panic from a Latin American by the former's awkward syntax in Spanish, an English syntax. My own Spanish is the same, though thanks to the good fortune of higher education and a lifetime of reading Spanish literature, I compensate by adding rococo flourishes to my español. It works the other way too, as my editors well know. I bend and twist English in unnatural ways. Editing my copy requires a hot iron and a firm hand. Editing as conk job.

Therefore, if the massive Hispanic immigration has some influence on the American language, this will be more than just Spanish words entering English, like the hoosegow, calaboose, and desperado of the Old West. Look for exuberant shapes missing from the Queen's English since the Elizabethan era. Look for hyperbatons, redundancies, excess. Look for the death of economy, pithiness, terseness. Look for rhetoric. Look for a new language that will sound like a concierto barroco. Look for too much. More es más.

Those spices... that beat. Latino culture beckons. It promises to fill the sensory vacuum of Anglo America. The frightening nothingness inherited from Puritan England and northern Europe. In an American novel a black character pressed by a white lover to explain how white folk smell answers that what's unpleasant about them is that they don't smell. No-funk. Likewise, when Latinos are pressed to explain what they find lacking in American food and American sexual attractions, the answer is no tiene sabor. No-sabor. Horror vacuii. Come fill me.

How does sabor/seduction work? In that gorgeous morality play, John Ford's The Searchers, the John Wayne character relentlessly pursues his kidnapped niece in hope of catching up with her and her Indian abductors before she comes of age, before she can be tainted by miscegenation, before she becomes a mother of a mestizo, a mother of an hijo de la chingada. After a good long time his search is more of a reflex than an obsession. And somewhere in la frontera, the searcher relaxes. His clothes are loose, his drink is Mexican, his body language Latino. Of course, it is at the very precise moment of his mestizaje/assimilation that he finds his niece: rię y bien chingada. But it's too late for righteousness. The Puritan knight who began the search has yielded to the seduction of the Other. Is the Other. As was the Duke himself, that Latinophile, tequila head, mestizo lover. The searcher has found himself.

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1 In what way does the term “salsa” express a complex range of attitudes about Latin music (para. 3–4), food (para. 6–9), sex (para. 6), race (para. 11), dancing (para. 3–4), and other frames of reference for the Latino community?

2 How does “salsa” function as a bridge that connects otherwise very different Latino groups, like Mexicans and Cuban-Americans? Why is the question of what language you use to express yourself such an important one for Fernondez? How does “Spanglish” permit the expression of a hybrid mentality that fuses aspects of Latino culture (humor, passions, dreams) and mainstream American culture in a new way?

3 In your own words, explain what Fernondez means by each of the five important Hispanic immigrant groups in his autobiography. Be sure to discuss the religious, political, and economic aspects in each of them.

4 Where is Fernondez most successful in showing how completely words and phrases in Spanish have become interwoven with English to produce a unique hybrid called “Spanglish”? [Glossary: Idiom, Semantics.]

5 What is this essay’s thesis? Locate the sentence(s) in which Fernondez states his main idea. Express the thesis in your own words. How does Fernondez develop his definition of the term “salsa” to reinforce his thesis? Locate some of the contrasts that Fernondez uses to illustrate the various ways in which the term “salsa” is used. How do these contrasts help him build his definition of “salsa”? [Glossary: Comparison and Contrast, Definition, Thesis.]

6 Are there terms with which you are familiar that have no exact synonym in English (for example, guan-xi [translated loosely as “relationship”] in Chinese, “sympatico” in Spanish, and “prego” in Italian). Select a term you use and define it in a paragraph or two, giving examples of how it is used in different contexts. Try to convey all the nuances and connotations that would be difficult to get across in English.

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Public and Private Language

Richard Rodriguez

*Richard Rodriguez was born in 1944 in San Francisco, where he grew up as a child of Spanish-speaking Mexican-American parents. As this selection from his autobiography *Hunger of Memory* (1982) reveals, Rodriguez received his education in a language that was not spoken in his home. In recent years he has continued his memoirs in a work titled *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (1992). The predicament of someone who is forced to give up the language he has always spoken with his family when he enters grammar school and must learn to speak English has rarely been more poignantly illustrated than in this memoir by Rodriguez. While Rodriguez feels that English is an indispensable part of his public self, we also feel quite keenly his sense of loss at “growing away” from his...

family because he no longer spoke the language that had connected him to them in childhood.

