Love through Romance Languages

Patrick Quinn

Chapman University
I. Introduction

Culture and communication are inherently linked. Communication does not make up a culture, but it ultimately creates the lens in which we see each other through. Speaking the native language of a foreign country partially immerses the foreigner in that culture. Thus to what extent can love exist across different cultures? Ethnocentrism shows how people tend to think single-mindedly and believe their culture is the right one. New ideas and lifestyles frighten many people into sticking closely to what they are used to, resulting in them never living beyond their way of doing things or form of communication. In short, people like the familiar.

Love is an emotion that everyone feels regardless of his or her background, so presumably a person could fall in love with someone from another culture. Unfortunately, in order for love to flourish and grow, communication needs to take place, and language is directly linked to communication. Therefore, it would be difficult for two people with separate native tongues to fall in love, even if they spoke each other’s languages. With a globalized world, intercultural marriages are on the rise, but people still have misconceptions about other cultures and languages due to ethnocentric viewpoints that might end in a missed opportunity to meet and learn about someone from a different culture.

II. Story

In my Theory of Knowledge class during my final year of high school, my teacher, Jaime Cortez, told a story about how he met his wife. I thought I was in for an irrelevant opening lecture, but fortunately I paid attention because there was a significant point that changed the way I view language and culture. Right away, I learned that Jaime is a very multicultural man. He is an American citizen now, but lived in South America for most of his early life. With Spanish being his first language, he did not exempt himself from learning other languages.
Throughout his life, he managed to fluently speak English, French, and a small amount of German.

It is no surprise that he met his soul mate in another country. Jaime was traveling to France where he met Sofia. Naturally, they first communicated in French together. She was very impressed with his French accent, and they chatted for a little while, where Jaime found they had a great deal in common. He learned that Sofia was a native to France, but was also Latin American and knew the Spanish language very well.

They began speaking Spanish, and discussed each other’s past, while Jaime was quietly becoming attracted to her. She seemed like the perfect woman for him. They not only shared the same knowledge of languages, but also had lived and breathed these cultures in their own unique ways. She also knew more about what he thought he had nearly conquered: language. In addition to speaking French and Spanish, Sofia could also fluently speak German, English, and Italian. Even with Jaime’s vast multicultural background, he still fell short of understanding the whole world.

Sofia transitioned the conversation into English and Jaime started to love her even more. The more she spoke, the more remarkable she appeared. However, when she changed the conversation to German, something happened. Jaime didn’t feel anything for her. She seemed different and less appealing all on account of what seemed to be the language. The German language, through Jaime’s eyes, did not shed a good light on Sofia. She was still the same woman, but through a different form of communication, Jaime was no longer attracted to her. Jaime always thought of German as an “ugly and rough language.” (Cortez, 2008) While her personality had not changed, the way it was communicated to him did.
While he was feeling this change of tone, he quickly tried to switch the conversation back to a language that was more comfortable to him. Jaime recovered and asked her out on a date before anything else could go wrong. Today, he is married to this woman who shares his multicultural background. To this day, Jaime still dislikes it when his wife speaks in German. She is not the same woman to him as when she uses her nation’s language, French, or speaks in his native language, Spanish. Jaime confessed to her that if they had met in Germany, they would likely not have the loving relationship and family they now have in the United States.

III. Theoretical Framework

The definition of culture is “a process of reality construction that allows people to see and understand particular events, actions, objects, utterances, or situations in distinctive ways. These patterns of understanding also provide a basis for making one’s own behavior sensible and meaningful. It is an active living phenomenon through which people create and recreate the worlds in which they live.” (Jia, 2011) Jaime’s culture is not limited to only Spanish. His cultural background, along with everyone else’s, extends to the various customs he has come in contact with.

The unfortunate side to culture is that it can lead to a close-minded view called ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism can be defined as “the strong sense of group identity, or attachment; the tendency to consider one’s own culture as being superior to other cultures” (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2010, p.12). This viewpoint is the reason we have the need for intercultural communication. By thinking one’s culture is “right” or that Spanish is a better language than German, one will be unable to learn anything from the world.

