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Two-tongued - Tamara Marques

I am bilingual.

Portuguese is my first language.

I first swam in it, completely immersed, when I was a baby. It was in Portuguese that I spat my first words. Portuguese is home. Its words paint pictures in my mind- black and white memories, dancing around my eyes like a slideshow. Portuguese is warm and breezy like a summer's night.

English is my second language.

I dipped into it when I was a toddler and later dived into it as I grew older. It was in English that I formed some of my first friendships. English is a key. It opens doors to new cultures. English is piquant and crisp, like an afternoon in October.

As a child, I struggled with having two languages fighting against each other, rattling in my brain. I would merge and blend them. I tampered with them- making them my own. I would use the words and phrases from each language that tasted better in my mouth. I loved the aromatic sweetness of Portuguese words mixed with the buttery gooeyness of English phrases. Separate they were nice to satisfy a specific craving for a feeling or sentiment, but together they tickled my emotional palate superbly. I took Portuguese words that did not exist in English and English words that did not exist in Portuguese. I would make sentences out of both of them. I had formed my own language. My sister and I still speak "Portlish" fluently - much to our mother's amusing despair.

However, I do despair (which I hardly find amusing) when both Portuguese and English fail to serve me as the correct communication devices. Sometimes I cannot seem to translate what I am thinking and seeing in my brain into real words. No matter how hard I try, I cannot avoid that dry feeling. The blankness my mouth experiences causes me to forget to articulate the exact words I wish to convey. The images in my mind and my feelings struggle to translate in fluent, coherent color. They fumble in a bleak black and grey. Both languages long to speak so badly that they block each other out. Their fight distracts me from what I am trying to say. This interior battle often causes my sister and I to struggle with speaking.

"Diz só em Inglês!" My sister suggests after I stutter and grunt frustratingly. "Just say it in English!"

"Eu não consigo, também me esqueci de dizer a palavra em Inglês!" I scoff at the two languages in my brain. Their common state is fight and conflict, but now they lay quiet and calm. So calm that they seem to be mocking me. I for some strange reason cannot utter that specific word through any of them about what I want to say. How dare they. I find their calm demeanor irritating. "I can't, I also forgot how to say it in English!"

The ends of my sister's mouth gradually turn up. Her eyes look up at the ceiling as she sighs. She knows my situation much too well. Both of our effervescent minds cause us to bubble laughter out of our mouths. Portuguese and English laughter foam out of our lips.

"Ai, repariga só mesmo nós!" My sister would sing in between frothy giggles, "Only we would actually forget how to speak in two languages!"

I cannot ever forget to thank God that I have my sister to speak my language with. Many of my friends speak only one. I do have a select group of friends that have mastered Portlish, yet still we bilinguals mix the flavors of each language to our own liking. We always come up with different dialects.

I hardly ever mind that most of my friends only speak one language or the other. However, I do mind when my English speaking friends and my Portuguese speaking friends are in the same room together and I become the reluctant designated translator. My tongue turns into a slippery eel and my words sway awkwardly through my teeth. Fact: having to explain a joke in one language when it is only funny in the other can only contribute to awkward and forced laughs. Jokes are not usually polyglots by nature.

Languages come with their own culture. They live as words and phrases, yet they also mirror the feelings and thoughts of the people who speak them. I recommend imperatively using the correct idioms that correspond to the correct language. I would never say it was raining cats and dogs in Portuguese just like I would not say that it was raining pots and pans in English.

There can be so many layers of English and Portuguese I can speak. It depends on the audience. If I am with my teen friends, I speak in a more “broken” Portuguese with a dollop of Angolan slang and vocabulary. When I am at church and at home I speak a more traditional and proper “Lisbon” Portuguese accidentally spilled with a few grammatical mistakes that my mother often reprimands me of. She wishes I could speak more of the “correct” Portuguese. I do try to improve it, but it is a tough language to master. I am also fluent in other forms of English. I speak a more relaxed English with my bilingual friends - an English filled with slang to the brim. It tends to not be as posh or refined as the one I have to speak and write for my English assignments and emails for my classes here at Cedarville.

My mouth widens into a grateful smile whenever I remember the unbelievable opportunities I have had over the years, mostly because of God placing these two little guys in my brain. A group at my church which included my sister and me, translated Bible stories and sermons in Mozambique together with a mission’s team from Michigan. I remember feeling overwhelmed about translating one language into the other, yet my sister helped me out with some of the grammar and idiom differences. My creamy Portuguese and crunchy English managed to work together. They helped the other English-minded people to communicate iridescent stories and lessons of the Bible to Portuguese-minded children in Mozambique. What a beautiful thing we accomplished. We made friends there due to our unique ability to speak in different languages.

I have developed strong attachments with people from their own different linguistic-cultured worlds. While the savory and crisp English bridged us together to explore each other’s linguistic worlds, we managed to form a new one. A world where we all our languages purred in delight.

My languages still quarrel from time to time, sparking away as they try to move my mouth and have me think with them. Yet I can now control them a bit better and motion

one to speak and the other to hush. However, I must be careful not to shun one so hard that it might flail and keep silent forever.

Knowing two languages was not always rosy. It came with its own prickly thorns. Nevertheless, the rose bloomed. My life as a bilingual is weird, yet colorful and fragrant with my own assembled words. My heart beams at this precious gift God has given me.