

John H. Lybrand

Spanish Contact: A Reflection

Many years ago, during my sophomore year of high school, I began taking my first Spanish course; the class was taught unenthusiastically by a woman from France who barely spoke the language. Though I do not remember this woman's name, what I do remember is that my own enthusiasm for the language was slackened with each passing class period. Later, my Spanish teachers became more engaging, but I had already lost my interest. When I arrived at Clemson, my intention was to forget the language as soon as I was done with my gen-ed courses and had picked an illustrious major, possibly in philosophy, or medicine, or business law. However, I discovered that the language came quickly to me, and that I was often more fluent than many of my classmates. I thought that I could use this advantage to get ahead elsewhere, so I began learning any language I could get my hands on: Italian, Mandarin, Arabic, Russian, French, Navajo, German; I did my very best to encourage the language-acquisition instinct within myself, the near-insipid ideal of "polyglotism". This hope, which I now realize to be ridiculous, soon confused my abilities to speak any one language adequately, and as a result my grades in Spanish suffered a while as I mixed up the most basic building blocks of that language with the others. The process of untangling this web has been quite arduous, and the stark realization I came to is that to speak a language fluently, one must immerse themselves in it resolutely.

The moment I remember actually feeling a connection with the language after this process, the moment I decided to study Spanish exclusively, was during a literature course focused primarily on medieval and Renaissance-era Spanish works. The Spanish I encountered was rather different from the overly simplistic grammatical structures I had studied until then; it

was more archaic and allowed me to better understand the origin of more contemporary Spanish, as well as the relationship between the older European languages (Old English, High German, etc.), which fascinate me greatly. Besides providing me with an interesting linguistic perspective, this course also helped familiarize me with the “spirit” of peninsular Spanish. From there, I also learned about the origins of many narrative styles that emerged in the Spanish world, such as the novel, which was popularized by Cervantes in *Don Quijote*, or the *historia picaresca*, popularized by the anonymous work *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Furthermore, Professor Rojas’ rigorous evaluation of my essays spurred me to study Spanish grammar in depth in my free time to be able to say anything I needed whenever I needed to in my second language. In second language fluency, perfection is nearly unattainable, and such perfection is rare in my writing and speaking, but I can see that the presence of advanced level fluency improves by the day.

After that course, I began to read a bit more attentively and began grasping the subtler nuances of the language. The logic of Spanish was difficult to assimilate to at first, but over time the process became nearly instinctual. Professor Rojas began recommending me additional readings outside of class, usually by Borges, who has since become my favorite Spanish-language author (finding a favorite author in a new language, I have discovered, is fundamental to achieving fluency, and I can’t recommend it enough). Borges, who often plays around with perspective in his works, grabbed my attention with “La Casa de Asterion”, which uses a highly aberrant narrator. Without spoiling the work, which is relatively short, I would highly recommend it, as Borges makes every work of his read like a puzzle that you intuitively want to solve before the end.

Other courses, such as Spanish Linguistics, allowed me to appreciate how Spanish syntax, morphemes, and grammar relate to the other languages I’d studied. I learned about the

progression of the Castilian language from Latin, through contact with the Arabs, Visigoths, Celts, and Basques, and the languages diaspora across the world at large. Recognizing the Latin roots of words and the shared structures within Spanish, Italian, and Middle English (which I am somewhat familiar with) taught me to find patterns that had previously escaped me. However, this clarity required a great deal of discipline, trying to learn too many languages at once had set me back greatly.

I made it a point to engage with the Spanish language and culture outside of class to set myself on track. I discovered that simply studying for essays and reading medieval texts distanced me greatly from the “street Spanish” spoken in the real world. My roommate Austin and I began attending a Catholic church service in Greenville together to improve our fluency. He was the one that brought up the idea, and since he’s from Dallas, Texas, he often acted as an intermediary in the beginning, helping me understand things as we go. I was raised Presbyterian, so between the language I didn’t know at the time and the composite of foreign-to-me rituals there was a bit of a culture shock at first. Now, I can understand around 95% of the sermon (barring good acoustics in the chambers), and I’ve learned to anticipate certain prayers and songs, and have gotten to the point where I no longer need a program to understand the service.

I’ve also discovered that Spanish is an extremely useful language for communicating at work. I work in the hospitality industry, so my Spanish is primarily functional; I communicate with the cleaning staff and can direct them on complex tasks effectively enough for management to acknowledge it. When I move to Richmond, I hope to refine my skills so I can communicate more frequently with guests. I currently work at reception, which leaves me with quite a bit of free time between visits. I’ve used this time to delve deeper into Spanish literature, especially the work of Neruda. Over the past year, I’ve come to the conclusion that, while Cervantes and

Márquez are the most well-known, Neruda is the best author for understanding the subtleties of the language. His work, with its mystical quality of bending meaning into near-meaninglessness, then back around again, has prompted in me a fastidious study.

Even with my improvement in the language being exponential as of late, I find it hard to imagine achieving complete fluency. I still aspire to be a "polyglot," which makes it difficult for me to concentrate. However, I believe that as my intentions with the language move away from the academic sphere and closer to more concrete and natural linguistic goals, and as I have more free time to explore the culture, these doubts will begin to diminish. My girlfriend and I have already planned a trip to Colombia in July, with a list of cities and restaurants to visit, compiled by her coworkers, all of whom are from Cartagena or Barranquilla. Ideally, I will, in the future, be able to make these trips as often as possible and, at the same time, discover new ways within the language to achieve complete fluency.