

Living in another language

Beverley Costa explains how multilingualism shaped her identity

I speak only one language, and it is not my own.¹ This was the experience of Jacques Derrida, an Algerian-born French philosopher. And it was also my experience, growing up, not in Algeria or France, but in Essex in the overspill from East London in the 1960s and 70s. I only spoke one language. And that language was the mother tongue of neither of my parents. It was English. Maybe you would think that English would have been enough for me. And yet, as Derrida says, it didn't feel like my own language. English didn't feel like a mother tongue. It felt like an other tongue. It felt like the language that belonged to other people.

I spoke all my life to members of my family in a language that wasn't their own. It wasn't the language of their home or heart. *'If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.'* Nelson Mandela is believed to have said.² And he certainly lived these words. He taught himself Afrikaans, the language of his prison guards on Robben Island, so that he could reach not just the guards' heads, but their hearts too.

Growing up on the outskirts of London, I felt a sense of belonging to different communities, but I didn't feel like a full member of any group. At home, we were a mixed bunch of nationalities, languages and religions.³

In our most everyday arrangements, languages were routinely interwoven. 'Pass me the *schmutter* so I can give the *shissel* a bit of a clean.' (English and Yiddish), my mum would say to me in the kitchen. 'We'll go to the swimming pool tomorrow, *endaxi*?' (English and Greek), my dad would then ask in the garden. And at some level, the sounds and the rhythms of these languages reached into me, and touched the soul through different routes. Even the religions were enacted in different languages.

As soon as I could, I fled from that *mélange*. I went to Spain and created a new identity. I became enmeshed with the new language, in which I became fluent. My aim was to become more Spanish than the Spanish. Surely, now I would belong. I worked at it until I was able to communicate in what Eva Hoffman (whose book, *Lost in Translation*,⁴ is about a life in a new language) refers to as '...a free streaming of speech, ...those bursts of spontaneity ... those nuances and patterns [that] snap smartly into synapses of my brain so they can generate verbal electricity.' And it worked, for a while, until I started to think about having children. Living a life based on an invention didn't seem right. I didn't want to have a relationship with any children I might have, based on an inauthentic version of who I was. I embarked on a journey to find an authentic version of myself, even if I didn't have a vision of what such a hybrid could look like. And in these acts of invention and re-invention, I didn't discover anything radically new. I underwent what Eva Hoffman describes as the process of maturity '...by entering into the great stream of experience, coming to know what people have always known.'⁴

It was through a later learned language that I was able to reconsider who I was, reassemble the different parts and gain a greater connection with, and an understanding of, who I had always been.

Along that journey towards authentic hybridity, I connected with what it must have been like for members of my family to live their adult lives and to be judged by how they sounded – different from those around them; what it must have been like for them to bring up their UK-born children, not in the language of their home and of their heart.

When I became a counsellor and psychotherapist, I looked for training or services that would have been accessible to people like members of my family, had they been searching for support. But I couldn't find anything. In 2000, I set up *Mothertongue*, a multi-ethnic counselling service, for black and minority ethnic clients, in their preferred languages. My book, *Other Tongues: psychological therapies in a multilingual world*,⁵ shares some of the learning from those years with *Mothertongue*.

The spotlight on discrimination, prejudice and inequalities in health outcomes shines brighter now than it ever has. I wrote this book because the inequality of languages – the power of speaking some and the powerlessness of speaking others – is still hidden. How does a multilingual client '...love, enjoy oneself (*jouir*), pray, die from pain or just die, plain and simple, in another language...?'¹

Other Tongues explores how we express our emotions, experience our identities, process trauma, make ethical decisions differently in the different languages we speak. The book contains case examples and exercises to support counselling and psychotherapy practitioners and supervisors to develop their multilingual empathy and to look through the multilingual therapeutic frame to find the depths that languages may hold for a client. For those who are interested in further training for working with multilingual clients directly, or mediated through an interpreter, Pásalo offers training, supervision and creative projects. See: www.pasaloproject.org

Biography



Dr Beverley Costa grew up in a family with three languages. She is a counsellor, psychotherapist and supervisor, and founder of the multi-ethnic counselling service *Mothertongue* (2000–2018), the Mental Health Interpreting Service, the Pásalo Project and *Colleagues Across Borders*.

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