

Olga Litvinova

18+

SHINING MY LIGHT ON BILINGUALISM AND FULBRIGHT

BILINGUALISM

Language Learning

FULBRIGHT

Language Teaching

Identity

Culture and Politics



Olga Litvinova

**Shining My Light on
Bilingualism and Fulbright**

«Издательские решения»

Litvinova O. A.

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The interviews in this book were collected in the U.S. as part of a Fulbright research project on bilingualism. The participants share their experiences of living with more than one language and different sorts of challenges and struggles coming with it. The author (English teacher, researcher, writer, traveler) also includes her own experience of life in the U.S. into the narrative as she combined elements of storytelling and academic writing.

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Shining My Light on Bilingualism and Fulbright Olga Aleksandrovna Litvinova

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Olga Litvinova

**SHINING MY LIGHT
ON BILINGUALISM AND FULBRIGHT**

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PREFACE

December 1, 2022

Yerevan, Armenia, 2:58pm

Back in 2017 when I started my Fulbright journey in the U.S.,

I had no idea I would begin writing my first-ever book based on a part of my research project here in the Armenian capital where I have been living for almost two months now. Bilingualism is indeed such a tricky and mysterious phenomenon that you genuinely never know where in the world you would find yourself thinking (and writing) about it. Actually, Armenia is a good place for writing about bilingualism as you are exposed to it in different corners of the capital. As I am in the post-Soviet space, one of the languages I (happily) see in Yerevan's streets making this city and country feel so emotionally and linguistically accommodating is my «language of the heart», which is Russian. There is also English, the language that I have been teaching for more than 10 years now.

I am writing this foreword here in Mirzoyan Library, a 19 century building now functioning as an art gallery and a cafe, enjoying this perfect quiet setting for doing what would definitely be my dream job. My current soundscape is multilingual as I can hear Armenian, Russian, and some English being spoken. Sitting at a vintage sewing table, I feel like a seamstress who is about to start working on putting together all the ingredients of this book. Honestly, I am terrible at sewing, but hopefully I am better with words than I am with a thread and a needle.th

As much as I love putting words on paper (or rather typing them on my keyboard), I have always been too scared to even think of writing a book. I grew up as a humble kid in the post-Soviet Russia in a family that was neither noble nor rich. Probably the idea that writing was something only privileged wealthy people could afford to do was drummed into my brain at school where we were told that it took an enormous level of geniusness (matching those of great classical Russian writers) to even dare contemplate doing this.

As a kid, I also thought bilingualism was not something people like us (living in a small town not far from the Russia-Ukraine border) would ever contemplate either. Just as with writing, I used to believe bilinguals were some privileged individuals who traveled a lot and lived generally exciting lives and as some great Russian writers, mostly came from noble and rich families. Growing up listening to my parents and grandparents speaking a dialect, which was a mix of Russian and Ukrainian, I never realized my mundane linguistic experiences were at least a tiny bit similar to those of bilinguals. Now here I am – writing a book about bilingualism in my second language!

In 2017 I won the Fulbright scholarship to collect data for my PhD research project on second language writing which involved the use of a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. The interview project that I will be presenting in this book was meant to become part of this «bigger» study. However, in the process of interviewing bilinguals and listening to their stories, I realized that «smaller» project was a lot more interesting to me. Probably that was because deep down inside I wasn't sure I felt totally comfortable with quantitative research methods, while this qualitative project was a way to embrace my long-standing passion for journalism.

It really takes crises of varying scale for some ideas to materialize and for others to be put on hold. Due to some internal and external uncertainties, my «bigger» research project hasn't materialized into a PhD paper yet. As for the «smaller» project, even in the process of working on it, I realized that I wouldn't be able to do justice to this material presenting it in the impersonal tone of research papers. Living in Armenia amidst a political turmoil in my home country in 2022, I got inspired to make this «smaller» interview project part of my debut book.

What you are going to read is my «diplomatic» way of marrying storytelling and research. If we think about the first part of this book as a painting, all the 51 bilinguals and the summaries of those

interviews I conducted with them back in the U.S. are in its foreground, while my reflections on how I met each of my «characters» (who would have been impersonal, etc. in a PhD paper) as well as on my time as a Fulbrighter in the U.S. are in the background. In the second part of the book I dwell on the issues surrounding language learning and teaching and present some research studies in this area. In the third part I discuss some problems related to bilingualism which are not directly associated with language learning and teaching but are central to it as well. These are the topics concerning identity, culture, and politics. *Participant 1, Participant 2*

I am perfectly aware of all the challenges of bringing a book into this world in the current situation when as a Russian, English teacher, translator, researcher, writer, and a Fulbrighter, I am really struggling with how to position myself in this rapidly changing world. On the other hand, what the insanity of the last couple of years has taught us is that life is so fragile and we never know what tomorrow brings. So, now at the age of 34 I finally have enough courage to put into a book all the ideas informed by all the research reading I have done over these years as well as those inspired by my personal experiences and interactions with like-minded individuals.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK?

The book is organized into chapters. The first one includes the interviews with 51 bilinguals that are presented in the chronological order they were conducted in. Readers can study the summaries of the interviews in any order they wish.

The second chapter presents the analysis of the interviews as well as some studies on the topics that came up in my talks with the 51 bilinguals. The first part deals with some issues regarding language learning and teaching. The second one looks at some «non-linguistic» problems that have to be dealt with while discussing bilingualism. These are related to identity, culture, and politics.

Each of the chapters and their parts can be read separately or in any other order.

WHO IS THE BOOK FOR?

First of all, if you are reading this, you are most likely bilingual. So, I hope that this book will be interesting for bilinguals and everyone interested in language learning. I would also like to think fellow language teachers and linguists will be able to reflect on the issues I cover in the book. As they are mostly interdisciplinary, it would be amazing if fellow researchers with the background in social sciences are able to examine how closely interrelated our fields are. Last but not the least, I hope that fellow Fulbrighters (with any background) will enjoy this book and will be invited to reflect on their own experiences.

The research project presented in this book was funded by a Fulbright grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.

*This study has been approved by the Montclair State University Institutional Review Board, study no. . Prior to participation, all the participants were informed of the purpose of the research and signed a consent form allowing the researcher to make the recordings of the interviews publicly available as well as to use the collected data in other studies. **FY17-18-800***

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CHAPTER 1. INTERVIEWS WITH BILINGUALS

Part 1.1. WHO DO WE CONSIDER BILINGUAL?

As there is a word «bilingualism» in the title of this book, it would make perfect sense to start by explaining what it is. Answering this question in a straightforward ways seems difficult. Put simply, bilinguals are those individuals who speak two or more languages. But obviously, there are two questions that arise – how do we define «knowing» a language and secondly, how well is one supposed to «know» it to be called bilingual?

Modern linguists do not agree on the definition of bilingualism. The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2003) proposes such a definition: There is a question of whether this proficiency level is achievable and whether individuals using a second language but not being so fluent can be considered bilingual (Liddicoat, 1991). A more diverse definition is set forth by A. Fantini (Fantini, 1985) who sees the following as essential in describing bilingualism: the number of languages used by an individual; types of relations between them; their functions; degree of proficiency; alternation of languages and interaction between them. Haugen (Haugen, 1953) attempts for an even more precise definition by classifying *«having or using two languages especially as spoken with the fluency characteristic of a native speaker»*. *anyone capable of producing coherent ideas in another language as bilingual*.

A rather liberal definition is suggested by Diebold (Diebold, 1964) and J. MacNamara (MacNamara, 1967) where So, as opposed to a widely held belief, beginner language learners in formal academic settings of educational institutions, or e.g., tourists with a working knowledge of a few spoken phrases can be called bilingual. Edwards (Edwards, 2006) holds that almost anyone finds themselves having to be bilingual as in order to be able to travel and take advantage of the benefits of the global world and they have to speak a language rather than their own. The same researcher (Edwards, 2003) dismisses monolingualism as a disease that has to be cured. Attempting to embrace the complexity of the term, Yuko G. Butler and Kenji Hakuta (Butler & Hakuta, 2004) believe that *anyone with a minimum competence in any of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) is classed as bilingual. bilinguals are individuals with various degrees of communicative skills (in oral and/or written language) enabling communication in two or more languages in a certain linguistic community*.

As we can see, bilingualism has not only a linguistic but also a social nature and involves more than individual speech production but also cognitive skills, psychological features and a particular social (as well as ethnic, gender, age and cultural) identity. Most of current conceptions and studies of bilingualism are taking a variety of its social and psychological aspects into consideration. Grosjean (Grosjean, 1989) cautions against viewing bilinguals as a sum of two monolinguals. In modern literature there is an emphasis on the fact that while working on improving their linguistic skills, bilinguals develop a whole new linguistic behaviour, which is distinctly different from that of monolinguals. Cook (Cook, 1992) speculates on a wide range of bilingual competences including cultural ones that are to be paid attention to as part of studying bilingualism.

The complexity of bilingualism led to a variety of classifications of bilinguals according to different criteria: language competences, spheres of use, balance in the use of languages, development of linguistic skills, age of learners, context of language use, etc. E.g., Peal and Lambert (Peal and Lambert, 1962) classify bilinguals into and . However, Fishman (Fishman, 1972) thinks this is an idealized view. George Steiner (Steiner, 1992) argued that he was equally good at English, French and German, i.e. he would hardly say which of the languages he would use in a particular situation, which is quite exceptional. *balanced unbalanced*

There are also classifications of social groups of bilinguals. Fishman (Fishman, 1972) speaks of folk bilingualism (e.g., slaves were made to learn basic Greek to talk to their masters) and elite bilingualism (e.g., in the Tsar's Russia members of high society were taught French while growing up). Additionally, Lambert (Lambert, 1974) suggests that interactions of previous language systems and new ones cause what he calls (in societies where one is encouraged to learn a second language for gaining better prospects) and (an individual has to lose touch with their first language as its use is not endorsed in a particular community). *additive subtractive*

It should be remembered that bilingualism is not a static but a very dynamic category and individual bilingual profiles might shift as personal or social circumstances change. E.g., an individual might lose oral skills in a previously learned language as they start using another one more frequently instead, etc.

Originally, I was looking at interviewing bilinguals with a high (self-reported) level in the four language skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking). All of the fellow Fulbrighters I have interviewed obviously fit this description as all Fulbright candidates are expected to take the TOEFL test and get a certain overall score (depending on the requirements specified by particular host universities in the U.S.). There have also been a few English teachers from different countries whose occupation alone equalled them to the level of a confident language user.

Throughout the course of this project I realized I had to adopt a more liberal approach to who qualifies as bilingual if I wanted to get more varied perspectives on individual language learning histories. I was able to interview a few first-generation Americans who spoke their heritage languages with a varying degree of fluency, immigrants to the U.S. as well as Americans who self-reported different levels of proficiency in other languages. I felt these people's insights would be valuable for this project as well. Everyone who participated had had prior experience of learning a foreign language and showed a great interest in the topic of bilingualism. Every participant's interview was included into this project and I am sure each one contributed to it in its own unique way.

Part 1.2. HOW WAS MY DATA COLLECTED?

Interview questions

- Introduce yourself (your name, country of origin, what you are studying in the U.S.)
- When did you start learning English?
- What kind of difficulties did you have at different stages of learning? What did you find easy/difficult?
- Did you have a chance to use English outside the classroom?
- What was the main focus of your language instruction?
- What is your general opinion of the language instruction in your country?
- What are the attitudes to language instruction in your country?
- Would you agree that one might feel like a different person while speaking other languages and switching between them?
- How are you planning to use English in your future life?
- What tips would you give to anyone trying to learn another language?

