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Facing the Center

Harry C. Denny

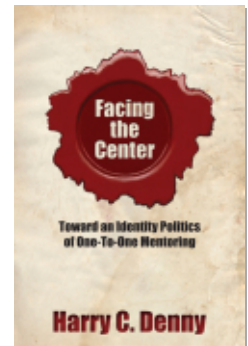
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INTERCHAPTER 5

Hadia Sheerazi, senior, writing consultant, St. John's University

If only I had a dollar for every single time someone has said to me, "You've only been here for three years? But you have no accent!" or "Your English is flawless for an international student!"

Initially, I remember being mildly amused by these comments made by people I met on campus, or even around New York City, and I would dismiss them with a smile or a casual shrug of my shoulders. As time went on, I began to realize that most people I met assumed that I was either a local, or an out-of-state student from the New England area. It was only when I would use the magical words "back home" would they ask and find out that I was not only an international student, but that I had been born and raised in Pakistan. The questions that inevitably followed were, "So did you learn to speak English when you came here?" (This ridiculous question has been posed to me over a dozen times, and, shockingly at times, by faculty members!) or, "You have no accent!" (I still don't know what this means). To this day, I'm not exactly sure what bothers me more: their complete surprise that a non-American can speak unaccented English fluently, or their ignorance (and audacity) to believe that I could only have learnt the language within the borders of this country.

Even more interestingly, I had a very strong British-English accent when I first arrived in New York City, and found it amusing that a lot of Americans were overtly impressed by how I pronounced my Ts. They "loved" the crispness of my speech, or even the way I said "herb". Unwittingly and perhaps even unconsciously, I decided to take on an experiment: I began to Americanize my British accent by replacing my Ts with Ds, dropping the "g" sound in the suffix "-ing" and speaking nasally. Within a fortnight (another word that they thought was so "cute" or "quaint") my friends and family noticed my new American accent, which was no longer "crisp" but was curiously bland as it lacked the distinctive tones and flavors that serve as markers of local and regional diversity (Brooklyn English vs. Queens English). The only times I tend to "lapse" into my British accent are when I'm public speaking (having been taught enunciation) or when I speak to my very "proper" parents on the phone; and every single time I am told by my American friends, "Wow, you sounded SO British just now..."

My ability to transmute my “English” to fit various moulds has benefitted me tremendously when it comes to writing for or speaking to specific audiences. It’s almost as if I automatically switch mental gears when it comes to academic, reflective or creative writing or public speaking vs. formal presentations at conferences. I have no desire to “fit in” or “conform,” if anything, I allow my nationality, heritage, multilingual background and perspectives to color my words. I learnt long ago that effective communicators employ metaphors or imagery that are universal and transcend regional, national, ethnic or religious boundaries, and I have never forgotten that lesson. Finally, the greatest advantage of being a multilingual speaker is that I have the ability to switch places with people, appreciate their perspectives and even condone those who are ignorant. I can’t imagine life as a monolingual speaker, because I couldn’t bear to just be able to see black and white, and miss out on the beauty of the polychromatic and polyphonic world that we live in.

I’m struck by Hadia’s awareness of and insight about both the linguistic features of difference and the social-cultural response to her identity as an international student. Hadia clearly has the ability to not just index a “standard” English, but to move toward an understanding of multiple versions of English as codes, from the “standard,” to a British form and on to a general American expression. Not many people are aware of these nuances or that even these can be further complicated by any of the identity communities I’ve explored in this text as well as regional versions. As we’ll see below with Marina, that work with codes can move toward a sort of hybridity that brings language traditions together. Still I wonder, what spaces do we create and what practices do we cultivate that enable English with accent to be possible, doable in the way that allows understanding to proceed without the interference of accent?

From understanding Hadia’s experiences here, I’m also curious about how her facility with language, with switching between codes and conventions or traditions, confers and represents a sort of privilege that she brings to communication that other students from her country or elsewhere might not possess. How do we explore with other international students or permanent residents the range of their linguistic abilities without being patronizing, reductive or essentialist? How do we resist the bias that comes from reading someone’s body, affect, or language as Other? I pose these questions because Hadia’s experiences are the exception rather than the rule in my history of working with multilingual writers in our New York City context, where the numbers of international and permanent-resident students are higher than other areas in the U.S.

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Tiffany Chan, junior, writing consultant, St. John's University

Whenever I look at the schedule and notice a name that is spelt phonetically in English from another language (there's a word for it, but I can't think of it now), the first thing I wonder is, how much English do they know? It usually goes one of two ways, a complete mastery of the language, or stumbling over words with a thick accent. Once again, I'm weary, but this time because it might take a while for me to assess what kind of level they are on. If the student is Chinese, do they expect me to talk to them in our native language; do they expect to have a connection that they wouldn't have with an American; or will they write me off as an ABC, American Born Chinese, as if I have cut off all ties with my heritage?

