

UNITED WISDOM

Who am I becoming in another language? A voice still learning to express me

Relationships and Intimacy

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R-22-N02 · EN

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Epigraph

> *I remember it.*

Mary Antin, *From Plotzk to Boston*, Prefatory: the opening of the final sentence in the paragraph about her family's first separation. A short fragment in the original English. Text.

What this article is about

After moving abroad, people sometimes find their own voice surprising. In their first language they can tease, express doubt, or tell an absurd story. In the new one they initially state facts and say thank you. Dina, a fictional forty-year-old editor, leaves a meeting thinking that her colleagues know a careful, quiet person she never knew herself to be. She cannot tell whether she has changed or simply cannot yet show what is already there. Dina and the other scenes in this article are invented.

Our question is how to distinguish changes in ourselves from the means of expression available to us and the conditions of a conversation. We compare Mary Antin's early emigrant account, a specific study of bilingual self-description, and Augustine's recollection of learning languages. They address different questions. None proves that a second language creates a second personality. The conversational experiment we suggest is an editorial way of noticing one difficulty. Its effectiveness has not been studied, and it promises neither fluency nor the return of a former sound. Readers may decline it, prefer translation, or leave the question open.

I. My short sentence cannot hold everything I meant to say

At a meeting Dina says that a proposal is interesting. In her first language she would add that the idea appeals to her but the deadlines raise doubts: before agreeing, she needs to examine the workload. In the new language the first part comes readily, while the next two take time. The conversation moves on. Later she is angry with herself for being unusually compliant. Yet in this scene she did not agree; she produced an incomplete sentence. Her intention and what others could hear diverged.

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This distinction matters specifically for language. She could decide in advance that she has become more accommodating and start fighting her new character. Alternatively, she could establish which content disappeared on its way into speech. Was she missing a word, a construction, a pause, or an opportunity to return to the topic? These difficulties call for different responses. Finding a suitable phrase does not amount to revising one's values. Nor can a genuine change in values be explained by a single construction. A more precise question is needed than general disappointment in oneself.

Expressing a thought completely should not become a requirement for every remark. People sometimes withhold details in their first language too. What matters is the possibility of distinguishing chosen brevity from an involuntary loss of meaning. Dina can examine one instance by clarifying that interest in the idea does not mean agreement with the deadline. She need not deliver an elegant speech or tell her colleagues her entire history of linguistic uncertainty. She can simply restore the missing condition and find out whether they understand it.

The listener, meanwhile, cannot access what was left unsaid. They may have heard a positive answer in perfectly good faith. Our distinction does not assign blame or demand that anyone guess a hidden intention. It provides a starting point for repairing a particular conversation. Once Dina clarifies her meaning, there is still a proposal to decide about; precise words do not eliminate that work. But she is now discussing her own position rather than one that accidentally arose from an overly short answer. An imperfect new language can still become a means of participation.

II. First notice what has actually changed

Saying that I am completely different in another language often combines several observations. I speak more quietly. I interrupt less. I cannot find a joke. I agree to things I would once have refused. I consider myself less interesting. These concern different matters: sound, actions, decisions, and self-evaluation. If they are mixed together, any awkward appearance can seem to prove a major inner change. Separating them offers a chance to examine the immediate obstacle without producing a final portrait of one's personality.

Morgan Gianola, Maria M. Llabre, and Elizabeth A. Reynolds Losin studied self-descriptions from 133 Spanish–English bilingual adults. Participants completed the Big Five Inventory under separate language conditions; all had acquired their second language by ten. Some ratings differed between English and Spanish. The authors stress that they studied self-report, which cannot directly establish corresponding changes in behavior. Associations with cultural identification also do not establish causal direction. This is a particular sample and design, rather than a description of every adult emigrant. Study.

For our question, this provides a limited but useful pause before drawing a conclusion. Seeing ourselves differently in different language circumstances is possible; explaining the difference requires further work. We cannot take a difference in average ratings and decide that Dina has acquired a new character. Nor can we declare her impression an illusion in advance. An account of her experience needs a suitable scale: in the last two work conversations, for example, she did not manage to ask a clarifying question. That observation is smaller, but more intelligible, than a verdict about losing herself.