Interviews as a research method

As I said, one of the reasons why I chose to conduct this interview project was my love for journalism where being able to talk to your interviewees effectively and reporting facts in the manner fit for a specific target audience and publication is key. Being exposed to various types of journalism (particularly political) facilitated my learning in my senior years at university to such an extent that I was secretly dreaming of pursuing a career in this domain. This never happened, but every once in a while I would pick up books on journalism.

In the attempt to become a better interviewer for a couple of projects I had in mind, I started reading one by a journalist Dean Nelson called (Nelson, 2019). One phrase he used stuck in my mind, «Asking good questions keeps us from living in our own echo chambers». What the author means is that in investigating other people's perspectives on some issues we revisit and reevaluate our own. Nelson goes on to say that one doesn't even have to be a professional journalist to interview others as asking questions is essentially what we do almost on a daily basis. If we are trained to formulate our questions correctly, that would be able to «draw out personalities and understandings». *Talk to Me: How to Ask Better Questions, Get Better Answers, and Interview Anyone Like a Pro*

Actually, interviews («qualitative interviewing», Rubin and Rubin, 2005) are a popular qualitative research tool in social sciences, including applied linguistics. This is especially the case for studies «that aim to investigate participants' identities, experiences, beliefs and orientations» (Talmy, 2010). In the late 1960s and early 1970s narratives became an object and «a legitimate means» of doing research in history, education, anthropology, etc. (Briggs, 1986). Interviews were thought of as an effective way of eliciting different types of narratives to be investigated. This process is referred to as Of special interest have been so-called «personal speakers experiences» which draw on stories about «real, imagined, or possible events» (Pavlenko, 2007). as a subtype of such narratives have been one of the most common tools to study bilingualism. Different groups of bilinguals have been studied over the decades and there are a lot of papers presenting an overview of such research (e.g., Mann, 2010). *narrative inquiry. Linguistic autobiographies*

Among a huge number of studies, there were two books that I found truly inspirational for my own research into bilingualism. The first one was by a British linguist David Block called (Block, 2006). What I loved a lot about this book that despite being rigidly structured and presenting an extensive literature review on bilingualism and second language identities in particular, it had some storytelling elements as well following different individuals (immigrants, students, teachers, etc.) as they were living through their own unique linguistic experiences with London as a platform for their adventures (with obvious ups and downs). The author was able to provide the context for all the interviews and grouped them either according to the participants' country of origin or occupation.

To me, this research appeared to be an engaging attempt to humanize bilinguals while still examining their life stories through a research lens. «*Multilingual Identities in a Global City: London Stories*»

Another book that fascinated me was by Alastair Pennycook and Emi Otsuji titled (Alastair, Otsuji, 2015). *Metrolingualism* «describes the ways in which people of different and mixed backgrounds use, play with and negotiate identities through language» with the focus being «not on language systems but on languages as emergent from contexts of interaction». Sydney, the city where the research is undertaken, acts as a backdrop for new language identities transformed by «global and local practices». The authors draw a lot of attention to their diverse participants' everyday experiences making these individuals seem like actors on the vibrant multicultural Sydney stage where multilingual street signs also serve as an essential element of the action. «*Metrolingualism. Language in the City*»

Besides being a linguist and a language teacher, I am a keen traveler as well. So, I instantly fell in love with the idea of analyzing bilingualism as it is incorporated into a city's texture as well as its soundscape and landscape. As I knew I would be living very close to NYC, I couldn't help thinking about using its multiculturalism as a platform for my own explorations of language practices there. For sure, I would not be the first person to have attempted that, so in order to make my work more original, I wanted to incorporate my future home state, New Jersey, and my host university town into the picture. As I was hoping to be able to travel to other places across in the U.S., that would make sense to include them into my narrative as well.

Even before starting this project I had an idea to make it into something not purely scientific. I agree that autobiographic narratives «are interesting and thus have aesthetic value and can engage the readers. They are accessible and thus can appeal to larger audiences» (Pavlenko, 2007). So, the of my interview project was to collect linguistic autobiographies of individuals I would be meeting during my time in the U.S. in order to learn more about their language learning experiences. As I said in the previous section, originally I had adopted the stricter version of bilinguals and interviewed only fellow Fulbrighters who all had a high level of proficiency in English. Later on in the project, I realized that the more liberal definition of bilingualism (i.e., various degrees of language skills enabling communication in a certain community) would allow me to access more participants and make my narrative more varied and engaging. **purpose**

After designing the I thought would enable my interviewees to help me and my potential readers gain a better understanding of what being a bilingual is like, I started recruiting participants while in the U.S. The process was not as smooth as I had expected. It was my first experience of trying to collect data for an interview project. Looking back, I am not sure if choosing one (e.g., Fulbrighters, English teachers, PhD students, heritage speakers, etc.) would have made this collection more much smaller but a lot more comprehensible and easier to write up. Eventually I decided I would attempt to make this unexpected element part of my own unique narrative made up of these individual language autobiographies. **interview questions, recruitment focus group**

For this project I conducted . In this type of qualitative interviews participants are offered a series of open-end questions on a specific topic. According to lots of social science scholars, the reason why this specific kind of interviews is routinely studied in narrative inquiry is that it allows both the interviewer and interviewee a high degree of flexibility as the former can «gently» guide the latter to elaborate on certain points depending on the answers provided. These interviews are also called «exploratory», as despite its general directions given before the interview a researcher can «go deep for a discovery» modifying their line of inquiry (Magaldi and Berler, 2020). **semi-structured interviews**

As for the , it was obvious that all of them would share some sort of interest in linguistics (the topic of bilingualism specifically). Some of them might have imagined what to expect in the process before getting the interview questions and the guide. What is more, at some point of their own learning/teaching careers, they must have contemplated similar or the same issues I asked them

to dwell on in their talk. The individuals who were helping me recruit the participants and the interviewees themselves were professors of Linguistics or their students. The other part were fellow Fulbrighters coming from a range of backgrounds that I knew to a varying extent. The remaining part were individuals who were also interested in linguistics and responded to my social media posts about my project. **participants**

As for a few factors that have to be considered while conducting such studies, I am perfectly aware of how the effect of (Mann, 2010) as well as power balance with the interviewees has to be taken into account in this type of a qualitative study. It certainly determined the participants' motivation to be interviewed. Some (mostly Fulbrighters) were my friends and willing to help. Others (those with no background in Linguistics) found my research idea interesting and were curious to reflect on these issues. There were also a few students who agreed to be interviewed so that their professors would give them some extra credits. That for sure had some sort of effect on how the interview was going and the rapport between me and the participant. Being recorded might have made some individuals more self-conscious. **«prior relationship»**

As I was watching back all of these interviews while working on this book, I realized how much (Mann, 2010) (i.e., mine) was present in interviews. I faced a sort of a dilemma while thinking of ways to analyze and present my interviews. Instead of providing the transcripts as researchers often do in their research papers, in this book I decided to present the interviews as narratives told through my own lens as I was trying not to distort the original message and quote some of the parts that were formulated in the manner I found unusual. To show my own personal touch even more and to take advantage of that not being a PhD paper, before each story I decided to include the information on how I met each of the participants and how I myself was navigating through associated linguistic, cultural, political issues at the time. In scientific terms I was examining «a larger sociohistoric context of narrative production» (Mann, 2010). After each interview I also provided some reflections on what I heard and some further thoughts that this particular participant inspired in me. **«the voice of the interviewer»**

There are different ways to analyze interviews that are commonly used by linguists (e.g., (Gheyle & Jacobs, 2017)). In the section following the interviews I will be classifying those issues into groups (i.e., language learning and teaching, identity, culture, politics). I am aware of «the temptation to carve out those more quotable parts that serve our purposes» (Pavlenko, 2007). However, as much as I will be trying to stay objective, I agree that as a writer at this stage I am bringing some of my own biases into the project. **content analysis**

I am perfectly aware of the possible of such studies and possible criticisms of some methods of collecting qualitative interview data and analyzing it addressed in scientific literature. For example, as part of this project I have been focusing only on the oral narrative data obtained from the participants. Besides, as my stay in the U.S. was limited, I had no opportunity to conduct longitudinal studies. Another crucial factor is the language of the interviews. All of them were conducted in English. Even though all of the participants are confident English users, it is obvious that they might have faced some difficulties getting their message across and making it more nuanced, which native speakers did not. Finally, as I previously said, I did not attempt to target any specific groups of bilinguals and included individuals with various levels of language competence into the project. I hope that despite all of these obvious limitations, my readers will be able to benefit from the following 51 interviews that are to be read either individually or in the same order they are presented in the book. **limitations**

Part 1.3. MEET MY BILINGUALS!

First, before you get to know my bilinguals and find out about their linguistic adventures, let's imagine I asked myself these same questions on my long flight from Paris to Miami on August 21, 2017. This will also be a way for me to introduce myself to those who might not know me while

talking about my own language journey that got underway way before I found myself on this plane crossing the Atlantic for the first time in my life.

Me and my life-long commitment to English (Olga, Russia)

Russian, English, German, some Italian, French, Spanish. **Languages spoken:**

English teacher, translator, researcher (Linguistics). **Field of study/career:**

I had my first English class at Grade 2 at the age of 8. For months before that «big day», I had been growing more and more excited. As I had learned some of the English alphabet, . For example, I remember writing the Russian word for «granddad» (in Russian) as «» naively thinking that was a proper English word! I had no idea what kind of disappointment I would be in for when my real English classes started! ***I thought I would master English when I had learned all the letters and would simply use them instead of the corresponding Russian ones*** *дед дед*

Back in the 1990s English wasn't a compulsory foreign language to learn in Russia until Grade 5. At my school in a small town in the country's southwest, it was possible to start taking it earlier as an optional free class. ***Even though in the post-Soviet Russia English didn't enjoy the same level of prestige as it would around a decade or so later, it still seemed a good idea to start at an earlier age.***

It didn't take me too long to start getting disappointed – it wasn't about specific difficulties I had, but that was because of the teacher who would spend almost the entire class yelling and screaming at us. She loved to write in huge handwriting and once in Grade 3 she gave me a huge «3-» (or a «C-») for a test. I was called «the family's disgrace» by Mum when she found that notebook that I had been trying so hard to hide somewhere in the apartment. I think this phrase stuck with me for years and was part of my motivation to persevere with English. My sister, who was in Grade 8 back then, was doing exceptionally and unbelievably well academically, particularly in the Russian language. She had been winning all sorts of school competitions and was featured in a local newspaper a few times.

Deep down inside, I wanted to be at least a tiny bit as smart as my sister I saw working with huge dictionaries of Russian. It wasn't large so by the end of the summer, I had studied it from cover to cover. I picked up a few more English books – including the legendary (in the former USSR, anyway) English course by Наталья Бонк () and noticed I was getting more and more interested... ***Not wanting to be a complete «copycat», I picked up a visual dictionary of English. Somehow I had a gut feeling it was going to be a truly «big» moment in my life.*** *Natalia Bonk*

In the early 2000s music was the only window into a «foreign» (Western) world. Once I heard some songs by a British pop band on a radio show hosted by a Russian journalist living in London (which seemed to be somewhere on the Moon!). They somehow stroke a chord with me and sparked my interest in English even more. What I really loved was reading and translating their song lyrics my sister's friend downloaded from the Internet for me (I didn't even get my first computer till Grade 10). I would keep notes of any new vocabulary I came across.

