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My Early Language History

I'm often asked if I was especially interested in foreign languages while going to school, or if I ever tried to create my own language as a child, or anything like that. Most of the time I say no, because this answer is nearest to the truth. I'll also say that I became interested in language quite suddenly, waking up one morning at 17 years old with the burning desire to learn first French, and then every language on the planet. This is also very nearly true. Neither is a full and complete answer, though. For future reference, here I'll do my best to provide a full and complete answer.

My mother and father divorced when I was less than a year old, and I had no contact with my father or his family after the age of one. Consequently, when I talk about my family, what I mean is my mother's family. Genetically, I'm half my mother and half my father, it's true. But from my father I got my last name and a mixture of Germanic and Swedish ancestry and nothing more. Everything else that is my family, by blood, comes from my mother's side, and my mother's side of the family comes from Mexico (ultimately from Spain). My mother and older brother's first language was Spanish. Seeing how much trouble they had in school, my grandparents decided to use English at home with my mother's younger brother, and this is really where things started to shift in terms of language use at home. My grandfather only spoke English save with family members from Mexico, and my mother generally only used English, except with my grandmother. My grandmother, who came from Mexico as a late teen, has continued to use Spanish as her primary language most of her life.

After the divorce, my grandmother would often take care of me, while my mother first finished college and then began teaching. My grandmother's second husband was American, and so she spoke English with him. To me, she would speak a mixture of English and Spanish, which she continues to do to this day.

Had this state of affairs continued uninterrupted, I think I may have eventually developed some true fluency in Spanish and retained it, but there was a further complication. Not long after the divorce, my mother met and married an older man who was my first stepfather. The relationship quickly became abusive, and, in the pattern of abusers, my stepfather slowly but systematically began cutting off access to my mother's friends and family, culminating in our move away from San Pedro, a small city on the LA harbor, to Fresno, a growing city in Central California about four hours away by car.

From around age 3 to 5, I spent less and less time with my grandmother and more time with my stepfather. He was Armenian, though born in America in

the late 20s. He had an odd facility with language. He spoke English and Armenian fluently, but could kind of understand and make himself understood in just about any language. Granted, everything he said was riddled with errors, but that didn't seem to bother him, and he could clunkily bump along from A to B and make himself understood. Part of this was innate, surely, but I'm sure he also got plenty of practice, having served in WWII, the Korean War, and then sailed around the Pacific on a sailboat. While in San Pedro, I would accompany him to his job at the Ports O' Call Village, where he had friends who were sailors or who worked various jobs at the village. At that time, there were people there who spoke a dozen or so languages, among them Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Swedish, that I can remember specifically. (One I remember fondly is Ingrid, who owned the bakery at the Ports O' Call Village and was from Sweden.)

When we moved to Fresno, our new friends and family were my stepfather's family, all of whom were Armenian. Both of his parents were still living at the farm house they'd purchased after fleeing the genocide in Armenia. These became my Armenian grandparents. My Armenian grandmother's first language was Armenian, of course, but her English was quite good, and she only spoke English with me, occasionally using Armenian words with me that I never properly understood (she called me ծծալկ, which sounded like *tsakas* to me, and told me I was born in the year of the խորոզ, *khoro*z "rooster"). My Armenian grandfather spoke little English, and most of the time only spoke in Armenian to those who understood him. Oddly enough, looking back, my stepfather generally responded to both of them in English, even if they spoke in Armenian to him.

While in Fresno, my mother and I attended an Armenian orthodox church with my Armenian grandmother. I attended the adult service for two reasons: (a) I had no interest whatsoever in religion, and attending an adult service meant I could sit there and not have to do anything, so long as I was quiet; and (b) at the end of every service, an accordion curtain in the back of the room was opened revealing an entire buffet of desserts, both American and Armenian, and this was the highlight of the week for me (it was a *bounty*). Part of the service was always delivered in Armenian, meaning I had weekly exposure to Armenian for a full year from ages 5 to 6.

One habit I had that seemed to reach its height while I was in Fresno was speaking total gibberish. I really enjoyed it. I would adopt a funny voice (funny to me at the time, at least) and speak for a little bit uttering completely nonsensical syllables. I would speak quite quickly with lots of open syllables and intonational shifts. I can still do this, but I think I stopped doing it as a fun game for myself by the time I was nine (after that, I started doing accents and impersonating famous

actors to amuse my friends, which is something I was pretty good at). I never pretended to be saying anything specific; there was no imaginary world, or anything. It simply felt good—physically good. I enjoyed the feel of it in my throat, and so for minutes at a time, I'd speak fast gibberish to myself until I was ready to move on to something else.

