

LIF3

TRANSLINGUAL MAGAZINE



THU
NGUYEN

VY
NGUYEN

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Stepping through the door of our home, I shouted, “Chào má, con về!” (Hi mom, I’m home!). Always keeping herself busy, Má (Mom) stops what she is doing to greet me, “Có kẹt xe không, Vy?” (Was there traffic, Vy?) followed by “Con có đói không?” (Are you hungry?). Excited for her homemade food, I respond in my “Vietlish,” “Dạ con very đói bụng and want to ăn!” (Yes, I’m very hungry and want to eat!) as we move toward the kitchen.

Growing up in a bilingual household meant shifting identities and languages. In public and at school, English was my primary language, a natural and effortless language. But at home at home and with family, it is mainly Vietnamese. Má enforced this usage by “pretending not to understand English” or simply ignoring me if I spoke English to her as a child.

To further explore how culture, communication, and identity are experienced by an immigrant and second-generation Vietnamese-American, I sat down with my mother, Thu Nguyen (Má), for an intimate conversation about the past 25-years and her journey since immigrating to Colorado in 2001; focusing on how linguistics shaped her and my life. What emerged was an emotional dialogue about feeling “othered,” the evolutionary nature of language, and how our hybrid communication style became a bridge of understanding each other and the world around us.

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Unit 3

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The Weight of the Accent:

Má came to the United States with dreams of perfecting her English and to return to Vietnam to become an English teacher. However, her life shifted when she gave birth to me; Má chose to stay, sacrificing her dreams to provide me with a “better life.”

Though she began to learn English in 9th grade while back in Vietnam, the British English curriculum did little to prepare for the American native speakers.

“When I came to America, I had to start over. I could write, but when I read or spoke, people didn't understand me. I had to learn American English ... like a three-year-old.” – Má



Má and cousin, Hao Tran, during her early 20s in her bedroom in Saigon, Vietnam

Learning to “Start Over”

While I learned English naturally through school and children’s cable television shows, Má struggled with her heavy Vietnamese accent and the unfamiliar American pronunciations.

She notes that American English has a more “up and down” smoother rhythm compared to Vietnamese of “in and out” tonal markings. This difference in phonetics and how she learned British English, brought humility to Má when adjusting to America.

“When I spoke, they didn't understand, but they understood when I wrote. So back then, most of the time I would just write it down on a piece of paper and hand it to them.” – Má



Younger me (Vy) during Christmas time



RESILIENCE & THE CHALLENGES OF BEING "OTHERED"



Infant Vy sitting on a pedicure chair at Má's work

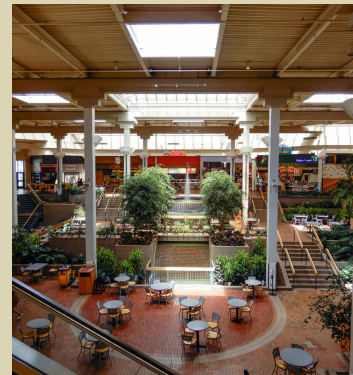
Both of us have experienced points of feeling isolated and "othered" by language differences and hierarchies through each of our own different experiences.

For Má, it was a form of "linguistic homelessness" where Americans viewed her accent as a means for exclusion. She recalls these agonizing moments with native speakers that lack the patience to listen and understand; since some people repeatedly would snap, *"What did you say?"*

Even though Má understand them perfectly, native speakers were ignorant in their effort to try and understand her. To address these communication gaps, Má describes relying on *"body language ... gesturing with my hands and feet just to express myself."*

Ironically, my own experience of being "othered" occurred when I was placed in English Language Learner (ELL) tutoring sessions during elementary school. Despite English being my primary language, the academic system isolated me and made me feel unintelligent.

Later in my teenage years, this language difference shifted, as friends and teachers noticed that I had a more formal, slight "British" accent and diction, inherited from my mother's early years of learning English. Yet, when I speak Vietnamese, my American accent alters my tones, which causes me to sound like a "foreigner" to native Vietnamese.