So, I ended up with an inconsistent «diet» of whatever textbooks I could get my hands on. I did all the tasks in writing in a thick notebook and used the answer key to check my answers. ***School classes of English where we did nothing but do boring grammar exercises and translate texts from English into Russian had become nothing but an obligation. I realized that early on I would have to take responsibility for my own learning.***

Eventually my teacher (the same that would still scream and yell at us) noticed my interest in her subject and I became her favorite. It seemed as if she was occasionally even relying on me for translations! I was hoping I had started to prove I wasn't «the family's disgrace». I can't think of any difficulties I had at that point at all. I loved every minute of my independent learning, which seemed to be the most enjoyable thing unlike all those boring school classes (probably apart from Russian and Literature). ***Or I might have loved English too much by that point to even start noticing any difficulties.***

It wasn't until I participated in regional school competitions in English that I realized I couldn't speak like those kids from the region's capital! I had trained myself quite well in grammar and vocabulary, but it hadn't ever occurred to me what I had been doing all of that for. ***I had treated English more as a funny game without thinking it was an actual language you had to speak!***

As there were still no opportunities to practise speaking, I continued working with the other aspects. For reading I had some classics and a few Oxford readers. Apart from listening to a few audiobooks on my tape recorder and later a CD-player, I studied a video course on CD-ROM after we had finally got a computer. I didn't pay much attention to writing. ***I only wish I had attempted to write in English creatively while still at high school.***

I was obsessed with it while my classmates were going on first dates and having fun. «English is your boyfriend», I remember one of them saying trying to make fun of that boring «nerd» I was considered to be. «Probably that was true», I thought to myself and stayed focused on my goals. One of the crucial ones was to pass my university exams to be able to study for free. In the early 2000s English was considered a prestigious foreign language as probably everything which had a word «foreign» in it. So, getting into Foreign Language Departments were very challenging. I chose the teaching path over the translating one, because it was more accessible for kids from small towns like myself who could only afford to study for free. ***Anyway, I knew well before I had finished school that English would be my future career.***

I attended a preparatory course at my university of choice, which involved waking up at 3am every Saturday to take an early morning train to get to Voronezh which was 250 km away. However, I wouldn't say I had learned much, but at least I had a chance to start speaking English while talking on some philosophic issues – I would be doing a lot of that at university! ***As hiring a private tutor wasn't an option at all, I prepared for my entrance exams all on my own.***

When I became a student at Foreign Languages Department of Voronezh State Pedagogical University, learning got insanely intense from the very get-go. My love grew more intense as at university classes we dived into advanced grammar and had extensive speaking practice. We would joke how after five years at Foreign Languages Department we would be ready to have extended conversations about anything under the sun. The only thing that made me suffer was Phonetics during the freshman year. Somehow I never truly attached much importance to how I sounded in English, because I had zero ear for music... ***«English is going to continue to be my boyfriend», I laughed to myself. Honestly, I didn't mind that as at that point I was deeply in love and was ready to commit.***

Halfway through my studies we had a course on Writing and that was got me falling for English even more. It was my first proper experience of writing creatively in it and I was feeling all the efforts I had put into writing down and memorizing that «fancy» vocabulary from all possible sources while my university classmates were out dating were paying off! Getting access to the high-speed Internet in my final year was a big milestone. I would stay up listening to a random selection of BBC podcasts or watching some TV shows. I started realizing how «real» this language was. It was then I got to have a Skype chat with a real native speaker I met on a pen pal website. ***Yes, back then I thought native speakers were walking gods or something!***

The first teaching practice that we had in the fourth year of university was disappointing, but honestly, I didn't quite expect I would love it at all. Working with kids had never been my thing and would never be. Of course, I would never stop working on improving my English and eventually had to let go of those feelings, because otherwise I would have gone mad – even teaching at my own university where to my astonishment, a lot of students training to become English teachers didn't make any effort to learn at all. Or was I thinking like that just because I had been making too much of it..? ***After that experience, I felt that my English that I had been working so insanely hard to study had been touched with some dirty hands.***

A few months before graduation I got my first job as a translator for a scientific journal in Architecture and I became a teacher at my own department a year after graduation. That was when

I first traveled abroad and got a chance to practise English not only on Skype with a few more native speakers I had met. I did German as a secondary foreign language at university. I wasn't enthusiastic about it as I wish I had studied French instead. Inspired by my trip to Italy, I started learning Italian. A bit later I got to see a bit of France, my dream country since childhood. So, I added French to my self-study plan. As a language teacher, I knew I wouldn't be able to master either of these languages reasonably well, but I felt that unlike German that had been forced on me, those two languages were my foreign language «affairs» I would escape to whenever the teaching routine got a bit too exhausting. I also had a quick try at Spanish before a brief conference trip to Spain, but this language didn't get me too interested for some reason. Traveling also inspired me to start a travel blog in English and to let out all the creative impulses I had been suppressing.

Even though doing research felt intimidating, I was happy to present as long as I could do it in English. Listening to other presentations, I got exposed to a great variety of accents. Exciting networking events during the conferences gave me the opportunity to use English in more casual environments. What I realized was that Pronunciation or grammar mistakes, which it is part of our job to correct, do not matter that much as long as one is able to get their message across. Most teachers should be aware of that, but unless you travel internationally, it is hard to feel what you teach is completely real and is actually a communication tool. ***Conference trips to Europe really allowed me to feel the power of English as a lingua franca. real-world communication in English is a lot «messier» than we try to make it seem in the language classroom.***

English has definitely been an extremely powerful tool in making something I wouldn't even dare dream of a reality. So, having this power available to me makes me feel different while speaking English. I am naturally introverted and don't feel too comfortable in big groups. But I am still an introverted me in English as well, but by speaking this language I feel I am embracing internationalism and cosmopolitanism as well as celebrating all the work I have done in order to master English. I also feel my voice sounds different in English, which I had others point out as well. It is easy to take our first languages for granted – probably that is the price we pay for the commitment we make to another language, which has been more than just a communicative tool, more than just a job which pays my bills, but a real passion. I am still confused as to how incorporate my «Russianness» into my English (i.e., international) identity. I don't think I have developed any sort of other personality for the other languages I only know some basics of. ***That kid who started learning English back in the 90s had absolutely no idea she would get to travel outside her country at all. when I speak English, I generally feel more cheerful, friendly and confident as if I were exploring this new side of me I had no idea existed. In Russian I feel more vulnerable and even less interesting to myself feeling the exciting new life English has offered me has been snatched away from me.***

As the U.S. is a linguistic and cultural melting pot, I might even get to practise these extra languages (German, Italian, French, Spanish) while I'm there. Honestly, I had never expected I would get to go to this country – especially for such an extended amount of time. I can't believe I have won a Fulbright scholarship, which my English has certainly played a part in. Actually, as an English teacher, I was expected to go to the UK first, because in Russia we were taught and some say they teach (I'm not one of them) the British variety of English. That is how I like to feel when I speak and particularly write in it. Yes, I feel a lot of us (i.e., non-natives) have to claim the ownership of this language. ***Now I see this language as truly international and not belonging to any specific country.***

I know I am going to be in a country where English (there is no official language in the U.S., by the way) is predominantly spoken. However, I am more excited not about linguistic adventures (which I am sure I am in for), but cultural experiences with people all over the world – fellow Fulbrighters as well as other internationals living in the U.S. As Fulbrighters we are also supposed to be «cultural ambassadors» of our respective countries, which is a daunting role knowing that you might be the first person from Russia someone is going to meet. Also, given the never-ending political tensions between Russia and the U.S., I realize when I return home, fellow Russians would expect me

to be their guide into what life in the U.S. is like. Some might even think I have somehow betrayed my home country by going to America, which some Russians think is our number-one enemy... There will be definitely be others wondering why someone would even come back from what might be paradise on Earth... All I know is that it is going to be complicated, but exciting as well!

Even though the Russian society is still divided over how the West (how it is collectively imagined) is to be treated, a lot of Russians – at least those living in bigger cities – have a more nuanced understanding of life abroad due to having been able to travel internationally, which has certainly become more accessible for some. So, the «iron curtain» mindset cultivated in the USSR when overseas traveling was restricted is no longer ever-present. Going abroad is no longer universally seen almost as flying to the Moon. English is no longer seen as something abstract and simply prestigious either. It is not a secret there are some compatriots who would love to move to other countries either temporarily or permanently, for which English is mostly likely essential. *Even though it is not widely spoken in Russia, more active and ambitious Russians treat as a tool that would fast-track their international careers.*

Each aspect (listening, reading, writing, speaking) would involve certain difficulties and practice, but you will be able to deal with any problems and find the time you need to build your skills if you are genuinely into this. *Finally, to everyone looking to succeed in language learning, I would recommend simply falling in love – with the language itself, its culture, people (or a particular person for that matter).*

∞ Now that I have caught a glimpse of Miami through a plane window, I know my U.S. adventure has finally started! I can't wait to ask my participants these same questions I have just answered and find out their perspective.

A charming and super educated bilingual (Apoorva, India)

Hindi, English, Urdu. **Languages spoken:**

Literature, Higher Education and Administration Policy (Teacher's College, University of Columbia) **Field of study/career:** .

I met Apoorva, an epitomy of the Bollywood beauty, during the Fulbright orientation event in Miami and was really amazed by how charming she was from outside and inside. She comes from India where English is quite widely spoken .

During my first days in New Jersey where my host university was located as well as during my first (quite humble and intimidating) commutes to NYC, even being a university English teacher, I had to admit to have been struggling with English a bit. For example, while ordering my coffee at the university diner I would sometimes have difficulties interacting with waiters as they spoke super fast and there were too many options to choose from, which I wasn't used to at all. That certainly reinforced that stereotype of the culture of consumerism so prevalent in the U.S.

NYC can be too much – visually, sensually and linguistically as well. When a fellow Russian Fulbrighter, Apoorva and I met in Central Park in New York City, we all probably needed a break from the city's linguistic hustle and bustle.

The choice of the first interviewee wasn't intentional or scientifically justified. Back in Miami I had mentioned my project to Apoorva and she volunteered to participate. Probably I felt she had just the right energy as I knew from the get-go, it wasn't going to be a purely rational and rigorously scientific endeavor...

Being in Central Park and picking a random bench to get comfortable for the interview had a certain cinematographic feel to it. As I was filming it (as well as most of the interviews that followed), for some reason I had a random thought of Woody Allen. So many iconic Hollywood films have been made (and I guess some by many other companies in many other languages as well) right in this spot. I knew I would be writing about this moment so here I am...

Apoorva started learning English as part of a basic curriculum at school at the age of 3. In India it is common to go to an English-medium school as this country used to be a British colony. So, as a result, Apoorva thinks that «50 to 60% of Indians speak English very well».

