever excuse to talk to anybody with that accent. Like the Dominican priest of the Chiquitano area of Bolivia I met last fall in his far away parish, who still speaks with unabashedly strong interdental cetas and 'chuintant' s. But the thing is, for all the pleasure I get out of speaking Spanish that way, I have to be very careful to whom I show it. Basically only other Castilian speakers. My Nicaraguan and Mexican students holler when I return home from Spain with that accent, they follow me for days putting inappropriate cetas in their speech and laughing at me, making me very self-conscious.

I spent many years after settling in the US not using my Castilian Spanish. The first year I lived in the US, I was working on a Master's degree for a French University. I had a fieldwork project: to study the Spanish of the Puerto Ricans in the US. The idea had come out of seeing 'West Side Story' in Paris the year before and being shocked at how little of their Spanish I understood. I spent a year doing fieldwork in and around Central Square in Cambridge. Ended up with a thesis on the influence of English on Puerto Rican Spanish. That is when I met Einar Haugen, who gracefully opened his private library to me and spoke to me in perfect French. Later, once I was a student at Harvard, I took his courses on bilingualism and language planning, and started a life-long process

of making mental notes of what I knew of bilingualism and language planning from living them in comparison with what I could read about them in the academic literature.

This first field work in Spanish taught me to de-Castilianize my Spanish. It was totally inappropriate to speak Castilian Spanish with the Puerto Ricans or the Dominicans I interviewed. They could not understand what I wanted from them, seeing how I spoke such 'good' Spanish and they spoke such 'broken' Spanish. Later, in Guatemala, I continued suppressing my original Castilian accent. Over the years of field trips to Jacaltenango, in the Cuchumatanes mountains of Guatemala, I eventually developed a passable Guatemalan Spanish accent, the best version of it being of the Guatemalan Indian Spanish variety. This to the dismay of some upper middle class acquaintances in Guatemala City. In sort of a repeat of the situation I had known in Madrid a decade earlier, the lady of the house I used to visit (the house of a doctor my doctor husband had worked for) once asked me if I could do something about my Spanish. It turned out she felt embarrassed by my sounding too much like a Mayan Indian speaking Spanish and she had heard unpleasant remarks about it from some of her friends. Guatemala then was probably as racially divided as if it had been under an official apartheid rule, and sympathy for the Indians was not seen with a positive eye by much of the ruling class. So the remarks about me the white person speaking too much like an Indian had both strictly social and dangerously political overtones. But once again, I myself felt pleased to realize to what extent I had acquired the mode of speaking of the people I was working with, and felt privileged to feel close to.

More than twenty years into living in the US and doing fieldwork in Central America, I had assumed that I had lost my Castilian Spanish. I never used it, very rarely heard it. After ten years on and off working on Mayan languages in Guatemala, I had moved to a project in Nicaragua and had adjusted to the variant of Spanish from there. At that, I spoke relatively little Spanish in Nicaragua since I worked in the Atlantic Coast region where the major language of communication in my work was Creole English. I did not return to Zaragoza until 1989. I had not planned to go to Zaragoza on that trip, but it happened, and I suddenly found myself in the streets of downtown on a Sunday evening and decided to drop in, unannounced, at the house of my first host family. I was very tense about it, not having seen them in more than 20 years, and wondering about my Spanish. The surprise was such that Mayesa, the surrogate mother of my teen years who was by then in her late 70s, told me later that she thought she was having a stroke. She could not understand how she could not remember the name of the person that had walked into her living room on her Sunday afternoon family gathering that she had instantly recognized as her daughter.

When the commotion subsided, I sat next to her on the couch and we began catching up on 20 some odd years of her family and my life. And in the middle of one of my sentences, she put a firm warm hand on my lap, sat up straight and said to me, very matter-of-factly in the raspy voice so typical of the women of there: “así no se habla aquí, hija” (“we don’t speak like this here, daughter”), meaning no Latin American accent in this house. And something powerful snapped in me. The next time I opened my mouth, it was in absolutely flawless Zaragozano Castilian. It had come out instantly, intact, from deep down in me, the accent of when I was 15. It left me stunned. When I returned that night to the house of the other friend I was visiting there, her teenage daughter asked at the dinner table what had happened to me, that I had left with a Latin American accent earlier in the day and that I suddenly sounded just like them, as if I was from there.

