BRIDGING THE GAP:
Romantic couples’ use of code to create meaningful connections in the face of divergent linguistic backgrounds

Senior Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University

Undergraduate Program in Anthropology
Professor Janet McIntosh, Advisor

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

By Eliana Cohen
May 2018

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BRIDGING THE GAP:
Romantic couples’ use of code to create meaningful connections in the face of divergent linguistic backgrounds

By Eliana Cohen
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I would like to thank so many people who helped me throughout the long journey of my thesis. The completion of my work would not have been possible without the constant love and encouragement I received from so many people.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deep gratitude for the guidance and support that my primary advisor, Professor McIntosh gave me throughout the entirety of this process. I have had the privilege of taking two anthropology classes with you prior to embarking on my thesis, and it was my time spent in your classes that undoubtedly gave me the impetus and inspiration to delve deeper into the study of anthropology by way of a thesis. While juggling hundreds of responsibilities, you never failed to make time for me. I am forever grateful for your patience, advice, humor, and ability to push me in kind but effective ways.

I would also like to thank my second and third readers, Professor Menoret, and Professor Dost. Thank you Professor Menoret for agreeing to be my second reader, meeting with me to discuss ideas, supporting my project, and providing me with important insights that helped guide me. Thank you Professor Dost for your constant support and understanding throughout this semester, and for adventuring with me through the first thesis process for both of us; your class has been a place of much learning and growth for me this semester.

Another huge thank you to my friends and family. To my mom, thank you for the constant phone calls, inspirational quotes, talk-throughs, and general maintenance of my well being- you are my wisest teacher. To my dad, I am so happy to follow in your anthropological shoes; thank you for your never ending support, thoughtful check-ins, and provoking questions. To Jordi, thank you for your love and encouragement, for being my person and sounding board, and for showing me what drive truly looks like. To my other moms and to the Burrow- I do not know what I would do without you. Thank you for putting up with my daily tears of joy and sadness, for being my best friends, and for inspiring me constantly with the ways you challenge and take on the world. I would not be here if all of you were not here to help me believe in myself.

Finally, thank you to all of the couples who shared their stories with me. Your generosity both with your time and your openness is something I will hold with me forever. Your warmth is at the core of my work and I have grown immensely, both as a learner and a person, because of what you shared with me.
IMPORTANT NOTES

BARRIERS- The words “barrier(s)” or “gap(s)” are sometimes used in my work to describe a difficulty associated with a linguistic or cultural difference. I, in some ways, hesitate to use these words to describe these sorts of issues because I do not want to perpetuate the association that so many people have between people who might not speak a certain language or come from a certain cultural background, with these sorts of “inevitable challenges.” These words feel like they have problematic undertones in some contexts; that being said, I will use them sometimes, to diversify the language with which I speak about problems encountered by inter-linguistic couples.

STANDARD- I do not subscribe to the idea that there exists a singular “standard” way of speaking any particular language; however, sometimes this word will be used to describe the dominant language variety at play in a given context, or will be used as a foil to what might be marked speech in particular context, or to contrast against the “couple-code,” which you will hear more about in the rest of my work.

FIRST/DOMINANT- I will use the descriptors “first language” and “dominant language” interchangeably in my work. This is not because first languages are unequivocally every speaker in the world’s dominant language; however, for every speaker I interviewed for this project, every person’s first language was also the language they considered their most dominant language.

FLUENCY- I never settled on an exact definition of fluency that I used throughout my thesis. When I use the word fluent, I am thus typically reflecting the given speaker’s self-identified level of comfort with speaking, or otherwise implying that a speaker was completely comfortable in all contexts expressing their thoughts in a fluid and thorough manner.

OUTSIDERS- I will use the words outsiders to describe anyone not in an inter-linguistic relationship; this is not meant to be pejorative in any way, but simply indexes that a person is not part of an inter-linguistic dyad.
COUPLE DESCRIPTIONS

This section provides information about each of the informants that participated in my study and explains some key information about the partners, each of their language histories, and their relationship. I interviewed a total of fourteen couples, and in this section information about each of these couples is provided; however, within my thesis, specific data and quotes are not included from every couple.

