La Gringuita:  
On Losing a Native Language

The inevitable, of course, has happened. I now speak my native language "with an accent." What I mean by this is that I speak perfect childhood Spanish, but if I stray into a heated discussion or complex explanation, I have to ask, "Por favor ¿puedo decírselo en inglés?" Can I please say it in English?

How and why did this happen?

When we emigrated to the United States in the early sixties, the climate was not favorable for retaining our Spanish. I remember one scene in a grocery store soon after we arrived. An elderly shopper, overhearing my mother speaking Spanish to her daughters, muttered that if we wanted to be in this country, we should learn the language. "I do know the language," my mother said in her boarding-school En-
glish, putting the woman in her place. She knew the value of speaking perfect English. She had studied for several years at Abbot Academy, flying up from the Island to New York City, and then taking the train up to Boston. It was during the war, and the train would sometimes fill with servicemen, every seat taken.

One time, a young sailor asked my mother if he could sit in the empty seat beside her and chew on her ear. My mother gave him an indignant look, stood up, and went in search of the conductor to report this fresh man. Decades later, hearing the story, my father, ever vigilant and jealous of his wife and daughters, was convinced—no matter what my mother said about idiomatic expressions—that the sailor had made an advance. He, himself, was never comfortable in English. In fact, if there were phone calls to be made to billing offices, medical supply stores, Workman’s Compensation, my father would put my mother on the phone. She would get better results than he would with his heavy, almost incomprehensible accent.

At school, there were several incidents of name-calling and stone-throwing, which our teachers claimed would stop if my sisters and I joined in with the other kids and quit congregating together at recess and jabbering way in Spanish. Those were the days before bilingual education or multicultural studies, when kids like us were thrown in the deep end of the public school pool and left to fend for ourselves. Not everyone came up for air.

Mami managed to get us scholarships to her old boarding school where Good Manners and Tolerance and English Skills were required. We were also all required to study a foreign language, but my teachers talked me into taking...
out of American trouble once we went our own way in English. No family connections, no ties whose name might open doors for us. If the world was suddenly less friendly, it was also more exciting. We found out we could do things we had never done before. We could go places in English we never could in Spanish, if we put our minds to it. And we put our combined four minds to it, believe you me.

My parents, anxious that we not lose our tie to our native land, and no doubt thinking of future husbands for their four daughters, began sending us "home" every summer to Maní's family in the capital. And just as we had once huddled in the school playground, speaking Spanish for the comfort of it, my sisters and I now hung out together in "the D.R.," as we referred to it, hating in English on the crazy world around us the silly rules for girls, the obnoxious behavior of macho guys, the deplorable situation of the poor. My aunts and uncles tried unsuccessfully to stem this tide of our Americanization, whose main expression was, of course, our use of the English language. "Tienen que hablar en español," they commanded. "Ay, come on," we would say as if we had been asked to go back to baby talk as grown-ups. By now, we couldn't go back as easily as that. Our Spanish was full of English. Countless times during a conversation, we were corrected, until what we had to say was lost in our saying it wrong. More and more we chose to answer in English even when the question was posed in Spanish. It was a measure of the growing distance between ourselves and our native culture—a distance we all felt we could easily retrocede with just a little practice. It wasn't until I failed at first love, in Spanish, that I realized how unbridgeable that gap had become.

La Gringuita

That summer, I went down to the Island by myself. My sisters had chosen to stay in the States at a summer camp where the oldest was a counselor. But I was talked into going "home" by my father, whose nephew—an older (by twenty years) cousin of mine—had been elected the president of El Centro de Recreo, the social club of his native town of Santiago. Every year at El Centro, young girls of fifteen were "presented" in public, a little like a debutante ball. I was two years past the deadline, but I had a baby face and could easily pass for five years younger than I was—something I did not like to hear. And my father very much wanted for one of his daughters to represent la familia among the crème de la crème of his hometown society.

I arrived with my DO-YOUR-OWN-THING!!! T-shirt and bell-bottom pants and several novels by Herman Hesse, ready to spread the seeds of the sixties revolution raging in the States. Unlike other visits with my bilingual cousins in the capital, this time I was staying in a sleepy, old-fashioned town in the interior with Papi's side of the family, none of whom spoke English.