So I have one solidly anchored variant of Spanish in me, one I am not about to lose, one I did not lose in more than 20 years of non-use. When I speak it, I am one with that language, I breathe in it, I feel it physically, I inhabit my body with it. The other variants of Spanish I handle are like clothes I put on to match the style of the place. I feel comfortable in them given enough time, I can think in them, work in them, and usually pass for some regional neighbor. They often think I am from Venezuela or Colombia when I am in Central America, and people in Bolivia assumed I was Latina, just from another province or a neighboring country. When I came out of three months in Bolivia this fall and lectured at the University in Quito, Ecuador, some people there thought I was Bolivian because I had apparently picked up their brand of ‘s’. I could not hear it, I don’t hear my borrowed Spanish accents, the ones I take from whomever I am working with.

English

I am much more aware of my imitative accents in English. I have not developed the same gutsy relation to English that I have to Castilian Spanish. Although my basic English is of the West Coast variety (I assume), my pronunciation shifts very easily depending on who I am talking with. Embarrassing how I answer European tourists in the Paris subway who ask me in accented English for instructions on how to get wherever they want to get with a matching accented English. I don’t seem to be able to control it.

The story of my English is a very different story from my story of Spanish. I remember vividly the last night before my first day of French lycée, when I was 10. I was to study English, and I was wondering what English was, and how one could learn it. In an amazing way, I never connected English to any of the languages I had been exposed to. I had never heard it before, neither in Algeria,

nor in the previous year I had spent in a very small rural school outside of Orléans, a sleepy town of the Loire valley where my mother had left me at the end of the 'grandes vacances', with no warning, in the care of my barely willing grandparents. The war of Algeria had begun to rage in our popular Bab-el-Oued neighborhood and she was worried for her children's safety, and had left two of us back in France.

I decided that English was like a code, that it would take effort to learn it, but that it was just a matter of matching French letters to English letters according to systematic rules of correspondence the teacher would tell us about one by one. I felt ready, and eager. I was totally distraught to realize it was not so. For a while I thought the teacher was not giving us the rules straight out for some maybe pedagogical reason, but that I would outsmart her. To no effect. I was lost, furious, rebellious, and started hating this unreasonable language.

I got bad grades in English for most of my high school career. Resisted it, refused to speak it, resented tremendously being shipped to England to improve my grades. My English correspondent was into tennis and pet mice, she lived in a comfortable suburban house where I had my own little cozy room. I would spend the two or three weeks my parents shipped me there every summer from age 13 to 17 reading voraciously piles of French books I had brought in my suitcase, talking to nobody, watching Stephanie play tennis, smiling at her gentle father who seemed to do everything in the house, including cooking the dinners we ate, pretty much in silence. I hated being there, considered it like prescribed medicine that did nothing for me. My parents would not let me go to Spain in the summer until I had put in my 2 or 3 weeks of British torture. I argued it was unfair, and useless, a waste of money, to no avail.

I went to the oral English exam of the baccalaureat with a grade book from the last two years that showed abysmal grades in English, and a general comment from my senior year teacher 'Miss Tourte' that seemed to sum it all up, and that I still remember: "Aurait pu mieux faire; fermée a l'humour anglais" ("Could have done better. Closed to British humor").

I have learned languages because of particular people. For Spanish it was Mayesa, for English, it took William. I met him when I was 18. It was on a boat to New York: a student ship full of impatient returning Americans and eager Europeans. We were assigned to the same table, and of the eight people of our table I was the only one that could not handle English. So I missed practically all he said that made everybody else laugh. Toward the end of the five-day trip, we had a very contrived conversation by the bar one night. We barely got through, in several hours, the very basics of our lives. That he was from the West Coast, was studying biology, was returning from a year in Scotland and was heading for "Cambridge" (it took me weeks to figure out it was a town near

Boston, a discreet way of saying he was going to “Harvard”, another name I would not have located either). That I was from a large family, was studying Spanish and did not entirely know what I was doing on that boat, going to a country I did not really want to visit. It got confusing there, difficult to explain, I was not sure he was understanding me, but I was sure I was not really excited about that trip. I was a stand-in for my older brother who had been invited to spend the summer in New York by German friends of my father who had emigrated to the US. My brother, a German major, did not want to go, out of anti-American French chauvinism. My parents — my father actually shared my brother’s strong anti-American feelings — decided to ship me off instead, as the next one in line in the family, to not lose the opportunity of one of their children going to New York.

