

The Best Worst Spanish

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Toward the end of high school, I took the opportunity to take a summer language exchange programme in the town of Trois-Pistoles, Quebec. By then, I had already taken several years of French Immersion, and had enough proficiency to use French in the classroom and in casual conversation, but I didn't feel I could call myself "fluent" in the language. Other fellow students all had different levels of proficiency, ranging from fresh beginners to language teachers.

The program in Trois-Pistoles was immersion to a whole new level – the immersion carried on outside the classroom. Our hosts would not ever speak to us in English, since they didn't speak English to begin with. Even in social interactions with fellow students, a French-only rule was strictly enforced, if a staff member caught you speaking English three times – you were expelled from the program. The setting made it a necessity to communicate with whatever French we had.

The first step in the programme was to take a proficiency test within a day of our arrival. It was called the Laval test (I don't know if they still use it, but it's what we were given). This would determine what classes we'd be able to choose, which ranged from beginner language classes to upper-year university-level courses about other subjects – taught in French, but with no formal language training component.

After taking the test, I was disappointed that I hadn't even cracked into the 70% range... not even a B-, and feared I wouldn't be able to take the class I was most interested in. The councillor reassured me that I was actually in the top range, and that my score meant I could take any class

I wanted. Apparently, it is a difficult test, dealing with ample and obscure grammar rules, that even proficient speakers aren't fully familiar with.

I took a political science course on the history of French-Canadian society, with a professor who looked like he was still campaigning in the 1980 referendum. Outside the classroom, we were well-fed by local hosts. We got to know the local culture, and had many get-togethers and activities among students with a wide range of ages, backgrounds, and proficiency levels. It was a good time.

Everyone of every level made fantastic progress. And I found that I was consistently dreaming in French and was instinctively reading the French side of the labels on food packages. When it came time to take the test again, I was confident that I would breeze past my previous score, as evidence of all that I had learned.

To my surprise and dismay, I found out I had actually *dropped* two points. When I pointed this out to the staff in puzzlement, they shrugged and casually mentioned that that's what typically happens to folks who come with ample formal language training. Apparently, learning deeper fluency can mean your reliance on the formal rules drops, as it becomes more intuitive.

As it turns out, the standard that the test uses does not line up with the ability to use the language effectively.

I've also been on the receiving end of finding that the standards of language we're used to using are not the best indicators of successful communication.

Often, when folks who are non-native Spanish learners speak to me, I can sometimes have trouble keeping a conversation – not because they don't know enough Spanish, but because the constant starts and stops of self-correcting and looking for the right word or conjugation tends to break the flow of the conversation.

Several years ago, I met a remarkable Spanish learner who broke this mold. Due to their life circumstance, they had to quickly start speaking Spanish, even though they barely knew it, and I found it surprisingly easy to have a conversation with them. Their Spanish was... respectably awful. They had a heavy Anglo accent, their grammar was inconsistent, they could barely conjugate, and word order was all over the place.

And yet, we were able to converse quite naturally. It took me a while to understand what was happening, but it eventually occurred to me that it was actually quite simple... they just spoke. They did this without constantly stopping to correct themselves, even though they knew full well that their Spanish was nowhere near correct, along with a self-awareness that they'd improve over time.

They would not have won any Spanish-language literature or public speaking awards, and they probably would have failed at even an elementary school language test – but that standard of language proficiency was hardly relevant. Their purpose was to communicate, and by that standard, they excelled.

Emerging linguistic scholarship is finding evidence that contradicts some of the previously-accepted wisdom around learning languages. The prevailing perception that fluency cannot be achieved once you're a teenager is increasingly being challenged, with data pointing to people who are fluent speakers, even when they started learning well into adulthood.

The reasons for that are still in the process of being understood, but it looks like there are a few factors that explain this.

Somewhat simplistically put, one of the main reasons that children learn languages so well, is that they are much more at ease with making mistakes. We see this all the time, when they say they have “forgotted” something, or they tell us to look at the “mooses”. When that happens,

we find it adorable and accept that it's part of their learning process. We might correct them from time to time, and they'll learn from that mistake, or else they'll eventually absorb how we use the language, and add it to their learning. Making mistakes, or simply not getting it right from the get-go, is all a natural and expected part of the process.

My friends, in our community, we have seen and will see this kind of process unfold. Adapting to doing and being church primarily online has put us in a spot of quick and required learning. It didn't happen all at once, we had to learn over time, making mistakes and gracefully finding ways to overcome unexpected challenges, I would say we're still learning this craft of online churching.

As in-person churching becomes once again a reasonable possibility in the near-future, the process of adapting into an emerging multi-platform church will bring other challenges, and we won't expect to get it right the first time, or the first year – we'll continue to learn as we go along.

My friends, we have also been learning to be prophetic witnesses and promoters of radical inclusivity, and this includes occasionally stumbling in figuring out how we live our values or how to model our commitment to social justice, anti-oppression, and anti-racism.

My friends, these can be tricky areas, and we sometimes find ourselves tripping over our words – or might be hesitant to commit for fear of messing up and not getting it right from the get-go. Even seasoned folks will attest that they are still learning. My friends, by embracing imperfection, shifting our standards, and having an openness to offer and receive grace, we may build an ever-more beloved community.

So may it be,
In Solidarity and Love,
Amen

Opening Hymn #335 Once When My Heart Was Passion Free

Words: John B. Tabb, 1845-1909

Music: From *Kentucky Harmony*, 1816

PRIMROSE

Closing Hymn #325 Love Makes a Bridge

Words: Brian Wren, 1936- , © 1983 Hope Publishing Co.

Music: Gerald Wheeler, b. 1929, © Gerald Wheeler

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