CLEO AND HUBERTO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cleo</th>
<th>Huberto</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country of origin</td>
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<td>Dominican Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First language</td>
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<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other languages spoken</td>
<td>Spanish (fluent)</td>
<td>English (fluent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of relationship</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Location</td>
<td>Boston Area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other information</td>
<td>Cleo and Huberto met at a Spanish language immersion program. When they first met, they both spoke both Spanish and English fluently. Cleo learned Spanish primarily through living and studying in Spain and Huberto learned English since he was young. They now speak a mixture of the two languages with slightly more time spent speaking in English. Both Cleo and Huberto work as Spanish teachers at the same high school in the Boston area.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LENA AND SEBASTIAN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lena</th>
<th>Sebastian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>French</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other languages spoken</td>
<td>Spanish (advanced)</td>
<td>Spanish (fluent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>French (advanced)</td>
<td>English (advanced)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>&gt; 7 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current Location</td>
<td>Boston Area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other information</td>
<td>Lena and Sebastian met in Spain and initially communicated entirely in Spanish. After dating for many months, they began to learn each other’s first languages. Now they communicate primarily in French and English with slightly more time spent speaking in English. Lena works as an English teacher.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### KARIM AND ZENA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Karim</th>
<th>Zena</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
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<td>French</td>
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<td>Arabic (advanced)</td>
<td>French (fluent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English (advanced)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Location</td>
<td>Montreal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other information</td>
<td></td>
<td>Zena’s mother is French and she grew up speaking a mixture of French and English throughout her childhood. Her American father has always spoken to her in English and has never been fluent in French. Karim grew up in Montreal and his parents are from Morocco. He grew up speaking a mixture of French and Arabic, speaking only French at school. While he began to learn English at a relatively young age it was not until he attended McGill University that he had to speak English consistently. Zena and Karim communicate in a balanced combination of English and French.</td>
</tr>
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### AMAV AND IRIS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Amav</th>
<th>Iris</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>India</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
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<td>First language</td>
<td>Hindi</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other languages spoken</td>
<td>English (fluent)</td>
<td>Hindi (advanced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Urdu (advanced)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spanish (basic)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Length of relationship</td>
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<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Location</td>
<td>Boston Area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other information</td>
<td>Iris studied South Asian languages in college and lived in Indian during school to practice her Hindi/Urdu. She now works as an English teacher and sometimes utilizes her language skills at work. Amav grew up learning English from a young age and moved to the United States after he completed his degree in India. The two speak a combination of Hindi and English.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
## FRANK AND VANESSA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frank</th>
<th>Vanessa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Nicaragua</td>
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<td>German</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
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<td>English (fluent)</td>
<td>English (fluent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spanish (advanced)</td>
<td>German (basic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of relationship</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Location</td>
<td>Long-Distance (Boston Area/Germany)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other information</td>
<td>Vanessa and Frank met in Barcelona when they were both working and studying abroad. Frank grew up learning English from a young age and learned Spanish during university primarily for career purposes. Vanessa went to English immersion school in Nicaragua and has been fluent in English since a young age. Vanessa and Frank speak primarily English with some Spanish and minimal German mixed in.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## LEOR AND RAQUEL

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Leor</th>
<th>Raquel</th>
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<td>Costa Rica</td>
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<td>Spanish</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other languages spoken</td>
<td>English (advanced)</td>
<td>English (advanced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Length of relationship</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Location</td>
<td>Boston Area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other information</td>
<td>Leor and Raquel met at University in the United States. Leor began learning English at a young age but improved during his time serving in the IDF and then when he began to attend school in the United States. Raquel learned Hebrew from her family and at Jewish afterschool programs. She learned English in school but did not have a fully immersive experience until she attended university in the United States. Raquel and Leor speak a mixture of English and Hebrew with some Spanish added in.</td>
<td></td>
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## CHAI AND MABEL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chai</th>
<th>Mabel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Country of origin</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First language</td>
<td>Hebrew</td>
<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other languages spoken</td>
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<td>Hebrew (intermediate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Farsi (fluent)</td>
<td>Arabic (basic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of relationship</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Location</td>
<td>Tel Aviv, Israel</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other information</td>
<td>Chai and Mabel met when they were both counselors at a Jewish summer camp in New York. They began their relationship in English because initially Mabel knew very little Hebrew. Chai knew some English but improved greatly from working at the camp and from speaking with Mabel. When camp ended, the two began a long distance relationship for over a year and a half during which they communicated daily via Skype and visited when possible. After dating for two years, Mabel moved to Tel Aviv to live with Chai and to learn Hebrew. The two now speak a mixture of English and Hebrew with an emphasis on English.</td>
<td></td>
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## BILLY AND JOAO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Billy</th>
<th>Joao</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Brazil</td>
</tr>
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<td>First language</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Portuguese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other languages spoken</td>
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<td>English (fluent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of relationship</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Location</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other information</td>
<td>Billy grew up in New Jersey and did not begin learning Portuguese until dating Joao. He initially learned just from speaking with Joao but eventually took Portuguese classes along with spending time studying and living abroad in both Brazil and Portugal. Joao came to the United States for university and while he had learned English for many years, he did not feel fully fluent until he had spent significant time studying in the United States and dating Billy. The two speak primarily in English with some Portuguese mixed in.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## ANNIE AND RAFAEL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Annie</th>
<th>Rafael</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country of origin</strong></td>
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<td>Spain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First language</strong></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other languages spoken</strong></td>
<td>French (advanced)</td>
<td>English (fluent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spanish (advanced)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Portuguese (intermediate)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Length of relationship** | 1 year                        |
| **Current Location**      | Boston Area                   |