So far, I haven't felt such pressures from the students. They don't expect much from me, only to make sure they're doing the assignment correctly or the grammar is perfect. Once in a while they ask if I am Chinese out of curiosity or if it seems I understood their stories personally. I'm lucky the St. John's University Writing Center and community isn't all about stereotypes for the most part, but rather the common experience that we have in class or on campus. The people that I work with know that we are all different, which is an advantage and nothing more.

Tiffany's response is really powerful. For consultants who lack her multilingual background, they can't even really have the mental conversation and negotiation that she is primed to do. I'm also drawn to the conflict Tiffany feels as a Chinese American encountering people with whom she shares some, but not all, cultural capital. It's that very liminality that this text has sought to address and highlight. But to dig into that background further, I wonder under what circumstances she'd actually work with a Chinese national or permanent resident in Mandarin, Cantonese or another dialect, assuming, of course, she has access to those languages. At a former institution of mine, one of my tutors often worked in Cantonese with Chinese students from across the disciplines. While I didn't understand the conversations, the body language and engagement looked wonderful, and the tutor reported rich experiences and progress. It has always made me wonder how writing centers and composition courses might make spaces for learning and expressing in other language and linguistic traditions, especially as opportunities to leverage for metacognitive awareness. I'm also drawn to what Tiffany says in passing about students having the expectation that after working with her that their assignments or papers are correct and grammar in perfect

form. In the context of our values to appreciate difference and to make room for accent in language, how might those pressures from students be confounded by our practice? How do we address those tensions between our ideals and our realities in everyday sessions?

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**Marina Stal, graduate student in psychology, Columbia University;
former writing consultant, St. John's University**

As a Writing Counselor at the St. John's University Writing Center, I have worked with numerous students that consider English to be their second language. Realistically, there are students that clearly depict insufficient mastery of the language – is that a deficit?

It has been fifteen years since I have immigrated to the United States. Like my peers, I have finished elementary school, junior high school, high school and college within the American educational system. I finished all English and writing courses I've taken with no less than a B, but I am still labeled an immigrant. That English is my second language, although it is my preferred, is seen as a deficiency and a cause for uneasiness in regards to my ability to communicate appropriately.

“Do you think in Russian when you write?”

A simple enough inquiry into my thoughts regarding a paper I had written that inadvertently unearthed a personal desire to challenge misconceptions concerning bilingual immigrants and writing.

Being fluent in two languages gives me a unique opportunity to approach writing from two perspectives. This means that I can think about an idea I have in either language, read about the idea in either language, and ultimately write about the idea in either language. Yes, that means that more drafts and revisions are required due to the differences in grammar, structure, syntax, etc., but doesn't that increase the credibility of the final product?

I have worked with students that have told me their professors discourage a bilingual approach to writing and feel that it hinders them intellectually. I beg to disagree. Being bilingual allows for a more comprehensive gamut of the uses of language: English, primary language, slang picked up in English, slang picked up in the primary language, English-primary language mix, etc. The ability to clearly explain a thought should be celebrated; the ability to use multiple mediums to do so should be commended.

So yes, I think in Russian when I write. And in English. And in Russo-English. And also in Brooklyn-ese, St. John's-ese, Writing Center-ese, psychology-ese. I do

not believe that a deficit in the English language is appropriate to consider a deficit; it is a learning process. Learning a language is learning a way to convey your thoughts, thoughts that cannot be created or considered without a desire to do so. If focusing on detail such as thinking and writing in a specific language, I feel that we are missing the bigger picture. Why are we writing? Why does it matter? Those are the questions that are important to ask, not whether a verb is in the proper tense. Tenses can be learned, ideas cannot.

What I like here is the whole set of values and politics that come along with multilingualism as well as the hybridity of language to which Marina alludes. She speaks into the stigma that multilingual learners experience in education and the ways that resident status confounds or exacerbates perceptions of cultural or social integration. If a person is signified as an immigrant, particularly from a different linguistic tradition than what dominates here in the U.S., Marina points out that that individual is cast as always already caught in that status of an outsider, a position from which escape is fraught with complications.

I also appreciate her thoughts about the presumption of deficiency that too often accompanies multilingual students: Coming from a different linguistic tradition is equated with an absence or paucity as opposed to a different range and set of experiences with the dominant language culture. At the heart of this mindset is a patronizing notion that limits the place and status of multilingual writers, and also fails to understand the intrinsic value a multilingual awareness brings to learning and teaching in this postmodern era.

Besides the tension Marina addresses so well, she also references the power of switching, meshing and blending codes in ways that make her language never pure, but thoroughly improvisational and multivocal. Coming to—even having—our ideas, whatever the code, is a recursive and iterative process that stops, starts, stumbles, spins, and spurts. How we come to those ideas, that process she references, is just as crucial. Still, getting to where we need to get to is important, but I also wonder how we factor into this line of thinking the cultural specificity of linguistic traditions. How do we embrace what's lost in translation, not as a barrier to dialogue and understanding, but as an opportunity to foster them?