**TO CONSIDER** How is the language you use with your family at home different from the language you use in public?

Supporters of bilingual education today imply that students like me miss a great deal by not being taught in their family’s language. What they seem not to recognize is that, as a socially disadvantaged child, I considered Spanish to be a private language. What I needed to learn in school was that I had the right—and the obligation—to speak the public language of los gringos. The odd truth is that my first-grade classmates could have become bilingual, in the conventional sense of that word, more easily than I. Had they been taught (as upper-middle-class children are often taught early) a second language like Spanish or French, they could have regarded it simply as that: another public language. In my case such bilingualism could not have been so quickly achieved. What I did not believe was that I could speak a single public language.

Without question, it would have pleased me to hear my teachers address me in Spanish when I entered the classroom. I would have felt much less afraid. I would have trusted them and responded with ease. But I would have delayed—for how long postponed—having to learn the language of public society. I would have evaded—and for how long could I have afforded to delay?—learning the great lesson of school, that I had a public identity.

Fortunately, my teachers were unsentimental about their responsibility. What they understood was that I needed to speak a public language. So their voices would search me out, asking me questions. Each time I’d hear them, I’d look up in surprise to see a nun’s face frowning at me. I’d mumble, not really meaning to answer. The nun would persist, “Richard, stand up. Don’t look at the floor. Speak up. Speak to the entire class, not just to me!” But I couldn’t believe that the English language was mine to use. (In part, I did not want to believe it.) I continued to mumble. I resisted the teacher’s demands. (Did I somehow suspect that once I learned public language my pleasing family life would be changed?) Silent, waiting for the bell to sound, I remained dazed, deficient, afraid.

Because I wrongly imagined that English was intrinsically a public language and Spanish an intrinsically private one, I easily noted the difference between classroom language and the language of home. At school, words were directed to a general audience of listeners. (“Boys and girls.”) Words were meaningfully ordered. And the point was not self-expression alone but to make oneself understood by many others. The teacher quizzed: “Boys and girls, why do we use that word in this sentence? Could we think of a better word to use there? Would the sentence change its meaning if the words were differently arranged? And wasn’t there a better way of saying much the same thing?” (I couldn’t say. I wouldn’t try to say.)

Three months. Five. Half a year passed. Unsmiling, ever watchful, my teachers noted my silence. They began to connect my behavior with the difficult progress my older sister and brother were making. Until one Saturday morning, three nuns arrived at the house to talk to our parents. Stiffly, they sat on the blue living room sofa. From the doorway of another room, spying the visitors, I noted the incongruity—the clash of two worlds, the faces and voices of school intruding upon the familiar setting of home. I overheard one voice gently wondering, “Do your children speak only Spanish at home, Mrs. Rodriguez?” While another voice added, “That Richard especially seems so timid and shy.”

That Rich-heard!

With great tact the visitors continued, “Is it possible for you and your husband to encourage your children to practice their English when they are home?” Of course, my parents complied. What would they not do for their children’s well-being? And how could they have questioned the Church’s authority which those women represented? In an instant, they agreed to give up the language (the sounds) that had revealed and accentuated our family’s closeness. The moment after the visitors left, the change was observed. “Ahora, speak to us en inglés,” my father and mother united to tell us.