The Citadel Mall in Colorado Springs, where Má work place (a nail salon) was located in and where I spent a majority of my early-childhood

Ultimately, Má and I found our own "voice" within this paradox, embracing the reality that our accent is part of how we speak and reflects our history of learning English and/or Vietnamese.

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Vietlish: Our Shared Hybrid Communication



Má holding an infant Vy at Memorial Park, Colorado Springs

Despite the social barriers that we faced, our bilingualism evolved into our own shared, collaborative language of Vietlish. This linguistic bridge has not only strengthened our mother-daughter bond but also reflects our growth in how we communicate.

Through a mix of mid-sentence language shifts and code-switching, we created our own unique vocabulary.

This hybrid language is not a marker of "broken" fluency, but fosters our intimacy and deep understanding of each other.

As Má points out, sometimes Vietnamese allows us to talk about more sensitive topics or express emotions in a way that feels softer and more contextual than English allows us to. To her, English can sometimes sound too blunt and hurtful. She observes that in English, phrases like "I don't like you" can feel incredibly harsh and "sensitive," compared to Vietnamese which allows for a gentler approach.

Our bilingualism acts as a "secret language." If we are in public and need to communicate more privately without being impolite to those around us, we can switch between English and Vietnamese. Má highlights this advantage, noting how "Có những cái từ gì đó mà nó giống như nó hơi mất lịch sự đi, mình không thể nói bằng tiếng Anh trước mặt của người Mỹ thì sẽ dùng một từ tiếng Việt để mà nói để mà nói với nhau... Để mình thể qua một cái để mình ngắt cái câu chuyện đó tí xíu rồi mình quay lại." [There are certain words – things that might be considered a bit impolite to say in English in front of Americans, so we use a Vietnamese word to say them to each other ... just to pivot for a moment, break the flow of the conversation briefly, and then come back to it.]

This pivot gives us a way to guide and protect our conversation, proving that speaking two languages is a powerful form in daily communication.

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Language as a Time Capsule

Language and communication are always evolving, which our conversation highlighted this development through the lens of generational gap in how Vietnamese is spoken today.

Having lived in America for the past 25 years, Má's Vietnamese is frozen in an era that she left behind, the 80s-90s Southern dialect.



Má with cousins: Hao Tran, Cuong Thi, and Nam Thi; taking one last photo together before she leaves to immigrate to America at the Tan Son Nhat Airport in October 2001.



Má, me, and my grandma in 2023 at a beach in Vietnam during our last recent visit.

“My Vietnamese is a bit dated,” Ma reflects. When she reads or watches modern Vietnamese media, she encounters a hybrid Gen Z Vietnamese slang that feels foreign or confusing.

She laughs at terms like “pha ke” (a Vietnamese phonetic pronunciation of the English word *fake*), used to describe a “liar” or “counterfeit.”

On the contrary, when I speak with my cousins, they do not quite understand my meaning when I use old-slang terms that Má taught me, such as “quần sọt lớn” (shorts), a term that her generation and older generations would recognize but completely confuses my cousins.

Ultimately, this disconnect in our vocabulary reflects our unique reality, that the Vietnamese I speak is a living time capsule of the exact moment my mother immigrated, preserved through her devotion to teaching me.

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REFLECTION OF THE LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE



Ultimately, maintaining our mother tongue is an act of our cultural preservation.

As Má beautifully describes it, “*Mình sống ở đâu, mình ở đâu. Mình cũng không thể mất được cái gốc của mình. Mình là người Việt.*”

[*No matter where we live, no matter where we are. We cannot lose our roots, our origins. We are Vietnamese.*]

Growing up with two languages has provided me with a unique lens of navigating the world. It teaches me the cognitive ability to view and try to understand situations from multiple angles, and more importantly, taught me patience and compassion.

When I interact with those who are non-native English speakers, I slow down, I listen, and provide the space for them to speak and be heard.

Our shared and unique bilingual identity is not static, rather it is a continuous, evolving journey. By recognizing the transgenerational and translingual perspectives, and how these experiences shape our language and communication; I want to preserve my Vietnamese-English.