At her English classes back there was a lot of focus on grammar and eventually the emphasis on writing well increased. Then in what could be an equivalent of an American «high-school» spoken English skills got «polished». As for mistake correction, there was also an «over-emphasis» on pronunciation and the teacher had a rather strong authority. ***Apoorva attended a convent and in these institutions students actually got penalized if they were found speaking any other language rather than English and their mother tongue were only allowed during recess.***

According to Apoorva, Initially she didn't feel confident enough as she hadn't grown up in an English-speaking environment even though her parents are «fairly fluent» in English. It wasn't till middle school that she finally gained enough confidence to speak English. ***in her home country speaking English is looked upon as something «very respectable». There are actually households in India where different generations of a family would speak English with each other in private settings.***

As being able to speak this language well is «imbued with a certain sense of superiority» even in India, some younger people might start ignoring their own mother tongues. Of course, with India being so big, English eventually acquired its own varieties inside the country and «grammar may differ from state to state». ***Apoorva emphasizes the role of the native culture which finds its way into the way people use the language.***

She said she had been contemplating issues surrounding language acquisition and use more after completing her undergrad in Literature which gave her «a renewed passion for languages» and «a newfound respect for my own language». Reflecting more on her adolescence, she recollects how even for formal requests back at school students still had to use English. Also, in formal gatherings rarely would you find someone asking you questions in Hindi or any other language spoken in India. So, Apoorva often heard fellow Indians approaching her with the questions such as «What's your name?», «How are you doing at school?». Then the conversation might «transgress» into another language.

Apoorva admits that she is still struggling with syntax which is so different from her mother tongue – Hindi. For example, Another thing she can't get her head around is how some grammar rules might vary from country to country. After studying in institutions around the world where English «has been a medium of instruction for centuries», Apoorva concludes that sometimes it was «just the matter of taste». ***she is annoyed by how every once in a while she still uses wrong articles.***

She remembers how after arriving in London for her Masters she had to struggle trying to understand what the receptionist at her bed-and-breakfast was saying. Back home it was not a problem to approach people and ask them as many questions as you needed, but that man seemed to have gotten annoyed as it might not be so common in the UK. So, he turned to his friend and said, «She will not be able to survive in England. She can't speak English!». Apoorva's friend in her turn replied, «But she has a degree in English so she probably knows more than you!». ***There were instances when she felt somehow upset by her interactions with native speakers of English.***

Ironically, Apoorva notes, the first department of English Literature was actually founded in India (Bombay) in the 19 century. In the UK English wasn't considered to be important for studying, so they were focusing on Greek and Latin. From the scientific perspective, Indians are «supposed to have the most perfect pronunciation of English». So this case «was a pinch of salt» as Apoorva was proud to have maintained her «Indian/Hindi accent».th

At this point, Apoorva describes herself as «well-versed» in English. Speech that «flows from Hindi to English and Urdu and back to English» is «an expression of who I am», says Apoorva. This is so much «part of my identity and I'm not trying to fit in either mode». ***She feels so natural using a combination of languages that it is actually difficult to express herself «in one language***

entirely». This, as she calls it, «mélange» of languages is an essential part of her linguistic personality.

Reflecting on the image she projects onto others based on her language choices, Apoorva says that outside India people might have a different impression of her when she's not speaking English. But once she starts doing that, they might change their impression of her. As it is a «superior» language, suddenly others «take notice of you».

Here in the US from the moment she landed, people have been saying «You speak English so well». But that might come «from the ignorance that Indians don't speak English very well». Apoorva is adamant that there are a lot of people she knows who speak much better, their grammar is «fantabulous», so she takes these comments «with a pinch of salt». She feels lucky that unlike some people who have to make an effort to acquire this language, she learned it as part of her school curriculum back in India.

Her linguistic journey continues as after 4.5 years of working in the field of Higher Education Administration Policy, she got a Fulbright scholarship to study at Teacher's College (Columbia University).

Finally, when it comes to some tips as to how to master a language well, Apoorva believes the key is to find a way to feel comfortable in it. So you don't have to imitate your teacher's language. Once you achieve that level of comfort and whatever you are saying is perfectly right in your own head, you will be very confident. «Don't think of it as a language outside yourself», but rather «make it your own». ***Speaking in any language «involves your own style».***

∞ It was enlightening to hear about a linguistic adventure of someone living in a country where English has a different status than in mine. It is obvious that the way any language is used and treated in any given state can be subject to change, but what cannot be denied is that in general English learning and teaching experiences would be different in India and Russia.

Delving into Apoorva's internal and external beauty as well as her beautiful English was an absolute pleasure. That was how I knew I was going to continue working on this interview project – even just for meeting such smart and truly articulate individuals as Apoorva. I couldn't help but notice how eloquent she was and how her own individual style of putting her thoughts into words shone through during our talk. It is true indeed that a radiant personality cannot possibly be hidden – no matter what language one chooses or has to speak.

Whenever I got to meet Apoorva throughout my year in the U.S., I felt that special bond we had, which shows how coming from different countries might not matter as long as you have one language you share – even if the way you both speak it might differ in terms of pronunciation, syntax, vocabulary choices, etc.

As I felt I had gotten off to a good start with my project, I was more than ready to dive deeper into an intrinsic linguistic fabric of the Big Apple as well as my home state of New Jersey...

A humble and hard-working bilingual

(Masumi, Japan)

Japanese, English, Chinese. **Languages spoken:**

Linguistics, Business (Baruch College, CUNY). **Field of study/career:**

I met Masumi from Japan on a sunny Saturday afternoon in Coney Island, Brooklyn, around an hour's subway ride from Downtown Manhattan. For the International Coastal Cleanup Day, One To World, an organization whose mission is to promote intercultural understanding, organized an event bringing together international students and scholars. It was a really interesting way of meeting new like-minded people, which is particularly essential during the first days of an extended stay abroad.

Getting together with a multilingual team for an environmental cause to pick up some trash along the coastline was a nice experience. At this point being in the US felt more like an extended vacation with everything being new – including the host university campus as well as the NJ and NY

area. Being able to spend a day at a beach wasn't something I believed I would do so casually and I'd never seriously thought being in NYC would allow me to do that.

Masumi must have been the first Japanese I'd ever met. She was what one would expect a typical citizen of this state in the northwestern Pacific to be: quiet, focused on the task at hand, disciplined. She didn't participate much in any of the conversations around a dozen participants from different countries were having. But in a private conversation Masumi – which I have to admit I do as well – opened up a lot more and volunteered to be my second interviewee. As we were done with making our own humble contribution to keeping the Coney Island beach clean and enjoyed a burger at an iconic American fast food establishment Nathan's Famous, we sat down on the beach to have a chat.

Back in Japan Masumi went to «an English immersive school» from Grade 1 to Grade 12 where all the subjects were taught both in Japanese and English. Masumi believes that was how she ended up picking up the language «naturally». At this private school most teachers were from English-speaking countries. through regular English classes focusing on grammar, vocabulary and making simple dialogues. Sadly as Masumi notes, as a result of such an education most ended up not being able to «produce» any English at all. ***Studying there definitely put Masumi in an advantageous position compared to her compatriots who normally start learning English during junior high/middle school***

Detailing on the strengths of her language instruction back in her home country, Masumi remembers how listening was the easiest as she was exposed to English daily in her classroom. Then she gradually learned how to read and write. Unfortunately, speaking was really difficult and, in fact, she still finds herself struggling with it, which has her wondering why she «can listen but can't produce English'. One of the reasons might have been that all her classmates were Japanese and even teachers who were foreigners could understand English so all interactions were in Masumi's first language. Besides, she never used English outside school.

But despite that being able to speak English would be «a strong point» for a job candidate as not so many Japanese people speak English well. But even without speaking it much one can work «normally». ***When it comes to the level of importance attached to learning English in Japan, it is not that high as a lot of companies use Japanese.***

Now that Masumi has been in the U.S. for a month, she has had more opportunities to use English as she is studying at Baruch College in NYC. Back in Japan whenever these limited opportunities to speak English occurred, Being a foreigner here, she knows it's ok for her to say something wrong. ***Masumi used to be afraid to speak for fear of making mistakes.***

Actually Masumi feels more confident speaking English compared to her native Japanese as in her first language she feels she cares about other people too much. As she says, in English she can be «selfish in a good way».

During this first month in the U.S. she has faced quite a lot of misunderstandings caused by her «mishearing» what people are saying. She is perfectly aware of answering some «weird» things when asked a question, but she has learned not to mind that too much.

Masumi is still too young for making a solid career choice, but she would love to use English in her future job. So, she might pursue translating or anything with «a connection to languages».

On the surface, Chinese looks like Japanese, but grammar and vocabulary are totally different. Some parts of written «symbols» are a bit different, which makes it particularly confusing. At this point Masumi isn't feeling confident enough to use any Chinese, but becoming a «good user» is part of her plan. ***Currently she is learning Chinese, which she considers a quite important language to learn these days.***

As for her own example, she feels that ***She believes that the most important thing in mastering a language is to actually use it.***

her English is «showing some kind of improvement» as she uses it daily. Besides, the fact that there aren't many Japanese people in NYC helps quite a lot.

∞ Not only was the ocean landscape against which we were sitting and talking soothing, but also so was Masumi's manner of speaking. She seemed reserved yet totally relaxed speaking with me. What she said about rigorous language instruction back in Japan might be in line with what we believe an Asian education system to be – with a strong focus on achievement and discipline. That might in a way explain why people in Asia tend to generally feel uptight about using English for the same reason Masumi did – for fear of making mistakes... Some causes of certain linguistic barriers run so much deeper than a wrong teaching methodology indeed...

Unfortunately, we never crossed paths with Masumi again, but I would go back here to this exact spot in Coney Island quite a few times during the fall to contemplate these and many other things we talked about while enjoying my burger from Nathan's. Even as a linguist, you sometimes feel like paying no attention to what languages are being spoken around you, but just want to listen to the sounds of the ocean waves instead...

A level-headed bilingual full of determination to succeed (Sharifullah, Afghanistan)

Dari, Pashto, Urdu, English, French. **Languages spoken:**

Public Health (Montclair State University). **Field of study/career:**

After over a month in the U.S. I became more proactive about meeting people «locally», i.e., at my host university as physical proximity facilitates longer and more sustainable connections. I met a fellow Fulbrighter Sharif from Afghanistan at an event for international students and scholars at Montclair State.

When we think about Afghanistan, news reports of never-ending war conflicts come up in our minds. But no journalistic report (even the most well-balanced one) or an in-depth research article would replace actual interactions with individuals who have had to witness and/or suffer the consequences of these atrocities committed in their home country.

It was a unique opportunity to do that while getting to know Sharif who seemed longing for company and open for new connections. For this interview we sat down on a lawn in the university campus. Despite 5 years of being a university teacher, I felt we were just students catching up in between classes having profound conversations – that was the way I had been imagining university life to be...

For Sharif learning English was a «long and steady process». He got his elementary education in Pakistan where it is the second language of instruction. Despite limited opportunities to speak, there was a lot of reading and writing practice in English.

Whenever a student asked a question, the teacher switched to Urdu for giving explanations. At least a lot of opportunities to practise writing were provided. *Initially, it was somewhat difficult and even teachers themselves weren't so good at grammar nuances. In senior classes Sharif took control of his language learning and improved his English dramatically by reading extensively outside the school curriculum and watching films.*

As Sharif started building his career in Nutrition and Food Science, he found himself increasingly having to interact (send emails, make phone calls) with colleagues he shared no other language rather than English. Besides, as part of his job duties, *he had to stay on top of the latest research in his field which is published in English and only considerably later might be translated into other languages.*

In Afghanistan English isn't taught until Grade 5 and 6. There are two national languages – Dari and Pashto – which everyone learns at school. According to Sharif, that might explain why English isn't introduced earlier to avoid the pressure of teaching three languages at a time.

Unless a student in Afghanistan isn't ready to take control of his own language learning outcomes the way Sharif did, there are some extra courses they can enroll in which are taught completely in English. That would certainly require extra time and commitment.

For example, as Sharif feels, Despite the colonial past, Afghans seem to have become more «liberal» about speaking a foreign language which can now be commonly heard in social meetings.