Over the next two years, correspondance with William necessitated the buying of a decent dictionary, sessions of deciphering his American handwriting and translating his colloquial idiomatic American English, which the dictionary often could not help me with. I had several friends on call to check the rough spots I could not make sense of by myself after several days of staring at them and trying various interpretations. It was as painstaking as the ‘themes’ (French to Latin) and ‘versions’ (Latin to French) of my Latin years, with innumerable ‘barbarisms’ and ‘contre-sens’ and unsuspected cultural misunderstandings.

Three years after that boat trip I arrived in the US, with no better English than what I had met him with. The little practice I had had was mostly British English, which did me no good on the West Coast. My trip to New York had not done all that much for my English, because of odd twists like being with German immigrants who spoke English with a heavy accent, meeting Albanian neighbors with another very distinctive accent, and doing much of my usual England thing of spending days by myself, talking to nobody. One thing I did do for my English, however, was to listen for hours to the Joan Baez record collection the family had, mouthing in sync as many of the words as I could. Very good pronunciation practice, as it turned out, something I remembered when I had to teach French/Spanish pronunciation and phonetics at the University of Oregon much later on.

It took me several months to get my bearings with English in the US. I spent the summer of 68 in Eugene, getting used to William’s English, generally lost at the noisy large dinners we participated in on a regular basis. Missed entirely what they were talking about, what they were laughing or arguing about. I could only cope with one-on-one conversation, with interlocutors aware of my limitations and helping along with whatever strategy they could come up with: child talk, slower talk, repetitions with lots of smiles of encouragement. I could talk better than I could understand, but only talk about pretty mundane

stuff; any attempt at explaining my bewilderment at the American way of life got me into complicated and frustrated sessions I tried to avoid.

I read my first whole book in English over the summer. I ploughed through the many hundred pages of Oscar Lewis's *La Vida* with determination, a dictionary at hand, and evening language lessons based on it with William as instructor, to prepare myself for doing fieldwork among Puerto Ricans upon return to Boston in the Fall. Once in Boston, most of my working days did not involve English. I was an au pair and cleaned house, or was with the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans speaking some sort of Spanish. I took one evening adult ed writing class at Harvard and began to hear about short sentences, and an idea per paragraph.

In the evenings, on weekends I was talking with William. I learned his language, adopted his expressions, I suppose his accent too, although I never felt he had one. I talked with his classmates too, some with amazing Eastern accents from Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. I stuck with William's seemingly more neutral accent. We got married, moved into communal living with some of those classmates and I started the graduate program in linguistics at Harvard my second year in the States.

One of my first courses in linguistics that Fall was phonetics, with Steven Anderson. I was grateful to be introduced to phonetic transcription early on, as I did not understand too much of the lectures. I took notes in French and started writing down phonetically those words that seem to recur often enough to maybe be of some importance, linguistically or perhaps just in general. I read those phonetic transcriptions to my household at dinner time. As they were all medical students (William had entered medical school) they could only help me with those of general English. I suppose the linguistic terms I eventually learned by 'immersion'.

I never found out about my TOEFL score, and taking the exam was very odd. It took place in a very large room, long, flat, with rows of small individual tables. Part of the written test included a vocabulary test in the middle of which an Indian woman in a sari next to me fell apart. She could not do it, apparently. I guessed my way through it, not knowing really too many of the academic words the list was full of, but recognizing enough Latin roots to get by. The other part was oral comprehension. A text played on a scratchy record. I remember distinctly that it was about a truck that was going down a city street (I imagined a Sesame Street scene for some reason) and knocked over a garbage can the contents of which had spilled on to the street. And then came an incredibly esoteric list of objects that had for some reason made their way to that targeted garbage can: sneakers, binoculars etc... We had to reconstitute the contents of the can, among other tasks. So much for TOEFL exams.

That first semester, I also took a syntax class from Susumu Kuno that I did not understand at all. Did not know enough linguistics to see what he was talking about, could not understand his English at all. Twenty seven years into speaking American English, I still cannot cope with any deviation from a fairly standard American English. William and Garrison Keillor I do well with. East Coast accents I am straining, southern accents, I am lost. My reading comprehension is also still limited. Linguistics is ok, the local newspaper is ok, but magazines like the *New Yorker*, or newspapers like the *New York Times* I am still uncomfortable with. Novels in English are very slow reading. Song lyrics I never get. Linda Ronstadt, a favorite of many of my friends years back, is lost on me. It's the words, and their arrangements, it is a style of language that completely escapes me. I regret it, because I like chansons à texte (that is, songs in which the words are as important as the music, if not more so), in French or Spanish.