Checking it does not require a personality test or a comparison of entire cultures. It requires maintaining the distinction between an event and an interpretation. The event might be an unfinished remark; the interpretation might be that I can no longer defend my opinion. The first can be checked against the conversation. The second covers far more cases. The wider the conclusion, the more care it deserves. This article offers no diagnosis based on speech. It suggests not rushing one's biography before a small, particular event has become clearer.

III. The listener, topic, and available time also enter the voice

If Dina laughs with a friend in the new language but remains quiet at a meeting, language cannot explain everything. Her friend knows her, is in no hurry, and is willing to ask again. Her colleagues discuss an unfamiliar project, interrupt each other, and use abbreviations. Several conditions change at once. We cannot mentally retain one while dismissing the rest. Understanding the difficulty calls for describing the circumstances, including the listener's authority, room for mistakes, available response time, and familiarity with the subject. This is a description of a situation, not a scientific experiment.

Anton, another fictional person, speaks confidently about his profession but gets lost in casual introductions. He has a rich technical vocabulary, while light questions seem unexpectedly difficult. To others he looks alternately confident and reserved. For him the difference concerns knowing the task: at work he must identify a problem; in the evening he must choose what to reveal about himself. Someone else might experience the reverse. Assigning language one mandatory effect would erase this variety in advance and obscure Anton's actual difficulty.

He can ask what would change if the same topic were discussed more slowly. If expressing doubt became easier, pace matters. If he has the words but is afraid to disagree with this particular manager, the relationship deserves attention. If the listener understands everything but his own sound still feels unfamiliar, that is another question. Such imagined comparisons do not prove a cause. They help identify one condition to request next time, instead of demanding immediate improvements in his entire voice, confidence, and standing among people.

The available adjustments have limits. A participant cannot always slow a meeting, choose a language, or bring an interpreter. Difficulty should therefore not become a personal obligation to be more inventive. Sometimes describing it precisely supports a request for a suitable format; sometimes it supports declining participation; sometimes it merely prevents an unfair conclusion about oneself. A voice exists within relationships. A supportive listener can make much easier, but cannot prescribe a desirable character. Assistance remains assistance while preserving the speaker's meaning and decision.

IV. Translating a thought does not mean translating the whole self

In his foreword to *From Plotzk to Boston*, Israel Zangwill reports that Mary Antin first described her journey in Yiddish at eleven, then translated it into English at thirteen. This is the foreword writer's testimony; we have not compared the two manuscripts here. In her own prefatory section, Antin distinguishes what she knew as a departing child from her later understanding. Our interest is the possibility of recounting an experience in another language and from another moment in time. One life establishes no general law of bilingualism. Book.

When Dina tries to translate a favorite story, its introduction, explanations of familiar names, and available wordplay change. She is working on a story for a particular listener. She need not reproduce every shade of meaning to remain its author. Nor must she celebrate every loss. She can acknowledge that this joke does not travel at present: she can explain it, replace it, or save it for people who know her first language. None of these choices by itself measures loyalty to her past or establishes which voice is more authentic.

Translation can be evaluated by its purpose. Discussing a contract requires precise conditions. Telling a friendly story may require conveying its mood or point. A personal conversation may require the speaker to recognize what another person has understood about them. These demands can diverge. An elegant expression is not necessarily accurate, and an accurate one does not always convey warmth. No universal translation can settle the question of one's voice. Sometimes a clarification is needed; sometimes two ways of saying something; sometimes permission to admit that suitable words are not yet available.

We can recognize our voice in decisions about speech: what we retain, what we explain, and where we disagree with someone else's account. It is not confined to a familiar timbre or quick vocabulary. Recognition is nevertheless not guaranteed. Someone may remain dissatisfied for a long time and have no wish to turn that dissatisfaction into a lesson in growth. That position is also permissible. We do not suggest treating every lost nuance as a gain. Our distinction allows both new possibilities and the real cost of having a narrower means of expression.

V. A mistake in wording differs from agreement in substance

The question of voice becomes particularly pressing when words lead to commitments. Someone uses a familiar positive formula to show that they are listening, and it is understood as a promise. Or they select a gentle refusal that appears to invite further persuasion. We establish no universal meanings for such formulas across countries. Their meaning depends on the situation and participants. We can, however, distinguish polite engagement from agreement to act, and suggest checking the content that will have consequences for the person speaking.

