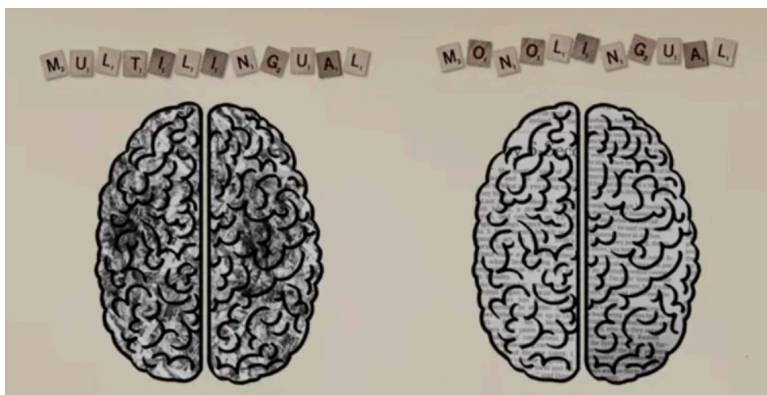


# Mi Vida Bilingue

Growing up in a bilingual environment, I had to experience navigating two languages on a daily basis. Spanish, being my first language, was the foundation of my communication skills since childhood. However, life has thrown me back and forth from New York and Puerto Rico. I found myself constantly switching between Spanish and English, a practice that, while natural to



me, often led to unexpected conflicts with those around me. Being bilingual is like knowing 80% of one language, knowing 80% of a different language, and being able to articulate each of them perfectly about 50% of the time.

The languages get bundled up in my brain as if fighting for dominance in a never ending war with no winners.

However, once my mother and I left Puerto Rico and came to New York, a thriving and multicultural city, I found myself navigating the complex web of languages that is unique to this city. I was 3 at the time of our first move. I was still learning about life and beginning to talk in Spanish since it was what I heard all the time. Then with the change of locations, my daily existence soon adopted English as its primary language. It was the language I used to communicate with classmates, take part in extracurricular activities, and engage with the city's diverse population of cultures. My knowledge of language deepened as I used English more frequently.

It wasn't always easy to switch between the two languages. As a kid, most of the time my mind would automatically go to English when talking to friends or teachers, and I had to make a conscious effort to speak Spanish with my family (and others that I knew spoke Spanish but I didn't really know anyone, aside from my family, that did). Many times I had a feeling best described as imposter syndrome because I would forget words in Spanish when I speak it. It felt as if I was forgetting part of my culture, my heritage; like I was losing a part of who I was.

On the other hand, when I returned to Puerto Rico to reunite with my family, the language switch was equally automatic but in the opposite direction. Spanish became the dominant language, enveloping me in the warm embrace of my cultural roots. Conversations with my abuela were steeped in the poetic cadence of Spanish, and the stories she told me resonated with the vibrant history and traditions of the island. Then the feeling of being an imposter came back when I returned to New York. It felt as if since I wasn't constantly speaking it, I was losing it again



These language shifts weren't just about the words I used; they also indicated my capacity for cultural adaptation. Because of the constant switching it became like a second nature to me. Having to focus to do it so often, it became easy and I didn't have to focus as hard or concentrate as much. I was able to switch languages as well as my attitude, adjusting to the cultural quirks that each language brought with it. Spanish portrayed Puerto Rico's rich and passionate culture,

while English represented the fast-paced, diverse world of New York. In Spanish, we may speak it fast in Puerto Rico, but the language itself takes time and passion, while in English I can get my point across in a few short lines. In Spanish, the message ends up being more meaningful depending on what words you use and how you use them. For example in English the phrase “I love you” is so commonly used that you can say it without meaning it at all. However in Spanish we use “te quiero” to express passive caring for someone and “Te Amo” to show actual meaningful love towards others. The phrase “te amo” makes a strong impact and we don't use it as much unless we mean it 100%. In English, “I love you” has lost its power.



In sixth grade I moved to NYC permanently and stopped going back and forth between NYC and PR for school. I started going to Democracy Prep Harlem Prep Middle School. This was when I started favoring English over Spanish, and it was like I was losing a piece of myself for good. My mother and I barely talked to one another, and I wouldn't speak in Spanish in school because while half of the students were Hispanic, they didn't know any Spanish, and all the teachers were white so they didn't know any either. Sixth grade seemed great at the time. I was doing well in school. I gained a love for reading books (mainly of the fantasy/supernatural and adventure genre) and was making a few friends. But whenever I would get home, and call my family in Puerto Rico, it was like I couldn't find most of the words I was trying to say. I felt like an imposter in my own skin. Like the passionless tone if english was seeping into the spanish i had left and i couldn't do anything about it

Because of that, I decided to visit as much as I could. So that I wouldn't lose the passion with which I spoke Spanish. So that I wouldn't forget words in Spanish. And yes, I still have a few words that I don't know exist or what they mean in English, but that is now mainly because Puerto Rican Spanish, much like the Spanish of many other countries and places that speak it, is semi-unique, with our own meaning and phrases that differ from other places like Cuba and DR. So while I may not know 100% what they are saying, and what I'm saying may not be understood to other Latinos all the time, I am still confident in my Spanish and speak it again as a native, as much as I speak English.