Dari and Pashto are both equally important in the country, but that has not prevented English from gaining increasing popularity. around 30 percent of the population have some level of proficiency compared to probably one third of this number decades back. The nation's natural resilience helps to embrace changes and do their best to incorporate the world's «primary» language into their day-to-day lives.

Even after having worked on a few international projects and some overseas experiences, He has only spent a month in the U.S., but is hoping to perfect his skills during the next 2 years he is going to spend here on his Master program. *Sharif still feels his reading, writing and listening are above his speaking.*

Sharif expects English to play an even bigger role in his professional life as his is «a new emerging» field and being able to develop it in his home country will involve continuous interactions with international funds and organizations.

Unlike when speaking Dari and Pashto, English and Urdu require some extra time to make up his mind on how to speak, how to react causing him to feel «caught up». *Sharif believes his identity certainly transforms as he switches between languages.*

Sharif is sure his little son will grow to be multilingual as there is definitely going to be more need for that in the future. But at the end of the day, the number of languages one speaks isn't that important.

∞ Humble but very articulate, Sharif seemed quite optimistic about the future of his country back then. We would occasionally catch up with him on campus over coffee «to put the world to rights». He actually became one of the backbones of our Montclair Fulbright group, a «community of practice» we, MSU Fulbrighters, created at our host university to stay connected. Sharif had a consistent and comprehensive approach to arranging group meetups. It seems like this «businesslike» approach to language learning has borne fruit for him. It was also so much pleasure to be able to stay in touch and have insightful discussions online after I left the U.S. a year following the interview.

«Routine» news stories become personal when you know a soul from the place where a report is being made from. I have certainly felt more involved watching reports coming from Afghanistan ever since I met fellow Fulbrighters from there.

Despite new challenges posed by more political turmoil that followed, Sharif went on to have an international career in a few more English-speaking countries.

A European's experience with English (Milena, Austria)

German, English, Slovene, Chinese. **Languages spoken:**

Molecular Biology. **Field of study/career:**

I met Milena from Austria in one of the weekly events at my university called «Connecting Through Cultures». She was one of the very first Europeans I ran into here in Montclair. Having been to quite a few places in Europe, I still held onto this collective image of it despite being perfectly aware of how different the countries making up the EU are (linguistically, culturally and somewhat politically).

Due to geographic and historic reasons, as Russians we might have conflicting views of Europe and the West overall. In the mid-19th century two opposite groups – the Slavophiles (those believing in Russia having its own way and not follow the West) and the Westernizers (emphasizing Russia's inferiority and the need for it to adopt the Western standards) emerged in the Russian Empire. Probably, up to this day, the Russian society is divided over how they feel about Europe in particular. I personally imagined that Europeans would have access to more educational (including language learning) opportunities compared to Russians.

So, Milena and I sat down to have a slow pensive chat on campus on a bench offering a blurred distant view of the Manhattan skyline.

In Austria it is mandatory to learn English from the 4 Grade. Milena doesn't feel there was too much focus on grammar. Even though her native language and English are of the same language family, pronunciation is completely different, so that was a bit of a challenge. Grammar wasn't that difficult, though, compared to that of German.th

Based on Milena's experience, everywhere she has been inside the EU all young people were fluent in English. Older generations might not be so open and the main reason for that might be that it is easier to learn a foreign language while you are young. ***English is pretty popular all over Europe as it is the language for connecting with people from all across the world.***

Milena went to Great Britain for a week with her school where she got to speak English continuously for the first time. That brief trip helped to «get into the language». Of course, living in Europe makes it easier to get around and mostly it is the regular use of social media and watching English movies that facilitates language learning for young Europeans. That is why ***speaking it is «not much of a big deal» in the EU where it feels «almost like the second language».***

When it comes to German, Milena's first language, the way it is spoken in Austria is different. Basically even though it is the same language, dialects are different and so are some words and even sayings that Milena hadn't realized weren't used in Germany till she had Germans misunderstand her. In a way German brings two nations together, but obviously Austria doesn't want to merge with its bigger neighbor. «We are still a nice country», says Milena.

Milena has faced no issues after around 1.5 months here in the U.S. If she misses her native language, there are some Austrians on campus to talk to. Here she feels it is «not a big deal to be from somewhere else» so having an accent or making occasional mistakes isn't a problem.

If Milena chooses to pursue a career in research, she will have to use English to get published as it is the language of science and networking. It is still possible to publish in German, but it is obvious it doesn't have such «a big audience».

Back at school Milena did some Slovene as this country is really close by, but sadly, she can't «actively speak».

Here at Montclair she started taking Chinese, which she mainly sees «just as a chance to learn a new language», which is «big» at the moment. Learning tones and characters is different but has been «fun».

Finally, Milena believes, but of course learning a country's national language is essential if you want to «feel more like you belong». ***English is enough to get by in the multilingual Europe***

∞ As someone who had been considering looking for opportunities to continue my research in Europe after my Fulbright program, I was particularly interested in the European perspective on bilingualism. As I had expected, a lot of things that in my home country were somewhat inconceivable were «not a big deal» there.

I also did German as my second foreign language at university, so hearing a German-speaking person's experience of sharing this language with the bigger country was interesting. At some point I felt tempted to practise my now rusty German with Milena, but honestly speaking, my level wouldn't have allowed me to have a conversation of much depth. But I did muster the courage to give it a go when Milena's Mum came to visit a bit later.

I spent the entire trip from Montclair to NYC (around 40 minutes) speaking German with an Austrian and was able to understand about 70% of what was being said. No wonder I never regretted stepping out of my linguistic comfort zone like that!

Later on we got to travel with Milena in the U.S. and even a few years later as well...

Inspired by a teacher (Geetanjali, India)

Hindi, English, German. **Languages spoken:**

Biochemical Engineering **Field of study/career:** .

We met up with Geetanjali, a fellow Fulbrighter from India, in Philadelphia, a member of the so-called Miami group – a bigger «community of practice» – that brought together the fellow

Fulbrighters from our first days in the U.S. at Gateway Orientation. Me, a fellow Russian Fulbrighter as well as Milena from Austria went on a day trip to the neighboring state of Pennsylvania. After a substantial meal of a Philly cheesesteak we sat right in front of the Independence Hall where the U.S. Constitution was adopted. It was overwhelming to be in a place where American history was made.

I was excited to talk from one more person from India and get to compare two perspectives from the same country so early on in my project.

Geetanjali comes from New Delhi (North of India) where she studied at an English-medium school. Initially she didn't really enjoy English much despite not having many difficulties. She can only remember having some with speaking. It wasn't until her middle-school English teacher encouraged the students to use English exclusively during classes. . Afterwards it became «fun». ***This specific teacher really made a huge difference as in day-to-day life no one encouraged Geetanjali to speak English***

As she progressed to more senior classes, Geetanjali felt the need for English. Her Dad was in military forces so they moved across the country quite often. For example, in the South people don't know Hindi, which is Geetanjali's mother tongue. ***India has so many languages and sometimes English is the only language that can be used between Indians coming from different states.***

According to Geetanjali, there is no use denying how «everything is getting globalized», so English is the number-one language for people moving around the world. At this point she doesn't consider her English to be perfect and feels it is still in need of some improvement. Here in the U.S. in between doing her research in Biochemical Engineering she is doing her best to make friends through Fulbright. It feels a lot easier to be using English here than in the UK (particularly Scotland) where Geetanjali had a tough time understanding people. That might have been due to more exposure to American English through Hollywood films.

Using English, Geetanjali does feel different. Hindi is something she has known since birth, but in English she has to «frame sentences» before speaking and there is «some thought process going on».

As she is determined to continue her postdoctoral research in an English-speaking country, speaking is the skill she is trying hard to improve.

Geetanjali believes that ***making friends from other countries by taking part in social events is key to mastering English as you would be put in a situation where you have no other shared language.***

As for other languages, Geetanjali might consider continuing learning German on her own after previously taking an introductory course.

∞ Overall, Geetanjali's experiences are similar to those of her compatriot Apoorva, my first interviewee. It is fascinating how no matter which part of the «circle» one happens to live in, the language learning difficulties they face are basically of the same nature. Even in the countries where speaking opportunities can be less limited than in others, it can still be down to an individual teacher to make the world of difference.

Geetanjali must have worked really hard towards improving her skills as she was able to continue her research in another English-speaking country after her Fulbright year.

**A multilingual and multicultural future psycholinguist
(Jonathan, Malaysia)**

English, Malay, Cantonese. **Languages spoken:**

Psychology **Field of study/career:** .

It was such a pleasure to meet such a young and open-minded person as Jonathan from Malaysia at another meeting of «Connecting Through Cultures». I considered him a colleague as he was here in the U.S. to study Psycholinguistics at Montclair State for one semester. For such projects you always wonder whether specialists in your field are actually better participants as they would be able

to illuminate a lot of issues we hope our interview questions are designed to tap into. On the other hand, there might be some caveats as being too conscious and aware of the topic is likely to make their answers more controlled. Anyway, I was happy to sit down on the familiar lawn of our campus to talk with Jonathan and hear his insights into bilingualism in his multilingual native Malaysia.

Jonathan (which is an English version of his name) considers English to be his dominant language which he grew up speaking with everyone in the family except his grandparents. He picked up Cantonese in the family environment as well.

While being at elementary school he picked up an English book and ended up developing love for reading. By the age of 12 he would read 2–3 books a week. ***That, paired with his passion for creative writing, must have helped him a lot to make English indispensable to his existence.***

English is seen as a prestigious language in Malaysia, which fact is emphasized at schools where three languages are used: Malay (the national language), Mandarin (in Chinese schools), Hindi and Tamil (in Indian schools).

When it comes to English grammar, Jonathan had no difficulties with it due to extensive reading. He says, ***«I just know, but I can't teach it. The rules simply grew on me».***

In Malaysian households it is common to casually use the so-called «Manglish», which is a «jumble» of English, Malay, Cantonese and sometimes Tamil.

English is mandatory for everyone to learn. Mandarin and Tamil are optional. Some of Jonathan's Chinese friends go to Indian schools and Indians go to Chinese ones, which makes Malaysia a sort of a «cultural pan». Nevertheless being «weak» in English is generally seen as unprofessional. Some people speak broken English and direct translate phrases from their native tongues, which makes people talking to them «reframe their mind» in order to be able to understand whatever they are saying. ***In this multicultural and multiracial environment there is no stigmatization of accents.***

Jonathan's interest in Psycholinguistics originated while he was working at a Learning Disability Centre. His research thesis is on how bilingualism affects cognitive abilities in individuals. During his semester here in the U.S. he is continuing this project which is only theoretical at this point as there is no time to get a special permission to conduct any experiments involving «human subjects» here in the U.S. One of the hypothesis in Jonathan's work is that individuals who are fluent in 2 or 3 languages would have «lesser reaction times». Jonathan mentions the Stroop Test which has been widely used in experimental psychology since the 1930s after it had been introduced by an American psychologist as well as for studying the effects of bilingualism. Another question Jonathan is struggling with is at what point one considers themselves proficient: is being able to hold a conversation enough or does it have to be of a certain complexity and length?

Switching between his languages, Jonathan is mostly affected by how different they are in terms of showing respect. For example, English doesn't have a hierarchy of respect, but when used in Malaysia, it does sound different. So, if I came to Malaysia, Jonathan as someone younger would address me as «Aunt Olga» to show extra respect. In Cantonese there are even more nuanced forms for that. E.g., the form «the first Aunt» would be used to show even more respect and reverence.