I never formally studied English, the way I studied French in the Lycée and Spanish at the university; no English or American classics, no study of American history or culture in my background. I am very mono-stylistic in English. I have one casual spoken style, the one I learned with William. I have been getting away with that one spoken style by taking advantage of the openness of the American system, including its tolerance of styles provided the work gets done, and I got the work done. I am aware of the fact that I would never have been able to get away with it in a country like France. I barely squeaked out of Harvard, but the West Coast and its still palpable pioneer spirit is where I developed my career and lived most of my adult life until now and it turned out to be a good place for me.

I never write down the papers I give at conferences because I cannot speak the written form; it makes me suffocate, I can't pronounce the words right, can't remember where stresses go. I have to talk. I cannot read quotes in class from other authors, I also remember not enjoying reading stories in English to my children. Same feeling of suffocation, of getting out of breath, of being physically uncomfortable. But a great pleasure reading to them in French.

One of my written styles is a straightforward, sober, hopefully efficient and clear type of academic writing that I have developed relatively consciously, influenced by the style predominant in science. The influence came directly through the editorial help my doctor husband provided me for many years. The same things I had heard in the adult ed writing class I had taken the first year: short sentences, main clauses first, direct to the point, short paragraphs, keep it simple. The opposite of the French writing style, but a style that suits me well.

My other writing style is a personal letter writing stream of consciousness style I am naturally comfortable in. The style close to the style of this essay.

People are more impressed with my English ability than they should be. I put up a good front, but I feel my limits. I only know how much I still select what I say, simply giving up on what I am not confident I can say right, still lacking in vocabulary, still unsure of some constructions. Maybe it does not show, but speaking English is still sometimes a conscious performance exercise. Occasionally friendly colleagues smile as I make up an idiomatic expression, an unconscious loan translation from French sometimes, but sometimes just neologisms from incomplete learning. Some prepositions and verb particles still off, off forever, the subtleties and richness of this system to remain for ever a mystery beyond the possibility of complete acquisition.

I do not have much of an accent, some people miss it altogether, more linguistically sophisticated people pick up something that they generally cannot place. Not a French accent, nor a Spanish accent. I think it is a subtle trace of an incomplete assimilation, free of real first language transfer, a limitation from having learned to speak it in my twenties. It is not so much French that is heard through my English: more likely it is my not totally wanting to be or be taken for an American. A safeguard of sorts, in extremis.

I often think of the advice Einar Haugen felt obliged to give me, the first year I took a course from him at Harvard. He had known me from my very beginnings in Cambridge, the first year I was still working on a French degree and my English was hesitant enough that he had gracefully spoken in French to me. He could tell how much my English had improved by that second year in the States. He called me in to his office once to tell me that I should not work so hard on trying to lose my French accent, that I would regret it later. Because, he said, I would reach a point of maybe sounding quasi native, but some details, cultural or linguistic, would still escape me occasionally and people would then think that I was a native, but dumb, odd, and uneducated, and I would get embarrassed. I have to confess that I had taken it then as the unsolicited advice of an old man, and had been if anything irritated at him for it, and determined to prove him wrong.

And I must say that it did not take me long to realize how right he was. I have always been very anxious at the start of a new course, facing a new batch of students who have no reason to know I am French and that English is my third language (with a name like Craig to boot) and have consistently felt the need to say outright that I am French, as if to excuse all the incorrect details of pronunciation and grammar that I know will pop up sooner or later in my lectures. Like pronouncing some of the linguistic terminology I never hear anybody utter, particularly the long words that are cognate with French. Like

being incapable of producing all the American English vowels, and being particularly afraid of demonstrating the difference between lax and tense vowels. Little constant stresses of immigrant professors.

Now that I am back in France, I worry that I will lose my English, pronunciation first. It never used to take long for me to lose it on previous trips to France. I am watching it a little anxiously now. Going back to the US after my first four months in France, I felt rusty, more nervous than usual with people I did not know well. English is not as solidly anchored in me as is Castilian Spanish. Maybe a question of age threshold. I learned Spanish at 13-14, I learned English at 21-22. Maybe a question of inner resistance. Spanish was a sensuous link to my Algerian past, Mayesa was the mother I wished I had had, Spanish was the language I was supposed at age 15 to age 17 to marry into. English I learned to talk with William but beyond him there were no strong hooks. It is a language I needed for survival.