**Other information**
Alicia grew up speaking only English but learned French and Spanish during high school. She began to learn Portuguese in college. Rafael grew up speaking Spanish, but his Mother is American so he experienced some English influences starting at a young age. He learned English in high school but did not become completely fluent until he attended university in the United States where he and Annie met.

## EJE AND JACOB

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Eje</th>
<th>Jacob</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country of origin</strong></td>
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<td>USA</td>
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<td><strong>First language</strong></td>
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<td>English</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other languages spoken</strong></td>
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<td>Turkish (basic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Spanish (basic)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Length of relationship** | 2 years                        |
| **Current Location**      | Boston Area                   |

**Other information**
Eje grew up in Turkey and began learning English around the age of 9. While she spoke English well, it was not until she came to university in the United States that she became completely fluent. Jacob grew up in the tri-state area and despite some second language education in high school considers himself nearly monolingual. As his relationship with Eje has continued he has picked up some phrases and words in Turkish. Their couple-code consists almost entirely of English, with some key Turkish phrases mixed in.
## ADINA AND NIV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adina</th>
<th>Niv</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country of origin</strong></td>
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<td>Israel</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>First language</strong></td>
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<td>Hebrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other languages spoken</strong></td>
<td>Hebrew (intermediate)</td>
<td>English (advanced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of relationship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Location</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Long-Distance (Boston Area/Israel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other information</strong></td>
<td>Adina grew up learning English in California. She learned some basic Hebrew from going to Jewish-related events and religious services but only recently improved her speaking abilities when she traveled to Jerusalem to study there. Niv grew up in Israel and learned English in school and through interacting with American friends. The two met in Jerusalem but now live apart. Their couple-code consists mostly of English with some Hebrew.</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

## GAVIN AND MONA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gavin</th>
<th>Mona</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Country of origin</strong></td>
<td>USA</td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First language</strong></td>
<td>Cantonese/English</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
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<td><strong>Other languages spoken</strong></td>
<td>Mandarin (intermediate)</td>
<td>English (advanced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of relationship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Location</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>New Hampshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other information</strong></td>
<td>Gavin considers himself an “OG bilingual,” having grown up speaking both English and Cantonese from birth. His parents moved to the US just before his birth. He learned Mandarin from family and study, and is continuing to learn more through his relationship with Mona. Mona grew up in China and began learning English when she was 7. She did not become more advanced until she moved to the US in her early twenties. Mona and Gavin emphasized how they continue to teach each other their first languages, and their couple-code consists of a mixture of Mandarin, English, Cantonese, and “lots of jokes.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# ALEX AND DEIRDRA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Alex</th>
<th>Deirdra</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First language</strong></td>
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<td>Swedish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other languages spoken</strong></td>
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<td>English (fluent)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Length of relationship</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Current Location</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>USA/Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other information</strong></td>
<td>Deirdra grew up speaking only Swedish. She did not truly start learning English until college. Alex grew up in the US and studied in Sweden where he learned fluent Swedish. The two met in Sweden and eventually moved to the US together. Within the last few months they have moved back to Sweden. They speak in a mixture of English and Swedish.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

