

LOST IN TRANSLATION

by *Angelina Rotman*

Being an immigrant is rough. Trust me, I'd know—my family moved to the US from Russia when I was three years old. We think starting our lives in our twenties is hard, but we don't realize that we're not starting at all. We have a 20-something-year-old foundation of family, connections, and community on which to build. Immigrants are people who have abandoned that foundation and are starting their lives entirely from scratch—no community, no connections, and often, no family. But the hardest, most frustrating part of giving up your former life is this: no language.

Most people who have studied a foreign language or been abroad have experienced the frustration of having limited communication abilities. As an educated, intelligent person, you want the people around you to know and appreciate who you are. That becomes incredibly difficult to achieve if you can't say more than “hello,” “thank you,” and “where's the bathroom?” But imagine that being your life all the time. Imagine that the language narrating your world is not the one that's in your head. As an immigrant, you have to function with limited language capabilities no matter what. You have to file taxes, apply for a mortgage, and puzzle out your insurance policy in a language that's not your own.

Whether it's checking out in a store or giving someone directions on the street, we've all encountered immigrants in the US who have trouble communicating in English. For me, those people are my parents. No matter how many language lesson books, language classes, or vocabulary tapes my parents went through, English never quite stuck, even after 19 years of being in the United States. Many immigrants start speaking English at home to learn the language quickly. My family never did that. They wanted me to be bilingual—to know Russian as well as English—so my parents chose to speak only Russian at home. Thanks to that, I'm one of the lucky ones who can switch between two languages with perfect ease. As a result, my parents are Limited



English Proficiency (LEP) speakers. They know enough to get by, but for more complicated things they'd need me. The federal government defines LEP individuals as people "who do not speak English as their primary language and who have a limited ability to read, speak, write, or understand English." In 2011, LEP speakers accounted for 9% of the US population. That's a lot of people dealing with the stigma, prejudice, and discrimination that comes with not being able to speak English as well as people who have been immersed in the language since birth.

Yes, there are plenty of immigrants who speak English almost as well as their native language. However, chances are that even they have an accent, and this alone can incur all the negative stereotypes about immigrants. But I'm not talking about those immigrants. I'm talking about the immigrants, like my parents, who have spent years in the US and just have trouble acquiring the language. Few things get my blood boiling like hearing people say, "If you're in America, speak English." I agree with that statement as a general principle, but usually when people say it they actually mean, "If you can't speak English as well as I can, you shouldn't be in America." Maybe that's because I grew up on the border of a small Southern town where diversity was rare and immigrants even more so, and maybe that's affected my experience as an immigrant.

A couple of years ago, my mom decided she wanted to become a U.S. citizen. We've lived here for nearly 19 years, and have been permanent residents for almost 13 of those years. She filled out the forms, paid the \$600 application fee, and waited for her interview and test. She studied for months, and knew the test questions backwards and forwards. I don't think I've ever studied for anything as hard as she did for that test. The first time she went in, she failed. They gave her a second chance, and she failed that too. The test itself is made up of two sections: the civics test and the English test. For the civics test, you are asked three questions about US history and government; and for the English test, you are asked to read a sentence in English and write a sentence in English that is dictated to you. The whole thing is conducted, obviously, in English. After the second try,

I looked at my mom's evaluation. Civics: Passed. Reading: Passed. Writing: Passed. English: Failed. She had passed every part of the entirely English test, but the test administrator had failed her for being unable to speak/understand English. A few months later, we learned that her test administrator had been fired for failing every immigrant whose test she administered.

My family's time in the US has been fraught with episodes like my mom's citizenship test. As I was growing up, it didn't take me long to realize that many English speakers seemed to decide that a person who didn't speak English very well was either not terribly bright or just downright stupid. Sometimes, this turned out in the immigrant's favor, like when my mother overheard two coworkers insulting her when they thought she couldn't understand them. She quickly corrected that impression. Other times, it can cause persistent problems. The manager of the condominium complex where my family lived for years continually talked down to my parents and would frustrate any complaints by assuring us we had just misunderstood. These misunderstandings would sometimes end rather costly for us and quite profitably for him. It's even more frustrating when I realize that if they spoke the same language, my mother would have likely intimidated him into good behavior years ago.

Those who argue against anything being printed in Spanish and English on grounds that it will keep immigrants from learning English forget that even if a few signs and some paperwork are in both languages, English is still by far the dominant language in the US. If there were as many options for Russian speakers as there are for Spanish speakers, it would certainly make my life a whole lot easier. Even so, I have never met an immigrant who has not tried to learn English. If you want any degree of autonomy, you have to be able to communicate. No one wants to be dependent on an interpreter for the rest of his or her life. If someone's English is poor, know that it probably isn't for lack of trying. Learning a language in school with plenty of time to study is one thing. Learning a language while working a full time, often low-paying, job and trying to rebuild your entire life at the same time is quite another. ☺

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