When I had children eight years into being in the US, I was fluent in English, but I felt caught short talking to the babies they were. Especially the first one. I only knew French baby talk, French lullabies. I tried to teach them French when they were little but it did not work. Their father did not speak French and he looked uncomfortable if I spoke it to them around him: he did not want to feel excluded. By the time they were in preschool, they were sure they did not want to hear any of it; they would kick me in the legs if I spoke to them in French and say: "don't do that!". I decided there was no rush, that teaching them French from the start was not necessary for them to become fluent adults eventually, and that the sooner one starts, the longer one has to keep it up. I took them to France when they were 4 and 6 and put them in French neighborhood schools. Six months later they sounded fluent, and it has been a matter of making sure they continue using it and growing with it over summer stays, and for the second child, years in a bilingual school program (which wrecked his pronunciation but made him functionally literate). The older can sound native like when in contact with the language but is at 20 functionally totally illiterate in it.

French

My native language is French. My first variant of it was Algerian French. My mother, who comes from the heart of France, the region of Berry, spoke standard French, my teachers were French 'from France', but I had an Algerian accent. I had it, noticeably when I arrived in France at age 9. My maternal grandmother was taking care of me then; she had been a school teacher and

school director herself and believed in the beauty of standard French. She called me “la crouillate”, an untranslatable word of very negative connotation. I don’t know how much my grammar was affected, how different my vocabulary was from Standard French, but the intonation, the pronunciation I knew were genuine Algerian, because I still have it in me, buried. It comes out in contact with other ‘pieds noirs’ (ask Claude Hagège!); it is hard to control in fact once it comes out; and it feels good to relax into it. It was my childhood language, and I did not have a chance to grow into adulthood with it, so it is more circumscribed to routine expressions and familiar conversations than my Castilian Spanish.

Over my 27 years in the States, I passed through various stages of language balance. French went from being my main language, the clearly dominant one I could do everything in, to an equal language with the others, still dominant in passive knowledge, but receding dramatically in productive skills. It reached a point when I was not sure if was not my third language. It was frightening.

My father used to send me back my letters marked in red for all the mistakes I made; it became traumatic to face going back to France and be embarrassed because of all the English interference my French was suffering and to deal with my family who spared me no grief about it. My first impression of French at every return to Paris, in the subway, was the dreamlike intonation pattern of the Parisians, or so it seemed to me, coming from the highly sing-songed pattern of American English. It would just last a day or so, and the dreamlike impression would fade. But my own speech never had time to get back up to speed. It was tiring to articulate the French vowels, it hurt my throat to pronounced the uvular R again, I was at a loss for words, and I often got myself into sentence structures I did not know for sure how to complete. It was very depressing. In the literature it carries the clinical name of ‘language attrition’; maybe it is my experience with it that makes me so interested in language obsolescence, language attrition, language maintenance and revitalization. I never learn anything academic that is not connected to some puzzle of my own life. I just want to say for the record that language attrition is often accompanied by much agony of which I see no mention in the literature. And my heart goes out to the semi-speakers of the dying languages I study in Latin America, the likes of Miss Nora, the main speaker of the Rama language project of Nicaragua.

But then, after years of worrying about my native language attrition, something wonderful happened. The process of attrition reversed itself, by itself it seemed. Underground work. I recovered the fluency, the ease, the feeling at home in it. My friends and siblings in France noticed it. I felt it as a great relief. I was not conscious about having done anything about it; spontaneous one

person language revitalization! It happened a few years before I decided to go back to France.

I expected to experience much stress in the process of reintegrating France, having been away so long. That is what everybody warned me about, what everybody seemed to need to predict. And it did not happen. What happened was totally unexpected: an immediate fitting back in. It felt physical in fact, an immense body tension release, like deep body massage, the end of some resistance. A week or so into it, a surprising and marvellous feeling of meeting myself again, of waking up from a long sleep. Back to something I had forgotten for many years and did not know was still there. This intimate reacquaintance with my old ally the French language was apparently noticeable to others too. Several French colleagues and friends commented that it was amazing that I had no trace of having been 27 years away from it, including the amazement of those that had known me in my French attrition phase. They have no idea of the comeback I feel I have made.