# INES AND MIKE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ines</th>
<th>Mike</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td><strong>Country of origin</strong></td>
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<td>USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First language</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other languages spoken</strong></td>
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<td>Hebrew (advanced)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hebrew (intermediate)</td>
<td>Portuguese (basic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of relationship</strong></td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Location</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boston Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other information</strong></td>
<td>Ines was born in Brazil but moved to the US when she was five. She began learning English once in the United States and considers her English and Portuguese to be equally strong. Ines also speaks some Hebrew from her involvement in the Jewish community. Mike was born in the United States, but because of his Israeli father, he had some influences of Hebrew when growing up. Mike began learning Portuguese after dating Ines for over a year. Mike and Ines met at university and began dating after having been friends for many years. Their couple-code consists almost entirely of English with minimal additions of Hebrew and Portuguese.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

I had dreamt of falling in love while studying abroad in Lisbon, Portugal, and during my months there, for a short time, my wishes were realized. I met Nuno while out dancing in the student-flooded streets of Barrio Alto. He was the Portuguese boyfriend I had envisioned. Having grown up in Porto his northern Portuguese accent was unfamiliar and intoxicating and I found myself intrigued by him for a multitude of reasons. I had just begun learning Portuguese a few months before and though my knowledge of Spanish and French aided me immensely, my vocabulary was quite makeshift, so it was fortuitous that Nuno not only spoke fluent English, but also exceeded my already strong levels of Spanish and French. We spent our time hopscotching from English to Spanish, French to Portuguese, on the banks of the Tejo river, until my mind became a puddle of words and letters. Our time together was brief, but it left me wondering about the ways that our communication habits would have crystallized had our relationship continued. Would we have proceeded with our four-language medley? How would we speak together when with our monolingual friends and family? How would we navigate the different ideological frameworks by which these languages were accompanied? How would we ensure we were communicating effectively?

Upon my return home to the United States, I began working at a school that taught English for Speakers of Other Languages classes. I quickly discovered that both of my supervisors were in long-term relationships with men who did not speak the same first language as them, and my curiosity about these romances progressed. When it came time to select a topic for my senior thesis, it was an easy choice. As a polyglot and romantic, I was wholeheartedly captivated by these relationships and was determined to
find out more about their innermost workings from people who had participated in them for more than a few fleeting months.

**Background**

Relationships in which partners do not share the same first language have a long history in our world, yet a deep anthropological look at inter-linguistic romance remains to be explored; the majority of “authorities” on the topic tend to be magazine articles containing, “Tips if you and your lover do not speak the same language,” or “How to seduce someone in a different language.” Perhaps this lack of exploration is because people are more attuned to differences in race, sexuality, age, or class, and are less aware of the deep impacts that differing first languages might have on a couple; perhaps it’s that only more recently, as our world has become more globalized and more connected through means of technology, have these sorts of relationships gained traction and attention and become more popular. Whatever the case may be, any work on inter-linguistic romance in today’s world leaves much to be desired.

The first time I heard of inter-linguistic relationships in the realm of anthropology was upon reading an ethnography about the Tukano people who live throughout the northern parts of Colombia and Brazil. The Tukano practice linguistic exogamy and have as many as twenty different mutually unintelligible languages that make up their people. Though the concept of a differing first language from that of a romantic partner is an idea that translates to my study, the case of the Tukano shares little else with the experiences of the couples I eventually interviewed. While couples I spoke with came from distinct backgrounds and cultures, Jackson notes, that “all Vaupés Indians, regardless of their
language-aggregate membership, share a strikingly homogeneous culture,” (Jackson 1974: 53). Additionally, Vapúés Indians do not share the same Western conceptualizations of romance that the majority of my interlocutors subscribed to. While there is not significant work regarding inter-linguistic romances that is currently part of anthropological literature, I was able to find useful parallels and insights from a variety of linguistic anthropology sources, particularly those that deal with bilinguality, globalization, love, and relationships.