When it comes to his linguistic experiences here in the U.S., Jonathan is amazed by how unique the language they use here is. It has quite a few «hipster» terms such as the word «lit» to describe something super good. But overall, accommodating to new terms has been a fun experience.

so that you can «connect and stick with them». Preferrably it has to be a native speaker so that accommodation to the culture goes more smoothly. Finally, Jonathan believes language is a relative thing. So, here in NJ it would be different from Texas and vice versa. As long as you find a local to help you through the process, you will be fine. ***For those wanting to step up their language game, Jonathan thinks it is important to find a person you can discuss how English is used in a certain community***

∞ Having heard Jonathan's story, I was in no way surprised he chose bilingualism as his research object. There was no way for me to even imagine growing up in such a multilingualism environment. I believe researchers like Jonathan and myself (with similar interests but different backgrounds) enrich the field. What I could totally relate to was dealing with the ethical issues of doing research in the U.S. American universities have IRBs (Institutional Review Boards) that are tasked with reviewing and monitoring research involving human subjects. This inspection takes a while. I had to go through it for this project as well.

Despite some age difference, Jonathan and I were able to connect and stayed in touch even after he had left the U.S. He was able to pursue a PhD program and further his fascinating research. I was really moved by his sincerity in sharing some of issues faced on his journey via social media.

A Latin American with an American accent

(Pedro, Paraguay)

Spanish, English, Portuguese. **Languages spoken:**

Hospitality Management **Field of study/career:** .

The first time I met Pedro (a friend of Jonathan's, the previous interviewee), I thought he was American. It was not only his perfect American accent, but there was something about the way he used body language – I can't even put that into words – that made me think like that. Once I found out Pedro was actually from Paraguay and was here in the U.S. on the Global UGRAD program to study Hotel Management and Hospitality,

I was really surprised.

As we talked more with Pedro – particularly during our weekend trip with a bunch of other internationals to see the fall colors («fall foliage») of Upstate New York along with the Niagara Falls – I found out he was my colleague teaching English back in his home country. For some reason I used to have a collective image of Latin America, so starting meeting more and more people from this region here in the U.S. helped me find out more about the linguistic profiles of the countries making it up.

Pedro learned English on his own by listening to a bunch of songs and recording himself repeating the lyrics to improve his pronunciation. At that point it was nothing more than «a fun game». After that he started translating some comic books, poetry and video games. Then the Internet «blew off» in his country and this was when virtually everything one needed for studies was to be found on YouTube and it was actually better explained in English than in Spanish. ***Pedro was amazed by how much stuff he was able to access in English.***

Normally at schools only basics are taught and there is no speaking practice whatsoever. But there is a big institution in Paraguay called () where immersive language courses where students are thrown into the environment are offered. Everything is in English and for those at lower levels visual cues are provided. There is also an institution called (that Pedro is working for back home) where the focus of the instruction is the pronunciation. This was the method that Pedro used to employ in his own language learning and is now embracing as a teacher. Pedro adds that he sees no point in spending too much time on grammar and general vocabulary. Instead, learning has to focus only on certain things a student will be using when speaking English in the future. ***CCPA Elevate English He believes that the way one sounds is something that can make or break it for you when it comes to that crucial first impression – be it at an interview for a job or an exchange program.*** [Centro Cultural Paraguayo Americano](#)

Pedro prefers American English which he imitated by focusing specifically on the features that were different from other varieties of English. Interestingly, in the British textbooks are mostly used, but audio recordings are predominantly American and sometimes they showcase «an array of different people» (e.g., Chinese). The majority of teachers are non-native speakers but have American accent. CCPA

Even though Latin American music is in the national top 40, songs in English are in the majority. There are also more and more stores selling books in English. Besides, a lot of opportunities are offered for Master and PhD programs after college. They are not very competitive as most people in Paraguay go straight to work instead of pursuing further studies. Being fluent in English, Pedro had access to a bunch of resources he otherwise wouldn't have known about. ***There is no doubt as to the extent to which English as a foreign language dominates Latin America as a whole.***

Now in his career as a teacher Pedro also uses «a wide array of activities» that are only available on English-language sources. Now he is also studying Hotel Management and Hospitality where knowing foreign languages comes in handy.

Based on his teaching experience, Pedro finds that Spanish speakers mostly struggle with certain vowels. ***He also has his students record themselves to be able to keep track of their progress.***

He believes that . Their self-image becomes more positive, which shows how pronunciation is something that can seriously hold one back. ***the moment students realize they sound more native, they muster the courage to start applying for international programs that might potentially change their lives dramatically***

Apart from American English, Pedro picked up the language of the neighboring Brazil as comic books in Portuguese were cheaper than those in Spanish. He used to speak some Japanese as his family hosted a group of Japanese students as part of an exchange program. Now he has lost all of it.

To conclude, Pedro believes that It has to be something you are looking into using on a daily basis. One shouldn't be afraid to expose themselves to as much authentic stuff as possible. ***having a plan for your language learning is key.***

∞ There is absolutely no doubt that the method Pedro has been using for all these years – on his own as well as with his students – works wonders. However, according to my own experience as a learner and a teacher, pronunciation doesn't have to be an absolute priority – especially for such an international language as English mostly spoken by non-native speakers with a wide variety of accents. Honestly, both as a learner and a teacher, I used to think of Phonetics (a branch of linguistics studying how sounds are produced) as my least favorite activity. As much as I realized how, as Pedro noted, pronunciation is key to making a good first impression, as someone with no ear for music, I was never fond of practising it. There has been a never-ending debate as to how to go about language learning and teaching, but what is for sure is that mimicing a certain English variety involves some identity work. Pedro has definitely succeeded in creating this «American» image and the way he speaks has a major role to play in projecting it.

A brave researcher willing to make sacrifices

(Jelena, Montenegro)

Montenegrin, Croatin, Bosnian, Serbian, English, Russian. **Languages spoken:**

Marketing Management, Associate Professor, a Fulbright scholar **Field of study/career:** .

By November I had been able to establish some connections with a few members of the Fulbright community in New York and New Jersey. There was also a one-off event at MSU there I met some more Fulbrighters. Jelena, an Associate Professor in Marketing Management back in her home country of Montenegro, a country in Southeastern Europe, was one of them. She was struggling to find the appropriate words in English, but her Southern charm and smile made up for that. Whenever we met on campus and beyond, she would give me a big kiss and a hug, which felt so sweet. It felt incredible to connect with a fellow Slav and to know we had this extra thing in common as Montenegro used to be part of Yugoslavia (which is a combination of the words «south» and «slavs»), which used to be part of the Soviet Union. At this point we must have all gotten accustomed to living in the U.S. and had a lot of thoughts and feelings to share with each other. Jelena and I felt comfortable talking and pouring out hearts to each other. One day we met at her office to have a conversation about her English learning history.

Jelena started learning Russian at elementary school. It was only later on that she started learning English. For her generation (those in their 40s) it was all about theory (grammar) and there was no practice of English in «daily situations» (stores, cinema, etc.), which Jelena sees as an absolutely bad approach. This is why she is so happy having made use of her English actively here in the U.S. for almost 3 months. She has to use English professionally – mainly for writing research articles and attending international conferences. ***She is aware of how the American variety she has been picking up here (along with some professional slang) might sound a bit strange when she comes back to Europe where she does most of her work.***

Back home she mostly practiced speaking with her son who is now in Grade 5. Here in the U.S. she is sharing a house with an American family and meets a lot of new people. «All my life is in English», says Jelena. Sometimes she feels it is «weird» to hear herself speaking English so much. ***She has even started thinking in English and she feels it solidly entering her brain.***

Even though there are still a lot of Russians living on the Montenegrin coast and Russian, which her generation mostly learned back at school, is in demand, younger people prefer English instead. There is also some Italian used as the Italian border is close by as well as some Turkish used by the Muslim minority. As a specialist in Marketing, ***Jelena points out how in her country there are economic reasons to learn Chinese as there is an ongoing cooperation with China through investment.***

English was a «crucial» reason for Jelena to decide to come to the U.S. Besides, one of her students had been on the UGRAD program here at MSU.

She realizes that is the price to pay for this «big» chance to start speaking English fluently. ***There have been some emotional trade-offs for Jelena as she had to leave her son behind for a year in order to come here.***

Jelena feels her personality changes when she speaks English, which she again describes as a «weird» but definitely a positive change.

She believes that Even considering herself not gifted for languages, Jelena knows she has no way rather than master English to advance her teaching and research career. As a side note, she questions she has no talent as in fact, apart from her native language, she speaks Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian which are all similar but still are separate languages. ***in order to survive and thrive in this increasingly competitive world, as she keeps saying to her students back in Montenegro, one has to be flexible rather than simply smart.***

In the future Jelena might consider learning German and probably Spanish. Even though she recognizes the global importance of Chinese, she says it is not for her.

For someone still feeling nervous speaking a foreign language just as she used to before coming to the U.S., Jelena suggests «going with the flow» and always looking for ways to listen to the target language in order to «center your ears» on it. That was how she overcame her «stage fright» particularly when asked questions in work settings.

∞ I can't even imagine how much identity struggle is involved in learning English and experiencing all the ups and downs, which are inherently part of this journey, for someone who has a solid teaching career back home. Transitioning from a figure of authority to someone taking in new experiences almost as a kid while also being a parent must have been daunting.

As a Russian, I might have had mixed feelings about some kind of reluctance of the countries that used to make up the former Soviet Union to continue learning Russian, but as Jelena pointed out from her professional perspective, there are obviously economic reasons for that. It is still comforting to know that all the four languages she speaks would be somewhat intelligible to me. Actually, in the same year we had our talk (2017) in the attempt to counteract nationalism the Declaration on the Common Language was issued establishing that Bosniaks, Croats, Montenegrins and Serbs have a common standard language.

We were all separated from our families and sometimes it felt so hard to stay on the same page on some matters being thousands of miles away. Being in the U.S., a country that a lot of Russians have strong feelings about – which obviously goes all the way back to the Cold War – didn't make it easy. Jelena was able to see I was feeling somewhat down on the day of our interview and said, «Your eyes look sad». That was so moving to have her point out something that I chose not to communicate with words. As much as we love our families, we have to make sacrifices to achieve what we want for ourselves even if that might cause us to have major arguments with those we love so much... Sometimes it is not only bilingualism that enables and enhances understanding as eyes can definitely be informative than words we say.

A smart and polite bilingual gentleman

(Naseer, Afghanistan)

Pashto, Dari, English, Hindi, Arabic. **Languages spoken:**

Public Health, Montclair State University **Field of study/career:** .

Naseer was the second fellow Fulbrighter from Afghanistan I met at MSU. Probably due to being somewhat older than Sharif that I interviewed previously, he seemed a lot more reserved and didn't initially talk too much. Yet again, I was excited to get another person's perspective on English learning in this country and was happy to have Naseer agree to meet for a chat on campus.

It took him a month and to his sheer surprise, he still «knew nothing»! After that he took a two-year course. Sometime later he started teaching this same course, which he found was the best way to practise and consolidate his knowledge. In the meantime, he was reading any newspapers (e.g.,) he could get his hands on. Naseer had to borrow a dictionary to translate new words. Teaching English proved to be the most efficient way to learn and that was how he gained a tremendous amount of knowledge. *Before starting learning English, Naseer used to think mastering the alphabet would suffice. New York Times Another secret he had was speaking English with himself.*

The way general English courses are designed in Afghanistan is not satisfying.

