

Thanh Tran

Professor Anne Bello

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My Vietnamese

During the summer of my junior year, I visited my aunt and my cousins instead of going back home. I was happy to see them at the airport to pick me up and my cousins were kind enough to make me a “Welcome home” sign with some balloons. On the way home, when we started talking, my aunt asked about how things are going on in my life. While I was answering her questions in Vietnamese, certain English words popped into my head. Then, I was like, “Huh, what is that word in Vietnamese? I want to use that! Hmmm”. I started listing relevant words until my cousin caught the word I wanted to say. I asked myself: “What was that? I am forgetting Vietnamese.”

Nowadays, there are six thousand five hundred languages around the world that are used and shared. The complexity of various languages has always been a fascinating topic to discuss. Some people can learn and use multiple languages without being overloaded despite how hard it is to be fluent in many languages. For me, I started losing my proficiency in Vietnamese after a period of living in the U.S. I noticed a change in how fast I react and respond in Vietnamese. It used to not be a problem but now it could take me a few seconds to translate the English word into my language. Since the experience of language I had with my aunt, I am now more aware of how I code-switch between two languages. It is easier for me to speak in Vietnamese and add English words while talking sometimes. Many people find that disrespectful towards the listener, however, I sometimes code-switch between Vietnamese and English to communicate with

people who I am close with.

Since this is my fourth year studying in the U.S, my awareness of my proficiency in Vietnamese has increased. For the past three years, most of the knowledge I gained and the writing I did were in English. As a result, my Vietnamese has not grown since then. There was this one time, my friend asked me to write a review in Vietnamese for a film I have watched. Although I was excited to help him, when I started to write the review, my mind was empty. I forced myself to write down a few sentences, but they sound so unnatural and broken. “Oh no, I just got better in English and now I am struggling in Vietnamese!” I thought to myself. If you ask me to write an essay in Vietnamese now, I am not sure how I would do that. I used to write in Vietnamese, then translate it into English but not anymore. If I am not keeping the habit of translating new English words that I learned into Vietnamese, I will only know what they are in English but not Vietnamese after four years of higher education. In fact, as I gain new knowledge in English from different courses at UMass, I realized there are many words in Vietnamese that I do not know. For instance, in English Writing 111 I have learned about intersectionality or code-switching, however, I do not know what they are in my mother language.

Besides my worries about losing my proficiency in Vietnamese, I am also having language insecurity in English. While Kevin Garcia has language insecurity being a Mexican-American who can not speak Spanish in *Can you lose a language you never knew?*, my language insecurity is quite different. I do not fully feel confident speaking English because of my Vietnamese accent.

The complicated, uncomfortable feeling about my “imperfect” English is because I know I do not sound like a native English speaker. I started to think about why I cared so much about my accent. The reasons are people will have a harder time understanding my

interpretation and my opportunities are affected, especially in an English-speaking country.

According to Amelia Tseng in *Can you lose a language you never knew?*, the way we live our

lives can be affected by the essentialness of language: “ ‘That tension exists for good reason.

Language is so important because it's "how we experience the world' ” (qtd. in Garcia). I care

about my language and my accent tremendously because they impact how I experience the

world. By hearing someone's voice, people can identify that person's identity through their

accent. It is sad but people might treat others differently based on others' identities and that can

impact people's opportunities in life.

On the other hand, my accent shows part of my identity that I am different and unique. I am from Vietnam and my mother tongue is Vietnamese. I am proud of my culture and nationality.

For me, identity does not only encapsulate language and nationality, but it is also more than that.

I am a Southeast Asian woman who was born and raised in VietNam. I grew up with Tet holiday,

lucky money, *thịt kho*, and *bánh chưng* (Tet Holiday traditional dishes). I am also Christian and

Christmas is one of my favorite holidays. I am that young woman who went out to the world at

the age of fifteen and studied abroad. I am a listener, who is patient, empathizes, and encourages.

A person who is passionate about creating quality relationships and having strong connections to

her family. I know that everyone has their own stories and no one will experience all the exact

things or feelings others have. Nevertheless, all the thrones and roses I have been through make

me who I am now.

Language plays an important role in our life, however, it is only part of us. I am proud of myself because I am still learning and trying after all the challenges I have faced. To be

honest, I do not know how my journey with languages will take place in the future. However, I

believe that the knowledge and understanding I have of learning and losing a language will

help me navigate through future decisions and practices.

Works Cited

Garcia, Kevin. "Can You Lose A Language You Never Knew?." *NPR*, 10 March. 2018,
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