One important part of understanding the inter-linguistic romances I set out to study was considering what it meant to couples to be involved in a romantic relationship at all. Though the majority of the couples I interviewed currently live in the United States, many of the individuals I interviewed did not grow up with the westernized notions of romance that I was accustomed to. Different cultures interpret love, and practices of love, in vastly different ways. Take for example, something that in Western societies is taken for granted, like romantic kisses. In one study, data on kissing was collected, “...from 168 cultures from a wide range of geographical locations, historical backgrounds, and social structures. Within this sample, we found that 77 cultures (46%) had evidence of the romantic–sexual kiss, and 91 cultures (54%) did not, (Jankowiak 2015: 537). In Jennifer Cole’s “Love in Africa,” she noted that anthropologists can best study love when “...we approach love as an analytic problem rather than a universal category,” (Cole and Thomas 2009: 3). Because my informants come from such a wide range of cultural backgrounds, it would be impossible to fit a thorough analysis of each of their culture’s conceptualizations of love into this work. Throughout the following chapters, different partner’s quotes and narratives will evidence some of their individual
conceptualizations of love; however, certain notions remained constant across all couples. Couples referenced ideas like, “commitment, I think, feeling comfortable with each other,” “understanding each other’s needs,” “being there for each other,” and “just being partners in life and being supportive,” as important pieces of being in a romantic relationship. These values were representative of each of the fourteen couples I interviewed.

Before foregrounding with more external research that is relevant, it is important to understand a few points about the couples who became the core of my thesis. When I spoke about the subject of my thesis research to people not directly involved in an inter-linguistic relationship, I was often met with responses like, “Wow, that must be so hard, there must be so much lost in translation!” or, “I could never do that, there is so much that they could never fully understand.” People seemed to be generally of the belief that people with differing first languages in the context of a romantic partnership was something that would inherently disrupt the possibility for an authentic connection; however, throughout the fourteen interviews I conducted, this idea never surfaced. There was little to no trace of my informants reporting anything other than satisfaction with the ways that they communicated and understood each other across their language “barriers” as partners. In fact, couples typically explained patterns of communication that seemed extremely effective, healthy, and fruitful, that balanced the needs of both partners well—at least when they were in certain settings. As I heard more stories from partners, it became clear that the perspective of the couple’s I interviewed completely negated these external concerns.
While the individuals who I interviewed differed in many ways, in terms of their linguistic background and otherwise, the majority of them identified as bilingual or multilingual individuals. Whether they were entirely fluent in three languages, or knew only a few words in another language beyond their own native one, access to at least some knowledge of two or more languages was something intrinsic to everyone involved in these relationships. This situates codeswitching as a core pivot point for understanding the dynamics that underpin these relationships. Just I experienced with Nuno on a less developed level, integration of all languages spoken by both partners and distinct patterns of codeswitching are habits that every couple utilized as part of their regular communication. The emergence of what I call the “couple-code,” describes this confluence of the native languages of both partners, as well as any additional languages that the couple uses, into one conglomeration that the couple uses as their primary language when together. The couple-code can include, not only multiple languages, but also humor specific to the couple, styles of storytelling and explaining that they are most comfortable with, and paralinguistic cues like body language, to produce pleasant and successful transmission of messages from one partner to the other. The patterns of codeswitching that are clearly salient between partners are also a vital part of this couple-code. I will more thoroughly explain the construction and dynamics of the couple-code in the following chapters, but the main takeaway is that the couple-code that each couple relies on for their communication is one of the main ways that couples are able to communicate so successfully and avoid the pitfalls that those not involved in inter-linguistic romances believed to be so inevitable.
Codeswitching has a long standing place in linguistic anthropology. As explained by Woolard, codeswitching can be thought of as “an individual’s use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event or exchange…Codeswitching can occur between forms recognized as distinct languages or between dialects, registers, “levels” such as politeness in Javanese, or styles of a single language,” (Woolard 2006: 74). Woolard notes that codeswitching is typically thought of as occurring in the speech of bilingual or multilingual individuals; however, it can be used in a variety of linguistic contexts. When we think about codeswitching in the context of my couples, switches both between distinct languages and switches between registers or varieties of languages were both common. There are many different types of codeswitching, and in the past, codeswitching has thought to be separated into two varieties that serve similar but distinct purposes: situational codeswitching and metaphorical codeswitching. While situational codeswitching typically indexes “a change in the definition of the speech event,” metaphorical codeswitching is a change in language in which speakers, “…do not alter the basic definition of the rights and obligations in operation, but only allude to different relationships that they also hold. Such allusion is achieved through transient use of a language that serve as a ‘metaphor’ for another social relationship regularly associated with it. This ‘semantic’ effect of metaphorical switching…depends on and exploits speakers’ consciousness of typical associations of the language that are more predictably displayed in situational switching,” (Woolard 2006: 76).

