# Conforming to Language's Social Standards: A Struggle

After reading through Vanessa's, Dario's, and my own language narratives, it became clear that we shared some similar struggles with adapting to a language. We were confused and frustrated with our own shortcomings in using a language. Our efforts in learning it and conforming to its standards all have stakes in our social circles. The effects of language standardization are present throughout all three language narratives in each narrator's struggles with fully conforming to a language's standards.

In Vanessa's language narrative, the problems that language standardization have on her language learning is most evident in the way she refers to her own use of Spanish, or "Spanglish," as it is a combination of Spanish and English words pronounced with a Spanish accent. After learning from her aunt that "soda" wasn't actually the Spanish term for soda, but "refresco," Vanessa writes about feeling guilty and ignorant for not knowing. She "never would've known that 'refresco' was the real Spanish term for soda." What I find most interesting about this sentence is her use of the word "real," as if just because the word "soda" was taken from American English, her bilingualism must be called into question. By referring to "refresco" as the "real" Spanish term for soda, she is enforcing language standardization upon herself by undermining the Spanish variant that she grew up with.

In Holly Cashman's essay "Language Choice in U.S. Latina First Person Narrative: The Effects of Language Standardization and Subordination," she describes Esmeralda Santiago's similar struggles to compensate for her perceived lack of knowledge in Spanish in order to "conform to the standard language systems," and she also explains the different social evaluation

of languages lead to judgment and prejudice, how "the Anglo who speaks Spanish is worthy of commendation, while the Latino who speaks Spanish receives societal damnation for being slow or stubborn" (138-139). Although Vanessa was never reproached for referring to soda with its Spanglish name, she internalized a lot of her shame and guilt for not knowing, writing, "it'd be a lie to say that I wasn't ashamed of myself a little for not knowing the 'correct Spanish' terms." As stated by Cashman, the pressure to fit into her family and culture led her to try to conform to Mexico's language standard. She was confused as to why she wasn't corrected in her misuse of the word "soda" until then because it was critically important that she knows the "right" way to speak and use a language in order to fit in. Although she has come to accept English, Spanish, and Spanglish as equal parts of her identity, her initial reaction of shame is evidence of the consequences of language standardization even outside of countries that primarily teach English.

In Dario's language narrative, he expresses a lot of shame for not being able to conform to the standard language ideals that is necessary for leading a successful career in acting in English. Like Vanessa, Dario's struggles focus on the social consequences of not being able to properly speak a "real" language, which inadvertently points to their inherent linguistic prejudices. For Vanessa, her continued use of the word "real" indicates that she believes the Spanish that her extended Mexican family speaks is more valid than the Spanglish that she regularly uses with her immediate family. Dario is very aware of the social judgment that comes with his accent and speech. He "hated the idea of being cast exclusively in stereotypical roles because of [his] speech." Without mastery in proper, accent-free English, it is very likely that there will constantly be assumptions and stereotypes about him that will affect his career. As Lippi-Green writes, "[W]e regularly demand of people that they suppress or deny the most

effective way they have of situating themselves socially in the world. . . can't you speak real English?" (Lippi-Green 63-64). The emphasis on speaking real English shows the prejudice that people have against those language learners. There will always be a clear distinction between a native speaker and a multilingual speaker who is competent or fluent but has a different accent, and the assumption is that those speakers didn't put in as much effort to learn or were simply too dumb to learn.

In my language narrative, I criticize the multiple language standards that I am expected to conform to. English was a necessity because I had grown up in New York. Cantonese was also one, albeit to a lesser extent, as the sole mode of communication with my family. But when it comes to the other elements of Chinese like "overcomplicated character systems," I fell short of my parents' expectations. And similar to Cashman's analogy "the Anglo who speaks Spanish is worthy of commendation, while the Latino who speaks Spanish receives societal damnation for being slow or stubborn," I excelled in the language that I believed would be "worth the end result" against my parents' objections and claims of me being dumb and lazy (139). Although I was caught between two entirely different language systems and standards, I, like Vanessa and Dario, had my own preconceptions of what my own language standard would be. I didn't want to waste time learning Mandarin when I only spoke Cantonese. To me, Mandarin was a sort of illegitimate language that I did not want to retain. Cantonese, however, was very rarely taught in schools, so English became the "real" language that I strived to master.

In Vanessa's, Dario's, and my language narratives, we all struggled with the various language standards that came with multilingualism. Although our experiences were rather different, we did share a common thread in making conscious choices in what language and what

language standard we wish to conform to, using a language's associated prejudices and social significance to help us decide which is the ideal language to master. Accents and usage are aspects of our multilingualism that we may never stop struggling with, but we eventually came to terms with our own experiences.

# Works Cited

Cashman, Holly. "Language Choice in U.S. Latina First Person Narrative: The Effects of Language Standardization and Subordination." *Discourse*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1999, pp. 132-150.

Lippi-Green, Rosina. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*. Psychology Press, 1997, pp. 63-64.