Actually I wasn't even staying in town. Cousin Ucho, whom I called it because he was so much older than I was, and his wife, Betty—who, despite her name, didn't speak a word of English either—lived far out in the countryside on a large chicken farm where he was the foreman. They treated me like a ten-year-old, or so I thought, monitoring phone calls, not allowing male visitors, explaining their carefulness by reminding me that my parents had entrusted them with my person and they wanted to return me in the same condition in which I had arrived. Out there in the boonies, the old-world traditions had been preserved full strength. But I
can't help thinking that in part, Utcho and Betty treated me like a ten-year-old because I talked like a ten-year-old in my halting, childhood Spanish. I couldn't explain about women's liberation and the quality of mercy not being strained, in Spanish. I grew bored and lonely, and was ready to go back to New York and call it quits on being "presented," when I met Dilita.

Like me, Dilita was a hybrid. Her parents had moved to Puerto Rico when she was three, and she had lived for some time with a relative in New York. But her revolutionary zeal had taken the turn of glamour girl rather than my New-England-hippy variety. In fact, Dilita looked just like the other Dominican girls. She had a teased hairdo; I let my long hair hang loose in a style I can only describe as "blowing in the wind." Dilita wore makeup: I did a little lipstick and maybe eyeliner if she would put it on for me. She wore outfits. I had peasant blouses, T-shirts, and blue jeans.

But in one key way, Dilita was more of a rebel than I was. She did exactly what she wanted without guilt or apology. She was in charge of her own destiny, as she liked to say, and no one was going to talk her into giving that up. I was in awe of Dilita. She was the first "hyphenated" person I had ever met whom I considered successful, not tortured as a hybrid the way my sisters and I were.

Dilita managed to talk Utcho into letting me move into town with her and her young, married aunt, Carmen. Mamá, as we called her, was liberal and light-hearted and gave us free rein to do what we wanted. "Just as long as you girls don't get in trouble!" Trouble came in one denomination, we knew, and neither of us were fools. When the matrons in town complained about our miniskirts or about

our driving around with boys and no chaperons. Mamá throw up her hands and said, "¿Pero si son americanas?" They're American girls!

We hit it off with the boys. All the other girls came with their mamis or tías in tow; Dilita and I were free and clear. Inside of a week we both had boyfriends. Dilita, who was prettier than I, landed the handsome tipe, tall Eladio with raven-black hair and arched eyebrows and the arrogant stance of a flamenco dancer, whereas I ended up with his chubby sidekick, a honey-skinned young man with wonderful dimples and a pot belly that made him look like a Dominican version of the Pillsbury doughboy. His name was Manuel Gustavo, but I affectionately nicknamed him Mangüi, after a mashed platanos dish that is a staple of Dominican diet. A few days after meeting him, Mangüi's mother sent over an elaborate dessert with lots of white frosting that looked suggestively like a wedding cake. "HINTHINT," Dilita joked, an expression everyone was using at her school, too.

Every night the four of us went out together; Dilita sat up front with Eladio, who had his own car, and I in the backseat with Mangüi—a very cozy boy-girl arrangement. But actually, if anyone had been listening in on these dates, they would have thought two American girlfriends were out for a whirl around the town. Dilita and I yakked, back and forth, starting first in Spanish out of consideration for our boyfriends, but switching over into English as we got more involved in whatever we were talking about. Every once in a while, one of the guys would ask us, "¿Y qué lo que ustedes tanto hablan?" For some reason, this request to know what we were talking about would give us both an attack of giggles.
in Spanish about complicated subjects, and Mangú didn’t know a word of English. Our silences troubled me. Maybe my tias were right. Too much education in English could spoil a girl’s chances in Spanish.

But at least I had Dilita to talk to about how confusing it all was. “You and I,” she often told me as we lay under the mosquito net in the big double bed Mamacita had fixed for us, “we have the best of both worlds. We can have a good time here, and we can have a good time there.”

“Yes,” I’d say, not totally convinced.

Down on the street, every Saturday night, the little conjunto that Eladio and Mangú had hired would serenade us with romantic cancioneras. We were not supposed to show our faces, but Dilita and I always snuck out on the balcony in our baby dolls to talk to the guys. Looking down at Mangú from above, I could see the stiffness of the white dress shirt his mother had starched and ironed for him. I felt a pang of tenderness and regret. What was wrong with me, I wondered, that I wasn’t falling in love with him?

After the presentation ball, Dilita left for Puerto Rico to attend a cousin’s wedding. It was then, when I was left alone with Manuel Gustavo, that I realized that the problem was not me, but me and Manuel Gustavo.

