

Vignettes of Love Languages

Part 1 - Lovers

It has been a running joke amongst linguists and polyglots that the best way to learn a new language is to date someone who speaks it fluently. Whether that's because a partner is one of few people who would be willing to put up with teaching someone their native tongue or if love inspires the sort of devotion required to learn a new language, it seems to be somewhat true.

I've felt this most acutely when I started dating someone whose first language is Greek; since then, I have picked up two measly phrases: 'I love you' and 'Can you hold this for me?' Besides the fact that this betrays my incessant need to cradle groceries in my arms lest I buy another bag that will nevertheless be forgotten on my next shopping trip, the act of learning to say 'I love you' in your partner's native tongue feels romantic... I think? Certainly, it is an attempt to create a liminal space between two separate and independent identities for love to occupy; but, on the other hand, it might just be unique. I have tossed around 'I love you' in English generously – former lovers, family and friends – but he is undoubtedly the only person I have said this to in Greek.

In many ways, when you're learning a new language and you're trying out newfound grammatical structures and vocabulary on a native speaker, you are hoping that they will receive you generously. You hope that they can see through your nascent understanding and fill in the gaps of your haphazard pronunciation to arrive at your intended meaning – to meet your act of faith with benevolence. In my quest to learn Greek, I found my own mouth to be a foreign place. Like everyone else, it's only possible to learn a new language in dialogue with your own native tongue, it is an exercise in translation and memory. This somehow made my partner more of a marvel to me: he could roll his r's smoothly and didn't have to consult google translate at all! But, more poignantly, in the process of learning his language, I felt as though there was a part of him I didn't understand or have access to. In love, you want to know the whole of a person and perhaps, if I double-downed, I could understand his Greekness more intimately.

I'm aware that it is a well-established fallacy to believe that language is the window to a culture or even to a speaker's identity. Such a belief has a number of unintended consequences that you cannot saddle a speaker with – among them is linguistic determinism; that is, to suggest that their language determines how a person thinks and speaks. From this, the pipeline to linguistic prescriptivism is all too cliché. Nonetheless, in Saussure's linguistics, classical structuralism held out hope for a "scientific" account of culture by identifying the system that underlies the cultural production. But this appeared to me to be a philosophical fiction, the more devotion I put into learning a new language, the more apparent the structure of English and indeed, every other language, seemed indeterminative and arbitrary. Ask most native English speakers why you get *on* a bus but *in* a car and you will likely receive the classic nonstarter response: "it just is." You can expect a similar response if you ask a Frenchman why the word for language (*langue*) is feminine but individual languages are masculine. What cultural insight, if any, is there to glean from this? Once again, the linguists might posit a number of socio-political or historical explanations that may be reasonable for society as a whole but can any real depth come from discerning which state someone is from based on whether they say bathers/swimmers/togs? It's become increasingly

clear that what can be said of the relationship between language and culture is that they both hide much more than they reveal and, paradoxically, what it hides is most effectively hidden from its own participants. To the extent that culture and language are inexorably intertwined, its impact on identity and relationships is best observed from afar.

Derrida reveals in 'Structure, Sign and Play' the key problem with Saussure's analysis of systems: any analysis of an underlying system assumes that there is a 'centre' or 'transcendental signified', that is outside the system under consideration and exempt from critical analysis. Derrida ultimately suggests that such a centre is non-existent. For example, there are grammatical rules that govern any language; if you freely use the English language outside of that structure, it will likely be unintelligible. However, there are no rules for the rules of grammar (the centre) – we've sort of just decided that "it just is." It's true that it is impossible to escape the relativistic nature of language or culture and the notion that a centre or structure exists independently of this is just a secular yearning for the divine. There is no absolute Truth or ideal form – Plato's cave is not real. Indeed, Derrida relinquishes such a yearning and accepts "a world of signs without fault, without truth and without origin." But where does this leave us? Quietly aching? Perhaps. Previously I've alluded to the fact that practising a new language is an act of faith in the listener; it's now obvious that this extends to communication writ large. Language is the medium with which love is shared, negotiated and understood and however imperfect, requires daily the hope that it is meaningful. So perhaps it's ok that my measly grasp of Greek is more of a romantic affectation than a coherent communication method; anyway, I suspect my partner merely thinks it's cute when I stumble through the small phrases towards his outstretched arms.

