

A flaw in language

At 40, I moved with my family to an island where several languages are spoken, and in the area where we decided to settle, French is the primary language. I had a basic grasp of the language since I attended the Alliance Française for four years during my adolescence.

I tried to integrate into that community through my daughter's school, and two years after my arrival, I began working as a psychologist. Initially, I worked with children because I was too embarrassed to speak in front of adults due to my limited language skills.

My first adult patient was Irene, a Russian woman who had sought asylum in the United States with her husband, a musician. Irene and I communicated in English; hers was much better than mine, but she wasn't concerned with my grammatical skills—she could no longer tolerate living next to such an egocentric man who was driving her crazy.

I began to have other French-speaking patients. I was very good at listening, as I had to learn how things were said, how to name anguish in all its forms. I was amazed that patients continued coming despite the mistakes I might make in the language. I told myself that I didn't have much professional competition on the island; there were very few psychologists at that time, which is why they came to me.

Only a few of my patients corrected me, and only one laughed at my pronunciation of a word that, with my accent, took on a sexual connotation. Through my patients, I learned unexpected realities. I discovered how people from northern France treat those from the south, the tensions that exist between them: Parisians versus Marseillais. I learned about the rejection of Arabs and the difficulties they face in gaining respect in France. I also witnessed rivalries among the communities of the French islands: Guadeloupe, Martinique, Saint Barthélemy, and Saint Martin. Not to mention the discrimination suffered by Haitians and those referred to as "Spanish," a term that mainly encompasses Dominicans and Latinos in general.

I improved my language skills while regularizing my administrative situation, obtaining recognition of my psychology diploma, my driver's license, French naturalization, and paying my taxes. As psychologists, we understand the weight of the symbolic in life. I am validated and recognized in

all administrative aspects, but I still feel insecure when I speak at a meeting, convinced that I will make mistakes, especially in pronunciation.

I must explain two things. First: the French generally discriminate based on pronunciation; they do not make an effort to grasp the meaning of what someone wants to say. They immediately highlight the flaw, making a face of disgust at how the word sounds in my mouth. The question of origin always arises: where is that accent from?

The second point is that my practice became full, and over time, I couldn't keep up. Undoubtedly, anxious people don't have time to notice if the "e" or "u" is pronounced correctly. The island is a place without social support; we are all in transition, and the photos of parties and beaches abound, masking the dark side of uprooting.

At that time, I did not know the theory of positioning, but I used it nonetheless without realizing. I am a white, Latina, middle-aged woman from a middle-class background, a professional, married with two school-aged children. And it is from that position that I question my patients.

The time I was most struck was when I asked a patient, a French woman of Yugoslav immigrant parents and a teacher in the French National Education system, how she was treated by the French. With her response, I saw her liberating herself from a heavy burden, telling me about the suffering caused by the discrimination her parents, grandparents, and she herself had endured.

I, who was so troubled by my Latin pronunciation of French, realized that it was that very flaw that allowed me to position myself in another place among those communities that coexist in permanent tension.

I had many enriching experiences in this regard while working with people of Caribbean origin. The islands are French colonies, and the relationship with the colonizers endures despite the centuries. It is worth mentioning that foreigners in the Caribbean behave like colonizers, even though it seems we are talking about the 1800s!

For this Caribbean population, my coming from South America facilitated the transfer. Even though I was white, I did not diminish or devalue them like other whites did. Perhaps it was because I listened to them.

The island I am talking about here is Saint Martin, which is an overseas community. The local population speaks English because, before France allowed the development of real estate projects to relieve French taxes, they traded with the United States and English-speaking islands. The French language was imposed in the 1960s with the arrival of the French administration, schools, and mail to the island.

The flaw in language existed before I arrived on the island. I identified with that flaw and also experienced discrimination—my family did too.

I had to leave the island for personal reasons. When I returned many years later, I realized that I spoke French well. I recognized that I had lived for many years with a sense of inferiority that I now understand stemmed from the dynamics of power among different ethnic groups.

As a postscript, I'd like to mention that when I emigrated from Saint Martin, I lived for two years in Montreal, the French province of Canada. The pronunciation, as well as the French of that very old colony, is often the subject of mockery by the French. This treatment generates much tension and even rejection from Quebecers towards the French.

When I arrive there, I am seen as French; my first acquaintances do not believe that I am Argentine because I “speak like a French person” to them.

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