Despite it being either blazing hot or freezing cold, my time in Fresno was fine enough (the school was nice), but being away from friends and family was quite difficult—especially for my mother. Luckily we were able to move back to Southern California the following summer, and from then on I lived in Orange County. We were also slowly able to reintegrate with friends and family, until finally my mother was able to divorce my stepfather when I was in second grade. From then on, I saw family regularly. The difference now, though, was I was much, much worse with Spanish. It was no longer my language, but a language that family members spoke, much like Armenian was in Fresno. Trips to Mexico to visit family became especially difficult and left me feeling isolated.

It was due to my inability to follow, let alone respond, in Spanish that I found myself frustrated by languages other than English. I had no interest in them. My mother would try to teach me some Spanish vocabulary every so often, but I didn't want to learn it. That remained the case for some time.

Growing up in Garden Grove I had general low level exposure to some non-English languages either around town or on the playground. Mostly these were Spanish, Korean, and Vietnamese, but occasionally there might be others like Chinese, Japanese, or Thai. This exposure, though, was a word or two here or there; nothing very extensive.

From ages 9 to 12 I studied taekwondo at a school in Huntington Beach run by Ken DuBose. As a part of studying we learned a lot of Korean vocabulary. This included counting from one to at least a hundred and fifty (the maximum number of push-ups I ever did at once) as well as a lot of vocabulary for things around the studio ("instructor", "thank you", etc.). We never learned how to write any of these, of course, and I learned the pronunciation from a second language learner from Texas, so I'm still unsure how close the words I remember are to how they're actually pronounced, but I still remember them.

Around this time (during fourth and fifth grade) my mother met her current husband, my stepfather. He and his family are Japanese, but have been in America, at this point, for almost a hundred years. Both of his parents were interned at a camp in Rohwer, Arkansas during World War II. As a consequence, his entire family—as was the case with many Japanese American families similarly affected—all but abandoned Japanese. My grandmother only knew a

few words of Japanese, and my grandfather had only distant memories of speaking Japanese before entering camp when he was very young. None of their children or grandchildren were raised speaking Japanese. My uncle was born deaf and learned American Sign Language during school, though only one extended family member ever learned ASL.

The only truly language-specific thing that sparked my interest in my early years was a project my sixth grade class did on ancient Egypt. As part of a larger chicken mummification project, we created a pyramid. The class was divided into a number of different groups, each with a different task, and the group I chose created traps to protect the chicken's burial chamber. As decoration on the walls of our room-sized traps I came up with hieroglyphic inscriptions. Naturally, these were ultimately gibberish (there's a popularly shared hieroglyph "alphabet" that assigns one hieroglyph to each letter of the English alphabet, and that's likely what I was working with), but the look of the hieroglyphs themselves *fascinated* me. Figuring out how to write (or "write") something in hieroglyphs was easily my favorite part of this project, and it stuck with me.

Other than this, my next language-relevant experience in school was taking Spanish in high school. There was no formal second language instruction in my elementary or junior high schools—something which remains frustratingly true to this day. In high school we could choose between Spanish, French, and German foreign language classes. I chose Spanish because I (rightly) thought it would be the easiest, since I had a background in it. And it was. A lot of the elementary vocabulary of Spanish was familiar to me as was the low level grammar. I also didn't need to work to pronounce anything: it came naturally. It didn't really captivate me, but the goal was to spend as little time on language learning as possible, and this allowed me to do that.

Aside from a month-long trip to Spain in 1992, this was my language history up until a pivotal trip I took to Washington, D.C. in 1998 for the National Young Leaders Conference (NYLC). For the curious, I was aware of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (even tried to read them once, but couldn't get through either) because my friend Blaine was a big fan, but I wasn't aware of the language material in them, and they didn't interest me. I read *1984* in fourth grade, but didn't pay much attention to Newspeak. I watched *Land of the Lost* as a child and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* when I was older, but didn't realize there were created languages in them (same with *Dune* which I read in 1997). Meeting a girl whose first language was English but was also fluent in both French and Arabic at the NYLC was the catalyst. It was a few months after this that I woke up wanting to learn first French (surprise, surprise) and then every

language on the planet. I immediately started studying Latin from a book we had at home, French from a textbook a friend gave me, and whatever else I could get my hands on. Two teachers that were instrumental for me at this time were Alice Rumbaugh, my junior and senior year Spanish teacher (and also my mother's Spanish teacher at the same high school, Pacifica), and Robert Harrell, my freshman year Spanish teacher and senior year German teacher, himself a polyglot who gave me my first Arabic textbook. I went from having little to no interest language to being insatiable over night, and they often had to weather the brunt of my interest. Their patience and assistance was truly a kindness.

Everything language-related that happened in my life after this is fairly straightforward and written up elsewhere. It's only my early language history that's difficult to explain in a few words.