Part 2 - Family

Unfortunately, it is much more difficult for me to understand my relationship with my family through language. It's a stereotype that Asian families don't ever say "I love you" to one another - the fact that this is true for my family makes me wince. Indeed, a common experience amongst the Chinese diaspora is a plate of sliced fruit placed gently beside you in the depths of your homework. The now canonised Love Languages would suggest that these were "acts of service" – one of five ways to express love. Yet I found this categorisation to be arbitrary and crude – something that was inevitably a victim of the unfalsifiability fallacy. Of course, it is literally an act of service, but more potently, it is a quiet recognition of hard work, an expression of care and a gentle deepening of the weight of expectations. The issue is that these feelings can be notionally conveyed in any other love language. I've had many discussions between friends on our "primary" love language and it always came down to this: we would all like to be loved through all the love languages. So perhaps the real truth is that habits of love expression are not categorical. These love languages provide little insight into how any individual person wants to be loved or express love; but, actually provided a language to talk about desire in a way that made the person feel readable to others, or to themselves. It leads to pseudo-revelations such as "oh maybe I express my love through gift-giving because my dad would always buy me gifts instead of telling me he loves me so that's the only way I know how to express love" or it could be the opposite – "maybe my love language is words of affirmation because my dad would never tell me he loves me and only buy me gifts." Love Languages, ironically, contain the same fallacy that any language does: it is ornamental and imprecise. How can we know how any given person wants to be loved on any given day? How can we know how they express their love?

Jessica Au's award-winning novella 'Cold Enough for Snow' is fundamentally a text about reaching towards these expressions of love in a way that neither the narrator or her mother fully understand. Although the plot is simple: a mother and daughter are on holiday in Japan, the blurb astutely lays bare the key question of the narrative – how much is spoken between them, how much is thought but unspoken? I think this shines a dim light on the secondary problem with the Love Languages; there can be a type of love that is not expressed but still felt. Narrated in first person, as readers we are only privy to the thoughts of the daughter as she tries to connect with her mother who appears inaccessible and elusive. They see the world differently in fundamental ways – art, culture, history, fate – and yet, they are tied to each other by these things. Their conversations often mask deeper feelings that they both have about each other and their strained relationship. The mother laments that “nowadays... people [are] hungry to know everything, thinking that they could understand it all, as if enlightenment were just around the corner” when in reality “there was no control, and understanding would not lessen any pain.” This mirrors the daughter's revelations as she navigates her academic career, but, in that moment, she finds that she is unable to agree with her mother. This discordance between what is articulated and what is felt reflects their own conflicting understanding of each other as mother and daughter. Au sums up this dissonance astutely when the narrator herself reflects:

“I knew that if I had a daughter, she would live partly because of the way I had lived, and her memories would be my memories, and she would have no choice in that matter.”

In my own life, I think this is something that my mother learnt in her efforts to stop us from learning Shanghainese. It is her first language, the one she uses with her parents and my father, and the one with which she feels most comfortable. Despite this, she had made a concerted effort to speak to my sister and me in “proper” Mandarin but seemed to make an equally noticeable effort to preclude us from the dialect she spoke with my father. Whenever she was speaking to my father in Shanghainese and we would scuttle into the room, she would quickly switch to Mandarin. She would even scold us if she heard us trying to imitate their dialect. Naturally, I wondered if perhaps she had something to hide. I theorised that she wanted a secret language like the one my sister and I had – one to communicate the location of secret chocolate and broken vases hidden in the garage.

Nonetheless, my sister and I quickly began to understand the arguments my parents had and their soft exchanges. It turns out their secret language was much less about hidden chocolates and much more concerned with our education, money and the future. At some point, she realised that we understood the language but her displeasure was somewhat assuaged by the fact that we still couldn't speak it.

Anyway, I've grown up a little since then and not much has changed except that now my parents aren't able to transition between Shanghainese and Mandarin as easily as before. They've aged in the indeterminate way that parents always age – slowly, then all at once. Occasionally, in the flurry of daily life, they'll unknowingly speak to me in Shanghainese and I, dulling the ache in my heart, will respond dutifully in Mandarin.