At first, it seemed a kind of game. After dinner each night, the family gathered to practice “our” English. (It was still then inglés, a language foreign to us, so we felt drawn as strangers to it.) Laughing, we would try to define words we could not pronounce. We played with strange English sounds, often anglicizing our pronunciations. And we filled the smiling gaps of our sentences with familiar Spanish sounds. But that was cheating, somebody shouted. Everyone laughed. In school, meanwhile, like my brother and sister, I was required to attend a daily tutoring session. I needed a full year of special attention. I also needed my teachers to keep my attention from straying in class by calling out, Rich-heard—their English voices slowly prying loose my ties to my other name, its three notes, Ri-car-do. Most of all I needed to hear my mother and father speak to me in a moment of seriousness in broken—suddenly heartbreaking—English. The scene was inevitable: One Saturday morning I entered the kitchen where my parents were talking in Spanish. I did not realize that they were talking in Spanish however until, at the moment they saw me, I heard their voices change to speak English. Those gringo sounds they uttered startled me. Pushed me away. In that moment of trivial misunderstanding and profound insight, I felt my throat twisted by unsounded grief. I turned quickly and left the room. But I had no place to escape to with Spanish. (The spell was broken.) My brother and sisters were speaking English in another part of the house.

Again and again in the days following, increasingly angry, I was obliged to hear my mother and father: “Speak to us en inglés.” (Speak.) Only then did I determine to learn classroom English. Weeks after, it happened: One day in school I had my hand raised to volunteer an answer. I spoke out in a loud voice.

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1 Los gringos: Foreigners.

2 “Now, speak to us in English.”
And I did not think it remarkable when the entire class understood. That day, I moved very far from the disadvantaged child I had been only days earlier. The belief, that calming assurance that I belonged in public, had at last taken hold.

Shortly after, I stopped hearing the high and loud sounds of _los gringos_. A more and more confident speaker of English, I didn’t trouble to listen to how strangers sounded, speaking to me. And there simply were too many English-speaking people in my day for me to hear American accents anymore. Conversations quickened. Listening to persons whose voices sounded eccentically pitched, I usually noted their sounds for an initial few seconds before I concentrated on what they were saying. Conversations became content-full. Transparent. Hearing someone’s tone of voice—angry or questioning or sarcastic or happy or sad—I didn’t distinguish it from the words it expressed. Sound and word were thus tightly wedded. At the end of a day, I was often bemused, always relieved, to realize how “silent,” though crowded with words, my day in public had been. (This public silence measured and quickened the change in my life.)

At last, seven years old, I came to believe what had been technically true since my birth: I was an American citizen.

But the special feeling of closeness at home was diminished by then. Gone was the desperate, urgent, intense feeling of being at home; rare was the experience of feeling myself individualized by family intimates. We remained a loving family, but one greatly changed. No longer so close; no longer bound tight by the pleasing and troubling knowledge of our public separateness. Neither my older brother nor sister rushed home after school anymore. Nor did I. When I arrived home there would often be neighborhood kids in the house. Or the house would be empty of sounds.

Following the dramatic Americanization of their children, even my parents grew more publicly confident. Especially my mother. She learned the names of all the people on our block. And she decided we needed to have a telephone installed in the house. My father continued to use the word _gringo_. But it was no longer charged with the old bitterness or distrust. (Stripped of any emotional content, the word simply became a name for those Americans not of Hispanic descent.) Hearing him, sometimes, I wasn’t sure if he was pronouncing the Spanish word _gringo_ or saying _gringo_ in English.

Matching the silence I started hearing in public was a new quiet at home. The family’s quiet was partly due to the fact that, as we children learned more and more English, we shared fewer and fewer words with our parents. Sentences needed to be spoken slowly when a child addressed his mother or father. (Often the parent wouldn’t understand.) The child would need to repeat himself. (Still the parent misunderstood.) The young voice, frustrated, would end up saying, “Never mind”—the subject was closed. Dinners would be noisy with the clinking of knives and forks against dishes. My mother would smile softly between her remarks; my father at the other end of the table would chew and at his food, while he stared over the heads of his children.

My mother! My father! After English became my primary language, I no longer knew what words to use in addressing my parents. The old Spanish words (those tender accents of sound) I had used earlier—_mamá_ and _papá_—I couldn’t use anymore. They would have been too painful reminders of how much had changed in my life. On the other hand, the words I heard neighborhood kids call their parents seemed equally unsatisfactory. _Mother_ and _Father_; _Mad_, _Papa_, _Dad_, _Pop_ (how I hated the all-American sound of that last word especially)—all these terms I felt were unsuitable, not really terms of address for my parents. As a result, I never used them at home. Whenever I’d speak to my parents, I would try to get their attention with eye contact alone. In public conversations, I’d refer to “my parents” or “my mother and father.”