On the other hand, the social constructionist theory says our culture is “an infusion of your own personal experiences” (Jia, 2011). Under this theory, one must give up ethnocentrism
in order to embrace and learn from other cultures. Jaime has lived by this theory to create who he is today by knowing Spanish, English, and French. Now, if he improved his understanding of Germany’s language and culture, maybe then he could stand to hear his wife speak it.

IV. Analysis

Being a man of many cultures, it seems unusual for Jaime to dislike a certain language. But to him, German appears negative and emotionless. Perhaps, it is because he is not as familiar with the German culture and language as he is with others. He had an affinity for her when she spoke in French, but this may be because it is Sofia’s first language, so she knows and communicates it well. When they spoke in Spanish, Jaime felt very attracted to her most likely because Spanish is his first language. Her ability to speak in his native tongue created a deep connection between the two of them. Then while speaking English, he was able to appreciate his wife’s talents through their mutual knowledge. Finally, when it came to German, even though he still spoke some of the language, this was Jaime’s least understood culture. Jaime distaste for this language is a minor form of ethnocentrism. He can appreciate a lot about Germany and its culture; however, amongst his cultural background, it is his least experienced. Through the social constructionist theory, we can see why he has aversion for the language. He has already experienced so much in South America, France, and America, causing him to be closer to these cultures, which is what brought him closer to Sofia.

It is extremely rare for intercultural couples to start out unaware of one another’s culture. According to Karis and Killian (2010), “many people who enter into an intercultural relationship have had long-term contact with the partner’s culture” (Karis & Killian, 2010, p. 7). Jaime, however, did not have long-term contact with the German culture, which helps explain his point that if he and his wife met in the German language, they would not have been married. He was
able to connect with Sofia because he was much more aware of Spanish, French, and English. These are the languages he is most comfortable with, so he prefers to communicate with them. The difference here is what can be described as origin and function. If a person has grown up with two languages from the beginning, they are said to have original bilingualism (Söhrman, 2004, p. 6). If a person is capable of using a language in most situations in society, they are said to have functional bilingualism (Söhrman, 2004, p. 6). In this case, Jaime is of origin with Spanish and English but only has function in German. If he had original bilingualism with German, he would have a greater appreciation of the language, and different attitude towards his wife’s use of it.

V. Discussion

Jaime admitted that if he had met his wife in that language, he would not have been with her today. Thus while Jaime ultimately married Sofia and started a family, the unfortunate story is how many other people are “meeting in German” (Cortez, 2008). It is a shame to think about the millions of lonely people out there that could be missing their soul mate due to ethnocentrism. The idea of intercultural relationships seems frightening and difficult to many people. But it is these ethnocentric thoughts that are causing people to avoid contact with someone outside their culture, and missing the opportunity to learn from someone who sees and understands the world differently from their views.

At the end of the film Crash, many of the characters burn their cars in a symbolic gesture to represent them giving up their racial identities. It is not until after this act they finally begin to say, “I love you” to one another (Jia, 2011). Director Paul Haggis shows that it is not until we free ourselves from ethnocentrism can we finally love one another. Jaime was smart enough to have learned much about Spanish, French, and English. He was blessed enough to have met his
wife in these languages, but if he hadn’t, his ethnocentric views against the German language
would have cut short the communication with the woman he was destined to spend with for the
rest of his life. It is tragic to think he might have never fallen in love with the woman he loves
due to ethnocentrism. Every culture should make an effort to learn from Jaime’s story because
two very different persons can still be right for one another—an Israeli could be perfect for a
Palestinian, a Christian with a Muslim, or a Latin American with a German.

VI. Conclusion

Romantics believe we only have one true love in the world. It is impossible that everyone
can find his or her perfect match in the limited pool of his or her own culture. With over seven
billion people in the world, as an American, it is very unlikely that everyone’s soul mate can be
found within the U.S. population of 315,000,000 (Census, 2012). By learning a new language,
one virtually at least doubles the number of fish he or she can communicate with in the sea. With
more people to communicate with there are more people to learn from. With more people to
learn from, there is a greater understanding of other cultures and therefore more people to love
and a better soul mate to find.
References