In our scene Dina is willing to consider a proposal but unwilling to work weekends. Those are two different answers. Repairing the misunderstanding requires stating the limit of her availability, rather than proving that she can be tough. She might prepare a simple clarification and send it after the meeting. Choosing writing is no surrender: the task is to communicate a decision. Speaking remains an option, but it is not the sole examination of adulthood. A medium should not substitute for its author's meaning and will.

When the consequences are substantial, an everyday exercise is insufficient. Accurate commitments may require qualified translation, an appropriate procedure, or professional explanation. This article sets no legal rules for consent and does not recommend signing anything on the strength of a general impression. Its point is narrower: lacking linguistic fluency does not mean lacking a position. Asking for time, a written version, or an explanation does not prove lesser competence in every field. It communicates the conditions currently needed to understand an offer and decide for oneself.

Correcting a word, on the other hand, does not automatically cancel responsibility for actions already taken. Participants must determine what occurred and what can be reconsidered. Our distinction supports an honest beginning: my expression was inaccurate, my willingness was narrower, and we now need to clarify the consequences. Language meets trust here. Promising without confidence in one's understanding is difficult for speaker and listener alike. Preserving a voice means being able to clarify meaning; it does not mean treating every unwanted commitment as a simple translation error.

VI. New expressiveness may emerge, but it need not be demanded

A second language sometimes offers an unexpected possibility. An expression someone previously avoided comes more readily; a topic surrounded by familiar family hints can be discussed differently. In a fictional conversation Anton calmly says, for the first time, that he does not want to continue an argument. Perhaps a new phrase helps; perhaps he has a different listener; perhaps his decision itself changed. We leave those explanations open. They allow a new possibility to be noticed without concluding that one language liberates while another necessarily confines.

A new means of expression may gradually feel like one's own through use in suitable circumstances. Complete naturalness need not precede saying something necessary. Equally, there is no obligation to use a phrase simply because it is considered locally normal. The speaker needs to hear its meaning and agree with it. An unfamiliar form of one's own decision differs from someone else's decision that is easy to pronounce. Ease and ownership do not automatically coincide. Voice returns to what I intend to communicate, beyond how the remark sounds.

A new expression has a history of encounters with particular people. Dina might retain wording she heard from an attentive colleague because it helps her express doubt without a long introduction. This is a small acquisition requiring no abandonment of favorite words in her first language. She need not use it at home or build a new self-image around it. It is enough that an additional action is now available in one conversation. A change can be assessed by its actual function without making every successful sentence proof of personal transformation.

Acquisition also does not compensate for every loss. Someone's work opportunities may expand while their circle of easy friendships shrinks. They may welcome one and grieve the other without choosing an overall verdict on the language. This article requires no gratitude for a forced move and promises no eventual repayment for difficulties. Respect has a simple condition here: new expressiveness can be noticed, offered, tried, or declined. It becomes a resource when someone gains more suitable means of participating on their own terms, rather than a new duty to be different.

VII. Whose listening helps a voice become audible?

In *Confessions*, I.14.23, Augustine recalls disliked Greek lessons alongside acquiring Latin among people speaking to him. He distinguishes threats from a living desire to express his thoughts, then places that distinction within his theological understanding of discipline. We take a question about the conditions of speech from this passage. We endorse neither punishment nor a modern teaching method derived from it. This is one author's retrospective testimony, not a test of the effectiveness of supportive surroundings for adult emigrants. Selected passage.

A listener can help through a particular action: waiting for a sentence to end, checking whether it conveys agreement or interest in discussion, or avoiding replacing a search for a word with a ready-made judgment about the person. It matters to ask whether assistance is wanted. Constant pronunciation corrections can turn a friendly conversation into an unrequested lesson. A speaker's authority over meaning includes choosing support. Sometimes they want correction; sometimes patience suffices; sometimes they need to switch languages or write an answer.

Completing another person's sentence is not always an intrusion. Among close friends it may be a convenient, agreed way to talk. Agreement matters because a listener can be mistaken and say something the speaker never intended. A simple exit is useful: the possibility of correcting the account without lengthy justification. Assistance should create no debt of gratitude that prevents disagreement with the helper. A person remains the author of their position even when expressing it involves someone else and takes several attempts.