Taking extra courses is costly and that is not something average Afghans can afford. Despite that, Naseer persevered and knowing that speaking English well would put him in a more privileged position in the society was what kept him going.

Apart from reading, Naseer started watching Hollywood films. He thinks that for the younger generation learning is somewhat easier, which is due to the big influence of the U.S. in the country. *There are economic incentives to learn as good English is a prerequisite for a higher salary, but it works the other way around as well as qualified professionals with no sufficient English knowledge might find themselves having limited career prospects.*

All the research that Naseer has been conducting in Public Health has been in English. On top of the country's two national languages (Pashto and Dari), Naseer speaks Hindi, which is «the blessing of Bollywood films» and understands Arabic.

Naseer believes that the world is a «global village» and languages are there to enable us to understand and exchange cultures. He recounts running into an Arab-speaking person while visiting Jordan and not being able to have a full-blown conversation as his spoken Arabic wasn't up to the mark. Looking back, Naseer wishes he had been able to speak better Arabic so that he wouldn't have missed out on the opportunity to make a new friend.

Naseer feels more formal and polite while speaking English. In his two native languages he feels more friendly, while in Hindi he sounds more romantic.

Surprisingly, here in the U.S., despite his physical looks which

he thinks might suggest he isn't originally from here, there have been no misunderstandings or biases. Being a student again feels like

an amazing break from his office activities back home. Contrary

to the popular stereotype, he found Americans not being arrogant at all. In fact, all of the people he's met so far have been incredibly welcoming.

His main tip for learners is to try to listen to people and fine-tune your communication patterns accordingly. In this way, interactions will go smoothly even despite some language mishaps.

∞ Even during these initial stages of getting to know Naseer, I was already absolutely amazed by his wisdom which came through even when he seemed to be searching for the right word to say. We spent time together in the group of the other Montclair Fulbrighters and would meet for one-on-one chats as well. I was aware of how uptight Naseer must have felt about being surrounded by females here in the U.S., which he made a point of saying would be strictly forbidden back home. Despite these inhibitions, Naseer would always come up with very poetic and metaphoric ways of using English. We have been in touch ever since and all his comments and reactions on social media are always so flattering even though Naseer is sure his English words of admiration do not suffice to express his emotions fully. I wouldn't agree with that...

Following the Taliban takeover, Naseer had to move to an English-speaking country after having held a few ministerial and embassy jobs in his home country. I am sure his resilience (this is what he and Sharif definitely share) and linguistic brilliance would help him build up a new life in a new country.

A fellow linguist on a thorny journey to English

(Julia, Hungary)

Hungarian, English, German. **Languages spoken:**

Theoretical Linguistics and Syntax, Visiting PhD student, UMass Amhurst. **Field of study/career:**

Over my first couple of days in the U.S. during the Gateway Orientation in Miami, Julia was my first roommate (or «roomie» as we have been calling each other ever since). All of us were matched with other Fulbrighters based on shared backgrounds. I was the first one to check in at the hotel and they wouldn't tell us who our roommates would be beforehand. I remember hearing someone knocking the door a few hours after I had taken enough photos of the American flag, palm trees and high-rises of the Downtown Miami.

Me and Julia, a Fulbright Visiting PhD student in Generative Linguistics, instantly hit it off. I had visited her home country of Hungary a year before. We bonded over talks of the amazing Hungarian wine Tokaji which at that point was the best one I had ever had. Waking up on my first morning in the U.S. and saying «Good morning!» to Julia felt so authentic!

We stayed in touch and in December as Julia was just a couple of weeks away from leaving the U.S., she came down from Massachusetts to visit me in New Jersey. At that point this state already felt like home and having a friend over to host reinforced that. I showed Julia around the iconic spots of NYC. We had lots of conversations about patriotism, politics, national identities, etc. and simply laughs about some superficial stuff as well. I interviewed her at a Russian restaurant in Fulton Street, just a few blocks away from One World Trade Center.

It wasn't until high school that Julia started learning English. Before that she would join her younger siblings who had private classes in a nearby village. Once the teacher gave all three of them a book in English as a present. Julia got one by Shakespeare and felt it was a beginning of her love for the language and literature. It was, but at her new school she had to take beginner's again as otherwise she would have had to start right with pre-intermediate English. As it was «a heavily language-oriented school», they had from 7 to 9 language classes a week. She was still doing both English and German, but now the focus was on the former. Julia didn't quite like her first English teacher, but the second one was very inspiring. When she left on a maternity leave, Julia continued taking class with her privately. *«quite a bit of a story»*

After she got her English certificate at the end of high school, Julia started exploring her career options. She aspired to be a doctor, but her Mum disapproved and she had to think of something else. Some information on English major caught her attention as Julia was skimming through a website. She had already developed love for Literature, but she had no idea what linguistics was. However, she

enjoyed Grammar (especially, rules and tables, i.e., «organizing stuff»). Julia decided choosing that career path could propel her into a translating job which could be potentially well-paid. So she started preparing for entrance exams which in Hungary back then involved a serious exam in Literature, History. Later it turned out Julia was no. So she decided to get into Linguistics instead. ***t «a literary person» and not «a PhD material for Literature»***

Julia specializes in Generative linguistics which was developed by the famous American linguist Noam Chomsky. This branch of linguistics relies on the idea that all languages have a similar structure and they are biological or genetic things in our head which we master just as well as we do seeing, hearing, recognizing color, etc. The key term here is , which means that human brain has an innate mechanism allowing it to master grammatical categories and relations of a language that are universally understood by all of its speakers. As Julia points out, English is very well-studied in this respect as all the pioneering scholars in the field were English-speaking. Investigating more languages could shed light on this «universal grammar» and make the structures more «fine-tuned». ***«universal grammar»***

For example if a child grows up surrounded by two parents who don't share the same first language, he or she will end up being bilingual. That would be the case of the so-called when one is equally good at two or more languages. She knows a few examples of such individuals. This acquisition has to happen before the , which is considered to be 12. That is why sending a kid under 12 to a language school and creating this sort of an artificial language environment might help a lot. ***In tune with the fundamental ideas of generative linguistics, Julia believes that the way we learn languages is universal. balanced bilingualism critical age***

In Hungary these days everyone understands the importance of learning English. Following the reevaluation of language programs in Hungary around 10 years ago in bigger cities Italian and French as well as Japanese are offered. Due to the growing economic connections, Russian is also becoming more popular. ***Julia assumes her 15 year-old brother knows more English than her 25-year-old one.***

It would be «schizophrenic» to her. In that regard she recounted a funny story about her university teacher that everyone thought was gay based on how high-pitched his voice was in Hungarian. But once he taught his first class in their group which he started in English, this impression totally changed as his voice sounded so low. ***Julia never experienced changes in her personality while switching between languages.***

Again, Julia does not feel like a different person in the languages other than her native Hungarian, but what she does find is that Besides, she is more aware of a variety of subtly different meanings English synonyms are used for. ***she is capable of expressing her feelings better in English, which she acknowledges is a «weird» feeling.***

For everyone having to master a foreign language after the critical period she recommends that they should not be afraid of speaking – regardless of how bad they think their pronunciation is. At the end of the day, it is not about perfection, but getting your message through, which due to the universal grammar, non-natives are capable of doing even in communication with natives, which most learners find particularly intimidating.

∞ Julia and I were definitely very appropriately and happily matched back in Miami. Of course, the way she looks at languages is more theoretical than the one I have to adopt in my language classroom. But the field of linguistics is so broad and we all have to work together towards the common goal of understanding and mastering human languages better.

Even though Hungary was part of the USSR and some older Hungarians speak Russian, our languages are not mutually intelligible at all. We just wanted to get a feel of that as we both listened to each other's conversations with our Mums in Hungarian and Russian respectively. No wonder that neither of us was able to anything except the word «New York»! As we discussed later, we did seem

like different people to each other as we switched to our native languages. There must be something that contributes to that such as e.g., the tone of the voice as Julia mentions in her talk.

I will remember the raw emotions of those intimate conversations we had back at my place over some American beer (there was no Hungarian wine in the neighboring liquor stores). We indeed both felt at home talking in English about the issues we'd been having with our research as well as with things well beyond academia. Meticulous language learning involving detailed examination of how different nuances of emotion are expressed must have come in handy for both of us...

Sophistication, intelligence, and style

(Dania, Jordan)

Arabic, English, French, Spanish, learning Chinese **Languages spoken:** .

Landscape Architecture, UMass Amhurst, a Fulbrighter. **Field of study/career:**

I also met Dania in Miami during the Gateway Orientation. She arrived in the U.S. to do her Masters in Landscape Architecture. I have also been working as a translator for a scientific journal in Architecture for a few years so there was some (albeit small) connection between our jobs. She and Julia (my previous interviewee) ended up at the same university and became particularly close. A few weeks after Julia had visited, Dania came to visit as well. It felt great to go back to my project after the winter break when I got to go to the West Coast and contemplate all the information I had gotten so far. Dania was such a delicate and sensitive speaker as well as a listener during this couple of days we spent together reuniting with a few more Fulbrighters from the Miami group in NYC. She literally kept me on my «linguistic toes» as I was looking for more refined and subtle ways of expressing myself as we, just like we did with Julia, poured our hearts out to each other over long emotional conversations.

Dania started learning English as a second language at primary school – 2nd language. It was a modern American school and . It was a very strict and rigorous program. It was always natural for Dania to use English being born around people from different countries. Dania believes that every learner's struggle is «personal» as we balance between a first language and a new one in our own unique way. *English «was just there» She never liked Grammar and just wanted to understand the language without spending too much time learning how different structures came about.*

Dania's classes back in Jordan offered an equal concentration on Literature, History, etc. People of Jordan are grateful to King Hussein who implemented this demand to have English as a 2language
nd

for everyone, which Dania is sure helps «keep up with the progress of the world».

English was always the second language which she and her siblings even practised at home with each other every once in a while. as well as allowed her access to books in English which are «omnipresent» these days. Before starting speaking extensively, Dania would spend awhile listening and accumulating knowledge and practising at home before feeling confident enough to speak at school. As for the accent she imitated, there was a mix of girls with a British, Scottish or American accents. Dania personally preferred the latter and it just «stuck». *English definitely opened so many doors and taught Dania to express herself more eloquently in essay writings*

Apart from English, Dania can speak French and Spanish. There are wide opportunities to practise the latter here in the U.S., but not so many for French – at least in her university community. Having a lot of Chinese people at UMass Amhurst inspired Dania to take up Chinese, which she has been enjoying so far.

Learning five or six languages (rather than twenty) is going to enrich one's life immensely. For example, knowing Arabic opens doors for Hebrew, which also facilitates learning Turkish, etc. *Dania admits she feels sorry for people who can only speak English as a foreign language.*

When she is in a romantic mood, she unconsciously dresses in the way that makes people go, «You look so French today!». *Dania feels different in any language she speaks and that even affects the way she dresses.*

Her experience here in the U.S., which has been her longest stay abroad so far, has been rewarding in many different ways. She feels absolutely positive about learning a new language here at the age of 27. She encourages everyone to learn languages at any age as Besides, it is widely known that learning a new language prevents the risk of developing Alzheimer's at an older age. ***once you realize how many gigabytes of information our brain is capable of storing, there is no stopping you.***

∞ I felt somewhat ashamed of myself for having fewer languages in my linguistic repertoire than Dania who wasn't even a linguist. But she inspired me to carry on with my humble efforts with other languages that I had been making in the U.S. She is a stellar example of how someone can seamlessly incorporate languages into their live just as landscape architects know exactly how to arrange space and make it work to create that «wow» effect.