It is making my reentry in France that much easier, although it will take a while to recover the missed vocabulary, technical, political, academic et al. My written French is still frozen, I will need language rehabilitation before I can write linguistic articles in French, or administrative memos. But that is a matter of exposure and time and conscious effort, and I am prepared to be patient with it. It makes for odd conversational situations where I sound like I am a Martian recently landed and not fully programmed to operate, but I can laugh off the looks I get from baffled French people.

One piece of evidence for all this underground work of my languages is how, when I was about to go to France, I would start for days if not weeks in advance unconsciously slipping French words into my English. Little discourse words “ah bon!”, “et bien”, “alors”, “voilà”, as if I was about to speak in French and that I hear only after they have come out of my mouth. It became particularly embarrassing just before I flew out to France for my job interview and found myself repeatedly in my syntax course doing it in front of 40 puzzled students. The feeling was one of discomfort, very much like in my professor nightmare, when I arrive to class and realize once in front of the students that I still have my slippers on. I distrust the unconscious switching that must occur in my mind, giving me the feeling that my French language box is leaking out. I have the same sense of lack of control when I am in an intense multilingual situation and I start using the wrong language repeatedly, unable to match person and language. I can go on for whole sentences before realizing I am using the wrong one.

Languages of field work

This was the story of my three major languages. And then there is linguistics, and all the languages I have come in contact with professionally. I made my way to linguistics through languages. It was in a Spanish philology class, brilliantly taught by Bernard Pottier at the Université de Paris-Nanterre, that I discovered that the inner workings of languages fascinated me. The plumbing I used to call it, to the dismay of one of my professors from MIT who found it a denigrating expression unworthy of such important work. I found my niche in life as a field linguist, in constant challenging contact with languages. Languages with which I have very different relations. Beyond the languages I live in, French, Spanish, and English, there are the two Central American languages I learned enough to be able to say some things in, Jakalteq (Maya) and Rama (Chibcha), and the myriad of languages I studied, but did not attach myself to, generally in the frustrating artificiality of graduate school field methods classes. Languages I regret I did not develop a better relationship to: Farsi, Ponapean, Chamorro, Akateko, Tsafiki, Tembe. And now the 28 languages of the lowlands of Bolivia I am supposed to help write down and document in the new field project I am plunging into, the grand finale of my career as I see it, a field linguist in a field linguist's paradise. Which will I pick for myself: Movima or Guarayu? or any of the new ones of the alphabet project of this year: Moré, Mosestén, Yurakare, Baure, Ayoreo, or Takana,

I was once a native speaker informant for several theses from Harvard and MIT, in the first years of my graduate studies, when French was still clearly my dominant language. From that experience I began to doubt the merits of a linguistics based on native intuition judgments and decided for sure never to work on my native language. Too complex, too shifty, too many variables of style and genre. That was before I knew of corpus work, before I heard of the *Trésor de la langue française*, but then that corpus scares me, it is so large and one easily gets drowned in it. I also promised myself to remember how it felt to be an 'informant' and to do my best to treat the native speakers with whom I would work, with patience, respect and compassion.

I reencountered Arabic, a language of my childhood during a graduate field methods class at Harvard, for which the language was colloquial Tunisian Arabic. I was very excited at the prospect of maybe finally learning to speak a little of some form of Arabic. It never happened, the whole course turning out to be a somewhat surrealistic experience. The 'informant' was a macho journalist of a man, who did not think that women should work, be out in the street in the evening (the course was an evening course), or should be trusted with the tape recorder. Needless to say he would not pay much attention to me and I had a hard time eliciting data from him. The professor called that a 'field experience'

and advised me to 'adapt'. The text we collected in the early stages of the year-long course was all about a princess, and unicorns, and castles and pursuits in the woods and charming and not-so-charming princes. That is the language material we had to work with for the rest of the year, on which we based our direct elicitation: relative clauses on princesses who had been kidnapped, passives on unicorns which had been seen or not seen, princes assigned definite or indefinite reference, according to their deeds. I would still like to learn to speak Arabic, the second language of my neighborhood in Lyon.

Languages are my life. I tend them, tame them, respect them, do linguistics on them, I am intimate with some and feel like a total stranger to others, some attract me and others scare me. But Talmy Givón to whom this piece is dedicated knows all about that. This was just the story of a fellow traveller, as he once called me.