The speaker need not make every listener comfortable by letting their own conditions disappear. If conversation becomes ridicule or pressure, an everyday language experiment loses its purpose. They can stop it, choose writing, or seek suitable assistance. This article establishes no safety rules for every situation. It maintains a boundary: permission to learn gives others no permission to humiliate, and someone else's impatience is no reliable measure of a person's inner poverty. A thought does not become smaller because a listener refuses to wait for it.

VIII. Preserve the first language without a loyalty test

Someone may use a new language almost all day and want to hear the old one in the evening. This does not necessarily reject their new surroundings. Conversely, temporarily choosing the second language for personal conversations does not necessarily betray the past. Our question concerns the function of a choice: where can I express the content I currently want to communicate, with whom, and at what cost? We offer no correct general proportion of languages. Even within one family, needs and possibilities may differ substantially.

Dina listens to familiar stories in her first language because she recognizes their rhythm of humor. Her child more often answers in the second. If every answer becomes a test of love for the family, the conversation no longer serves its original purpose. A wish to maintain a language can be discussed separately from how people talk today. Family memory deserves attention, but attention does not equal compulsion. Decisions about a child's education need appropriate information. Our article about an adult voice replaces neither an educational decision nor a family language policy.

Preserving a language may involve a small action: an accessible book, a conversation with a friend, a note to oneself. It need not entail publicly declaring an affiliation or undertaking a major cultural preservation project. Not every option is available now. Losing a circle of friends, lacking time, or having conflict with relatives cannot be resolved by an attractive appeal to remember one's roots. Someone may seek another form or defer the task. Removing the loyalty test makes actual obstacles visible rather than interpreting them as insufficient love.

If someone wants to bring an expression from the first language into a new conversation, they can explain its meaning without demanding a perfect equivalent. A listener may be interested or unwilling; reciprocity is not guaranteed. The attempt remains an invitation, rather than an examination of someone else's culture. Several ways of saying something can coexist. No one must appoint one of them as the only voice of their life. Some nuances will nonetheless remain available to only a few listeners. That limit can be recognized without devaluing either the old language or present participation in the new one.

IX. An accent does not tell a person's whole story

An accent becomes audible before a person's biography, experience, and knowledge. That makes it a convenient but narrow cue. In a fictional scene Anton uses an incorrect ending while discussing a complex work decision. His listener begins explaining elementary matters and stops asking about the subject itself. We do not assert that this happens to all foreigners. The scene shows a possible divergence: difficulty expressing something is mistaken for a lack of understanding. Linguistic assistance can be offered while the content of a professional answer is still heard separately.

Anton risks accepting that treatment as an accurate account of his abilities. Yet advising him simply to ignore it is too easy: other people's evaluations may have consequences. His response depends on the situation. Sometimes a concrete piece of work suffices; sometimes he needs clear feedback; sometimes the issue extends beyond an individual conversation. This article gives no instructions for complaints or defending employment rights. It suggests identifying what is being evaluated: intelligibility, command of a term, the quality of a decision, or someone else's expectation of a person who sounds like this.

An accent also need not become a symbol of pride. A reader may want to change pronunciation for convenience, a professional purpose, or personal pleasure. Another may not. Both decisions are compatible with self-respect when choice remains available and is not sustained by humiliation. We promise no particular outcome from lessons and do not set learning against dignity. A means of expression can be improved without accepting that the speaker previously had less value. A useful criterion concerns function: which conversations will become more accessible, and for whom?

Some encounters allow content to be heard regardless of pronunciation; in others, perfect speech would not remove inequality. It matters not to appoint voice as the sole cause of every difficulty after moving. Work, documents, relationships, and access to opportunities need their own decisions. Language participates in many but replaces none of the other conditions. Recognizing this boundary allows lessons to be chosen for their real purpose. Every misplaced stress then ceases to carry the impossible duty of explaining a person's entire current situation.

X. Recognize yourself through the possibility of clarifying

Dina began by asking whether she had become different. After one clarified conversation she need not settle the question. She can say something smaller: I expressed a doubt that had not been heard, my colleagues understood the condition, and we still need to discuss the proposal. This illustrates a narrow result. It proves neither that her former character survives intact nor that emigration has completed some inner task. It shows a particular possibility of participation that can be assessed without a final judgment about her entire personality.

In this article, having one's own voice involves authority to clarify an intention. I can speak more slowly, construct a sentence differently, use assistance, and still communicate my decision. Sometimes the decision changes too; voice then appears in an honest account of that change. We need not declare constancy the highest value. We need to preserve a person's ability to distinguish what they chose from what happened accidentally or was attributed by others. This is an editorial position, rather than a definition of personality accepted by all traditions.