My mother and father, for their part, responded differently, as their children spoke to them less and less. She grew restless, seemed troubled and anxious at the scarcity of words exchanged in the house. It was she who would question me about my day when I came home from school. She smiled at the small talk. She pried at the edges of my sentences to get me to say something more. (What?) She’d join conversations she overheard, but her intrusions often stopped her children’s talking. By contrast, my father seemed reconcile to the new quiet. Though his English improved somewhat, he retired into silence. At dinner he spoke very little. One night his children and even his wife helplessly giggled at his garbled English pronunciation of the Catholic Grace before Meals. Thereafter he made his wife recite the prayer at the start of each meal, even on formal occasions, when there were guests in the house. Hers became the public voice of the family. On official business, it was she, not my father, one would usually hear on the phone or in stores, talking to strangers. His children grew so accustomed to his silence that, years later, they would speak routinely of his shyness. (My mother would often try to explain: Both his parents died when he was eight. He was raised by an uncle who treated him like little more than a menial servant. He was never encouraged to speak. He grew up alone. A man of few words.) But my father was not shy, I realized, when I’d watch him speaking Spanish with relatives. Using Spanish, he was quickly effusive. Especially when talking with other men, his voice would spark, flicker, flare alive with sounds. In Spanish, he expressed ideas and feelings he rarely revealed in English. With firm Spanish sounds, he conveyed confidence and authority English would never allow him.

The silence at home, however, was finally more than a literal silence. Fewer words passed between parent and child, but more profound was the silence that resulted from my inattention to sounds. At about the time I no longer bothered to listen with care to the sounds of English in public, I grew careless about listening to the sounds family members made when they spoke. Most of the time I heard someone speaking at home and didn’t distinguish his sounds from the words people uttered in public. I didn’t even pay much attention to my parents’ accented and ungrammatical speech. At least not at home. Only when I was with them in public would I grow alert to their accents. Though, even then, their sounds caused me less and less concern. For I was increasingly confident of my own public identity.

Today I hear bilingual educators say that children lose a degree of “individuality” by becoming assimilated into public society. (Bilingual schooling was popularized in the seventies, that decade when middle-class ethnics began to resist the process of assimilation—the American melting pot.) But the bilingualists simplistically scorn the value and necessity of assimilation. They do not seem
to realize that there are two ways a person is individualized. So they do not realize that while one suffers a diminished sense of private individuality by becoming assimilated into public society, such assimilation makes possible the achievement of public individuality.

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1 Why is the distinction between "public" and "private" language such an important one for Rodriguez? Although Rodriguez discusses the increasing tension English brought between his "private" and "public" sense of self, he doesn't explicitly define either term. How do you understand these words in the context of his essay?

2 Rodriguez's first reaction to English is to the way it sounds. But there comes a moment (para. 10) when he focuses less on the sounds and more on what people are actually saying. What is the significance of this transformation in his acquiring English? How did his new fluency in English profoundly alter his relationship with his parents? How did his mother and father react to his new knowledge of English?

3 What does Rodriguez wish supporters of bilingual education would realize about the trade-offs involved in trying to assimilate into mainstream American society? What insight does this essay give you into how changing the language you speak also transforms personal and social relationships?

4 How does the issue of bilingualism (as discussed in the first and last paragraphs) serve to frame Rodriguez's personal account of learning English as a child? In what way do his experiences support his views on this issue? (Glossary: Bilingual Education.)

5 Where does Rodriguez provide the background and facts necessary for the average reader to understand what the effects of learning a second language were for him? To what extent does he establish that learning English helped undermine the close relationship he had with his family? (Glossary: Cause and Effect.)

6 Do you believe children of immigrants are under extra pressures or obligations to excel as a way of repaying their parents for the sacrifices they made in coming to America?

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Language Lessons

Sarah Min