Rather than move back to the lonely boonies, I stayed on in town with Dilita’s aunt for the two weeks remaining of my visit. But without Dilita, town life was as lonely as life on a chicken farm. Evenings, Mangú would come over, and we’d sit on the patio and try to make conversation or drive out to the country club a borrowed car to dance merengue and see what everyone else was doing. What we were doing was looking for people to fill up our silence with their talk.
Customs

One night, Mangú drove out towards Ulchó's chicken farm past the spot where often the four of us had stopped to look at the stars. We got out of the car and leaned against the side, enjoying the breeze. In the dark, periodically broken by the lights of passing cars, Mangú began to talk about our future.

I didn't know what to say to him. Or actually, in English, I could have said half a dozen ambivalent, soothing things. But not having a complicated vocabulary in Spanish, I didn't know the fancy, smooth-talking ways of delaying and deterring. Like a child, I could just blurt out what I was thinking. "Somos diferentes, Mangú." We are so different. The comment came out sounding insane.

"No, we're not," he argued back. "We're both Dominicans. Our families come from the same hometown."

"But we left," I said, looking up at the stars. From this tropical perspective, the stars seemed to form different constellations in the night sky. Even the Big Dipper, which was so easy to spot in New England, seemed to be misplaced here. Tonight, it lay on its side, right above us. I was going to point it out to Mangú—in part to distract him, but I could not remember the word for dipper—la cuchara grande, the big spoon?

But Mangú would not have been interested in the stars anyway. Once it was clear that we did not share the same feelings, there was nothing much left to say. We drove back to Mamaná's house in silence.

I don't know if that experience made Mangú forever wary with half-breed Dominicans-York girls, gringas, who seemed to be talking out of both sides of their mouths, and in two different languages, to boot. I myself never had a Spanish—only boyfriend again. Maybe the opportunity never presented itself, or maybe it was that as English became my dominant tongue, too many parts of me were left out in Spanish for me to be able to be intimate with a potential life partner in only that language.

Still, the yearning remained. How wonderful to love someone whose skin was the same honey-dipped, sallow-based color; who said como when he was mad and olido buda when he wanted to butter you up! "¡Ay! to make love in Spanish . . ." the Latina narrator of Sandra Cisneros's story, "Bien Pretty," exclaims. "To have a lover . . . whisper things in that language crooned to babies, that language murmured by grandmothers, those words that smelled like your house . . ." But I wonder if after the Latina protagonist makes love with her novio, she doesn't sit up in bed and tell him the story of her life in English with a few palabritas thrown in to capture the rhythm of her Latin heartbeat?

As for Manuel Gustavo, I met up with him a few years ago on a visit to the Island. My husband, a gringo from Nebraska, and I were driving down the two-lane autopista on our way up to the mountains on a land search. A pickup roared past us. Suddenly, it slowed and pulled onto the shoulder. As we drove by, the driver started honking. "What does he want me to do?" my husband shouted at me. I looked over and saw that the driver was still on the shoulder, trying to catch up with us. I gestured, what do you want?

"Soy yo," the man called out, "Manuel Gustavo.

Almost thirty years had passed. He had gotten heavier; his hairline had receded; there was gray in his hair. But the dimples were still there. Beside him sat a boy about seven or
eight, a young duplicate of the boy I had known. "Mangó!" I called out. "Is that really you?"

By this time my husband was angry about the insanity of this pickup trying to keep up with us on the narrow shoulder while Mack trucks roared by on the other lane. "Tell him we'll stop ahead, and you guys can talk."

But the truth was that I didn't want to stop and talk to Manuel Gustavo. What would I have said to him now, when I hadn't been able to talk to him thirty years ago? "It's good to see you again, Mangó," I shouted. I waved goodbye as my husband pulled ahead. In my side mirror, I watched as he signaled, then disappeared into the long line of traffic behind us.

"Who was that?" my husband wanted to know.

I went on to tell my husband the story of that summer: the presentation; Utcho and Betty; my worldly-wise friend Dilita, Eladio, who looked like a flamenco dancer; the serenades; the big double bed Dilita and I slept in with a mosquito net tied to the four posts. And of course, I told him the story of my romance with Manuel Gustavo.

And, as I spoke, that old yearning came back. What would my life have been like if I had stayed in my native country?

The truth was I couldn't even imagine myself as someone other than the person I had become in English, a woman who writes books in the language of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman, and also of the rude shopper in the grocery store and of the boys throwing stones in the schoolyard, their language, which is now my language. A woman who has joined her life with the life of a man who grew up on a farm in Nebraska, whose great-grandparents came over from Germany and discouraged their own children from speak-