After completing her studies Dania went on to get a job in Europe where I am sue she is working on expanding her language repertoire.

Navigating the multilingual New Jersey

(Alejandra, Colombia)

Spanish, English, some Hebrew. **Languages spoken:**

Foreign Language Teaching **Field of study/career:** .

I met Alejandra from Colombia in Union City, New Jersey. She was in a class of one of the professors of Linguistics I'd met at a Christmas gathering here in NJ as well. This professor has taught Russian and French and her husband is Russian-speaking, so bilingualism is one of the topics she is hugely passionate about. She kindly invited me to give a talk about my project in one of her classes. Alejandra was the first ones to have volunteered to participate and it was a pleasure to hear her story. Union City, which is just about 20 minutes' ride from Midtown New York, is a linguistically and culturally vibrant area where walking along these narrow streets with Catholic churches and statues as well as cafés selling all sorts of Latin American specialties, one can mostly hear Spanish rather than English being spoken.

Alejandra is doing her Master's degree in Education at New Jersey City University. She is also a teacher of her native language – Spanish. Alejandra started learning English at school, but it was not until she was around 20 or 21 that she applied for a job that required English. That was how she was able to improve her skills. Back at school she remembers struggling with understanding simple structures or even writing a simple word. As a result, she grew to hate the subject and had no idea why she couldn't succeed. That was a native speaker that she once met who helped her understand some simple grammar rules and that discovery was a turning point. As for speaking, there weren't many activities offered to improve it. She wasn't still very confident about her English after she had got that job, but it involved talking and helping others and by taking risks, she eventually started making a more significant progress. ***At some point, she started seeing this language as a challenge that she was determined to overcome.***

Nowadays in Colombia people are making an effort to learn English. Schools are trying to offer more than what used to be purely grammar classes as in order to land good jobs, people have to prove they are actually capable of speaking the language. In terms of continuing working on improving her English, ***living here in New Jersey is a bit challenging for Alejandra as a lot of Spanish is spoken and she has to find ways to practise her English. Living with American families and teaching people Spanish has been a great opportunity for her to speak English while sharing her culture with them.***

No matter whichever language Alejandra is speaking, she always tries to be herself and others perceive her in the same way as well. Alejandra finds it incredible how people here are ready to embrace the culture and let go of some stereotypes. There are economic incentives for it as well as a lot of people in business speak Spanish as their first language. ***Overall, being here and teaching Americans Spanish has been an amazing experience. There are a lot of schools in New Jersey where people can learn Spanish.***

Being one of the most frequently spoken languages in the world, Spanish has a lot of local varieties and according to Alejandra, She doesn't believe there are too many differences – except some vocabulary – as Spanish speakers from different countries can pretty much understand each other. ***Americans are enthusiastic about learning the Colombian Spanish as they think the accent is easier to grasp.***

Alejandra has also had some experience of living in Israel and learned to read some Hebrew there. She was able to read the Bible and for her that was a mesmerizing experience. Even though she didn't continue to study the language, she is still happy whenever she hears some familiar words in Hebrew. In the future she would like to take up Chinese as she finds it really astounding how many people speak it.

This is what she thinks you should do before you invest into actually going to a country where your target language is spoken. «Make mistakes, be confident, take risks, then buy your ticket!», says Alejandra. ***Finally, she believes that finding a good teacher to guide you through the basics is essential if you want to succeed in learning a new language.***

∞ I was really amazed by Alejandra's enthusiasm for teaching and sharing her language as she offered me her help with Spanish, which was the latest language I'd tried to learn before my brief trip to Spain back in 2016 following my attempts at Italian and French. Being a foreign language teacher myself, I found it inspiring to hear how much faith and trust is put into us in our effort to make a difference in our students' lives .

A routine life in Spanish and English

(Samantha, USA)

English, Spanish. **Languages spoken:**

Linguistics **Field of study/career:** .

I also met Samantha through the same professor I did Alejandra, my previous interviewee. That was my first online interview (if only we had known it would become «a thing» just a couple of years later!). Samantha is a first-generation immigrant as both her parents come from El Salvador (a country in Central America). She was also the first person I'd had in this project who had had this type of experience.

Samantha works at New Jersey City University. She grew up here in New Jersey in a Spanish-speaking family, but had had an opportunity to pick up some English before she started learning it at nursery school at about the age of 3. Her mother used English more and Samantha would use Spanish with her grandparents as well as other relatives. Picking up English and using it on a daily basis was very easy as she would use it all the time with her teachers and classmates at the public school she attended. The only difficulty she remembers having early on in her studies was with some letters. ***Her father, who was born in El Salvador and moved to the U.S. in his twenties, spoke to her mostly in Spanish. She doesn't remember having any difficulties growing up with two languages, it was just «a routine». Overall she can't say she was learning English as a foreign language. Now she calls it her primary language and doesn't feel that she has any foreign accent at all even though she's met some people who say she does.***

According to Samantha, she sometimes feels she has a foreign accent when she uses Spanish. As for her nationality and identity, s, but the problem is that this nationality is often not listed so she chooses «white» instead. Her Mum watches a lot of soap operas in Spanish and Samantha finds it amazing how she can switch between the two languages and understand them without even realizing it. In her job Samantha uses Spanish with some international students. Therefore Samantha finds being able to speak two languages advantageous as she believes bilingualism is regarded as something valuable despite the current political reforms in regards of immigration. ***he prefers to call herself Hispanic Spanish is still part of her life as she would still sometimes uses it at home and sometimes has difficulty remembering English words for some things, e.g., vegetables. Generally, she doesn't feel discriminated against based on her ethnicity as in this part of the country in particular, there***

are a lot of people who were born and raised here but have another linguistic and cultural origin that they identify themselves with.

Overall she thinks that . Her advice to anyone trying to make a living in the U.S. is to «push on through» remembering about the long-term benefits they are going to have. Using the example of her own father, she argues it might be hard to start feeling fully integrated here in the U.S. especially after coming here at an older age. As grateful as he is for all the benefits he has enjoyed after moving here, he hopes to be able to spend more time in his home country of El Salvador during the retirement.

Hispanics are having an easier time adjusting to the U.S. culture these days than they used to

∞ In her talk Samantha outlines some issues facing first-generation immigrants and their parents which include those pertaining to adaptation and certain identity struggles associated with it. The U.S. is known to be a nation of immigrants, but obviously full accommodation to living here is a long journey that not everyone is resilient enough to complete. The immigration policies enforced by the Trump administration also sent waves and it remains to be seen if they are going to have any far-reaching effect on the country's language policies.

A researcher experiencing bilingualism in Asia and the U.S. (Suqin, China)

Chinese, English. **Languages spoken:**

Clinical Psychology, a Fulbright scholar. **Field of study/career:**

As I did a lot of other fellow Fulbrighters, I met Suqin from China at a One To World event in NYC. Later on we would spend more and more time together. Then she invited a group of Fulbrighters to get together for Lunar New Year celebrations in Chinatown. This part of New York is so enticing and intriguing for all senses: those smells of fresh fish, Chinese spoken in every corner, those red lanterns lining the streets and waving lucky cats in every shop window, people elbowing their way through the crowds... Even though my country borders China, I have never felt closer to it than I did right here in Manhattan. Walking through some of the Chinatown streets on the way to our big dinner at a Chinese restaurant after seeing a traditional parade, I asked Suqin whether what we saw, heard and smelled brought her back home. I watched as she took a moment to think and went, «It kind of does». That made me wonder what visiting Brighton Beach, a part of NYC heavily populated by Russian speakers would feel like...

Happily stuffed with lots of Chinese dumplings and seafood, we sat down in Columbus Park in front of a monument to Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Republic of China, to have our talk.

In China students begin learning English from middle school. The major focus of instruction is writing and reading. At the beginning she used to only resort to the phrases she knew how to use but then there was more focus on what idea she was looking to express, so she was searching for appropriate ways of getting her message across. That was how Suqin knew she was improving. ***It wasn't until Suqin started her PhD in Hong Kong that she began to use English as the main language, which she feels was a turning point on her journey.***

At Chinese middle and high schools only paper tests used to be administered back when Suqin was a student, so there were no difficulties. At college speaking skills started being tested and that was when some problems were encountered. . Later on an oral test of English was also introduced. ***The teachers did their best to encourage their students to speak, but no one in class dared to speak up***

. There is never a goal to develop skills to eventually use this language. ***As English is compulsory for college entrance exams as well, it is learnt more as a science or «Chinese Math»***

In Hong Kong where Suqin has been studying for her PhD English is spoken as a second language from kindergarten, which encourages bilingualism. As Hong Kong used to be governed by British people, high-status citizens speak good English. That is what everyone else aspires to be so they might even prefer it to Chinese.

When it comes to attitudes to English in China, according to Suqin, there is no need to promote it there as the country is so big. It is literally useless in China to speak English in order to achieve a better life.

Her PhD research looks at bereavement and grief where most theories are developed in Europe and the U.S. *Suqin uses English predominantly for her research which requires her to get in touch with colleagues from around the world and have her papers published in international journals. English is also a tool for self-branding as the better she speaks, the better impression she makes.*

In the past Suqin wouldn't notice any personality changes as she switched between the language. She is also bilingual in Mandarin and Cantonese. Her family moved when she was 9 and Suqin learnt Cantonese from then on. She feels quite fluent but seldom uses very local phrases. At home she speaks a dialect of her province which is similar to Mandarin but some tones and slang are a bit different. *Now she becomes «Westernized» while speaking English and uses more gestures.*

Suqin started learning German two years ago just as a distraction from the pressure of her qualification exam. She could have chosen Spanish as well, but a lot of studies in her field are in German, which made the choice obvious.

To anyone struggling with their speaking Suqin recommends doing what worked for her once as well, which is *focusing on what to express rather than how to do that.*

∞ At this point of my project I was able to see how Chinese was one of the languages my interviewees were eager to learn due to this country's ever-growing economic influence. Suqin's thoughts echoed the ideas of China's self-sufficiency despite effort being made to teach English. There have been speculations as to whether Chinese might replace English as the world's lingua franca or least whether people outside China are going to have to master a special variety of English used in China. With the currently shifting world order, we are going to have to wait and see how things pan out linguistically and how this is going to affect language learning and teaching in the long run.

I am one of those individuals who isn't up to the challenge of learning Chinese. I even refused a job in China which I was offered a few weeks after my return from the U.S. But of course, this decision has nothing to do with specific people. As a reminder of our friendship I've been keeping a red envelope with good-luck wishes she gave as a present for Lunar New Year 2018.

A dreamy bilingual with lots of stories to tell

(Angelo, Timor-Leste)

Makasae, Naueti, Tetum, Indonesian, English, Portuguese. **Languages spoken:**

Forensic Psychology **Field of study/career:** .

I remember meeting Angelo at an international event at MSU. He was wearing a national costume of his country Timor-Leste, a small country in Southeast Asia with the population of over 1.1 million. To my regret, I must have been one of the countless number of people Angelo must have met who had no idea such a country even existed. At moments like these, you start particularly appreciate this unique opportunity to meet people who increase the number of «blind spots» on the world map for you as they make their home countries not just the names of faraway lands but something a lot more meaningful that you will be willing to explore more now that you have met them. Me and Angelo had a chat at a newly opened building of the School of Communication and Media at MSU where the smell of fresh paint and pristine furniture made it so easy to imagine I was a journalist working with another interviewee with a very unique perspective.

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