There is a strong objection: constant clarification is exhausting, and people want simply to converse. Our suggested experiment must therefore remain small and optional. Every conversation need not be analyzed, and every sentence need not be revisited. If language exercises increase strain or invade necessary rest, they can stop. Sometimes a familiar listener, translation, silence, or time without self-analysis is preferable. Declining is no failure of a method. Without that possibility, our practical idea would itself become another demand placed on someone already carrying too much.

The limits of our answer remain open. These sources cannot promise that a voice will feel familiar within a particular period or decide which language expresses someone more deeply. Being heard depends on means, circumstances, and another person's willingness to listen. One possibility can be cautiously expanded. Dina need not become witty immediately in her new circle. If her interest, disagreement, humor, or silence gradually acquires a suitable form, that is enough for the next conversation. Her future sound remains her affair, rather than an obligatory outcome of moving abroad.

What this means in practice

If you wish, choose a recent conversation with small consequences and write two short lines: what I wanted to communicate, and what the listener probably heard. The second remains a hypothesis unless it can be clarified. Note what was missing: an expression, time, understanding of the topic, or room to disagree with this person. Do not turn the exercise into a character test. One instance helps choose a small next action; it cannot evaluate an entire life in a new language.

You can prepare one sentence restoring the missing content and check its meaning with a suitable person, provided they agree. Then choose an available format: speak, write, use translation, or leave the conversation alone. Important commitments require appropriate professional precision; our everyday experiment cannot supply it. Stop the exercise in circumstances of ridicule, pressure, or threat. You need not prove your ability to speak where participation removes safety or your authority to decide.

After trying, assess only the identified outcome: did you clarify a condition, ask a question, or express a refusal? If not, change the medium or postpone it. If so, this guarantees neither fluency, changed relationships, nor general well-being. The suggestion is editorial and has not been tested as a programme. Your right to a first language, a pause, assistance, and refusal remains. Sometimes the nearest useful step is to stop demanding that an unfamiliar voice immediately express everything you have already become.

Key quotation

> *But we did not know it then.*

Mary Antin, *From Plotzk to Boston*, Prefatory, the final sentence of the paragraph about moving toward family reunion. The author distinguishes later understanding from knowledge at departure. Original English. Text.

Connections between traditions

Read source	Connection with the question of voice	Boundary of comparison
Antin and Zangwill's foreword	Experience can be narrated in another language	The translation history is reported in a foreword; the two manuscripts were not compared here
Gianola and colleagues	Language conditions relate to differences in self-description	Questionnaire ratings are not behavior; early bilingual adults do not represent all emigrants
Augustine, I.14.23	Acquiring speech is situated among relationships with speakers	A theological recollection is not a modern learning experiment

Sources

1. Mary Antin. From Plotzk to Boston, W. B. Clarke, 1899; Gutenberg20638. Metadata, Israel Zangwill's foreword, and Antin's prefatory section. Both short quotations come from the prefatory section. Territorial availability of a copy does not establish universal reuse permission.

2. Morgan Gianola, Maria M. Llabre, Elizabeth A. Reynolds Losin. Language Dominance and Cultural Identity Predict Variation in Self-Reported Personality in English and Spanish among Hispanic/Latino Bilingual Adults. Author manuscript; final publication DOI10.1080/00223891.2024.2416412, 2025 issue. Actual reading covered abstract, sample, instruments, procedure, selected results, discussion, and limitations. Bibliographic references are not treated as separately read sources; reuse rights for this version have not been established.

3. Augustine. Confessions, BookI, chapter14, paragraph23; New Advent. J. G. Pilkington's translation in the edition specified on the page. The selected learning context, including its theological qualification, was read. Reading of the whole book is not claimed; precise territorial rights for this version have not been established.

Tags

emigration, second language, first language, personal voice, bilingualism, expressing intention, translation, accent, conversational pace, language conditions, self-description, behavior, limits of inference, speech assistance, written reply, consent, clarification, refusal, time to answer, humor, family speech, language choice, dignity, listener, Mary Antin, Israel Zangwill, Augustine, travel narrative, cultural identification, fictional example, reversible experiment, United Wisdom

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