

LANGUAGE IN *VIETGONE*

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Language is the primary mode of human communication. No person is an island and our need for interaction and connection is fundamental to survival. We need to buy things at the store, to talk to friends when something is bothering us, to forge relationships, read, learn, watch TV, argue, and for all of those interactions, we need language.

Language is often seen as a direct reflection of people's intellect. While mastery of language on the level of Shakespeare or Qui Nguyen in *Vietgone* is definitely a testament to their brilliance, it is unjust to assume that struggles with language are a reflection of low intellectual ability.

I am constantly affected by this struggle as an ELL (English Language Learner) living and working in the United States. Throughout my formal education in Puerto Rico (where I majored in Hispano American Literature), I was constantly praised and affirmed for my understanding and facility with the Spanish language. Language was never a concern for me until I moved to a culture in which the language was one other than my own native tongue. To put it mildly, learning English was a source of tremendous concern for me. For instance, a key aspect of my job is to oversee the preparation and writing of these Play Guides for all SRT productions, and I still struggle to determine in certain situations whether the correct preposition is "in" or "on."

LEARNING A LANGUAGE ENTAILS MORE THAN JUST LEARNING WORDS. IT IS LEARNING A WAY OF THINKING, A HISTORY, A CULTURE, AND AN INSIGHT INTO SOCIETAL NORMS.

I have learned to enjoy asking people what words mean. However, my ego still suffers accepting that my articles *need* thorough proofreading and editing to reach the standard needed for publication. As someone who loves languages and has devoted most of her formal education to understanding and mastering four of them, I still have to stop myself from giving in to the thought that my inability to fully master English is somehow an intellectual shortcoming.

Learning a language entails more than just learning words. It is learning a way of thinking, a history, a culture, and an insight into societal norms. Being a foreigner and learning to speak a language at a later stage in life means I am always somehow on the outside of the dominant culture. For example, I have been known to accidentally swear in English simply because swear words in English do not affect me the same way swear words in Spanish do. I also still (after 11 years of living and working in English) count in Span-

ish. I am perfectly capable of counting in English, I know the numbers, I promise. They just aren't connected to my brain and soul in the way that Spanish numbers are.

English for me is like a pair of shoes. I wear it every day, I can't get out of my house without it as it is essential to all of my human interactions in this country, but it is not an integral part of who I am. I am Puerto Rican, I speak Spanish, and I relate to the world with a Spanish-speaking sensitivity.

I constantly see this relationship to language reflected in media and art. I have never really seen someone on TV speak with a foreign accent (other than British) in a drama. People with foreign accents tend to be part of comedies and language mishaps are always a good source of laughter. This is what makes Qui Nguyen's work with language in *Vietgone* revolutionary. He stands up for the outcasts in a way I have never seen before. He uses English words and a colloquial syntax so English-speaking audiences can understand the range of expression, freedom, and strength these characters would have had in Vietnamese. And he uses broken English when American characters try to speak Vietnamese to show, not only the different linguistic structures of Vietnamese versus English, but also the inadequacy that is inherent in trying to speak a language that is not your own. It shows the effort ELLs exert, even when we get things wrong, and the vulnerability we step into in doing so. Here is a passage that illustrates Qui's unorthodox use of English words to illustrate how Vietnamese characters speak their native language and American characters attempt to speak Vietnamese:

BOBBY

Sorry am me. Me am so sorry. Me am work here.

TONG

Uh.....What are you saying?

BOBBY

Sorry. Me Vietnamese not good.

TONG

That's fair. My English is also pretty damn atrocious.

BOBBY

Me am checking list? (*BOBBY shows her his clipboard.*) This you?

TONG

Yep, that's me.

BOBBY

This you bed?

TONG

Looks like it.

BOBBY

Check!

In this section, you can see how Bobby's dialogue is full of misplaced connectors that demonstrate his lack of understanding of the structure of Vietnamese language.

Lastly, Qui uses crass, often disconnected English words loosely connected to their "Vietnamese" equivalent to show not only the freedom people have in their own languages, but also how foreign it is for an immigrant to hear a language spoken by native speakers for the first time. Native speakers use shortcuts and slang—elements of language that are not accounted for without being immersed in the culture of the language you are studying. Here is a passage that illustrates this:

QUANG

I need to get to my helicopter. I need to go back.

CAPTAIN CHAMBERS

Poopy pants.

TRANSLATOR

"Oh man, this is awkward."

QUANG

What's awkward?

CAPTAIN CHAMBERS

Splish Splash taking a bath.

TRANSLATOR

Really? That's messed up.

CAPTAIN CHAMBERS

Splish splash taking a bath. Tell tell.

QUANG

What are you guys talking about? I don't really have time for this. I should—

TRANSLATOR

Sorry, bro. You don't have a helicopter.

QUANG

I just airlifted three dozen civilians here in it, what do you mean I "don't have a helicopter"?

CAPTAIN CHAMBERS

Splish splash.

TRANSLATOR

"We pushed it off the carrier to make room for incoming planes. Too many copters were coming at one time. We needed space so we pushed it off into the sea."

Vietgone subverts the complications of accurately representing people who are forced out of the comfort zone of their native language. The play humanizes the outcasts, challenges dominant culture, and its humor, rather than laughing at the intellectual “inadequacy” of immigrants, carries the warmth (for me as an immigrant) of relating to the experience of finding yourself in a foreign land.

WATCH IT > THINK ABOUT IT

Watch this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtOXiNx4jgQ>

1. Find two specific examples in the poem that illustrate the relationship between language and identity as described in the article above.
2. If you were born and raised in the U.S., imagine you live in a different country. What would be the thing “pointing you home”? What do you think would be the main marker of your cultural identity you would carry with you?
3. If you are either a first-generation immigrant or a child of immigrants, can you identify one thing that sets you apart from “American students”? How do you feel about this cultural identifier? Is it something you are proud of? Struggle with? Both?