Throughout my research instances of both sorts of codeswitching were easy to identify in couple’s interactions and communication patterns. Couples often used forms of situational codeswitching to guide them between shifts in social contexts or subject
matters. For example, a couple like Lena and Sebastian might speak English while out with their friends, and upon returning home shift to speaking French. These sorts of situational code shifts not only change with contexts but also can aid in creating the change in atmosphere or setting themselves, (Woolard 2006: 76). Metaphorical codeswitching happened equally as much for my couples. As Woolard expertly explains,

A bilingual’s two languages typically signal the contrasting cultural standards of the minority community and the larger society with which they are associated. In his model, bilinguals would tend to regard the ethnically specific minority languages as an in-group or we code associated with familiarity, solidarity, etc., and the majority language as a they code associated with ‘the more formal, stiffer, and less personal out-group relations,’ (Woolard 2006: 76).

Here, Woolard is drawing attention to the idea that this sort of metaphorical codeswitching can help people activate a feeling of community through speech. Codeswitches enable those who have access to the different languages or language varieties at play, navigate a social setting in a particular way and allows the in-group versus out-group dynamic to form.

This part of metaphorical codeswitching is extremely important when thinking about communication between the partners I interviewed. Codeswitching provides the roots for the couple-code that each couple I interviewed utilizes in order to communicate so successfully. In Ana Celia Zentella’s ethnography on bilingual children living in New York, she explains that, “… if you grew up… with people who loved New York and Puerto Rico, you came to feel like a New York Puerto Rican and you learned to speak Spanish and English in ways that proclaimed the overlapping racial and cultural aspects of that identity,” (Zentalla 1997: 40). Though her work surrounds the experiences of
young children in New York, the way she zooms in on the ability for knowledge of languages and codeswitching patterns to create connections between people applies directly to my couples. The use of the couple-code for each of my couples indexes their connection to each other. When they speak in their couple-code, they are demonstrating their commitment to successful communication with their partner. Outsiders are not able to participate in use of the couple-code, and this exclusion strengthens the couple’s bond because it makes their language something that only they share and that only they have access too. Use of the couple-code reifies both the connection that the couple has and the exclusivity of that connection. Just as any language variation can help formulate an ingroup and outgroup, so do the methods of communication that each couple creates and is reliant upon. Only the couple are privy to the exact switches, patterns, and flows, the topics that should be spoken about in one language or another, or how to interpret the paralinguistic cues that accompany different speech acts, and this enables them to be connected in a way that is unique to them.

In the communication habits of my couples, language revolving around the couple-code impacted by codeswitching can be separated into two distinct levels. On one level, codeswitching as part of how the couple-code is formulated happens regularly. Switching between the first language of one couple to discuss one topic, to the second language of both partners to discuss another, to a particular variety of English in order to make a phone call, could be one pathway of switches that a couple might follow just in the span of a few minutes. This is more similar to the kind of situational codeswitching that I discussed above. Metaphorical codeswitches can too occur inside of the couple-code, like if a partner wants to index affection, they might switch to their partner’s...
dominant language in order to enhance the feeling of connectedness that their partner experiences when they hear their partner speaking. These are likely the kinds of codeswitching that one might anticipate a discussion of in this work, considering the context of inter-linguistic relationships and the common definition of codeswitching as “an individual’s use of two or more language varieties in the same speech event or exchange,” (Myers-Scotton 1988: 74).

On another level; however, the couple-code eventually serves as its own complete language variety for the couple. In other words, the amalgamation of languages, as a collective, can be switched in an out of- let’s say between the couple-code, and standard English, or between the couple-code and Dominican Spanish. For example: a couple like Cleo and Huberto might be speaking their couple-code in the car on the way to work, and upon arrival, would switch into a more “standard” version of English that their coworkers are accustomed to. This type of up collective code can be seen in past studies of codeswitching throughout the history of anthropology. In Leigh Swigart’s work on the combination of French and Wolof in Dakar, she explains that,

This type of speech occurs as an ‘in-group’ phenomenon among educated urban dwellers, and it has become so frequent in African capital cities that Myers-Scotton has dubbed such mixed forms ‘hybrids’ or ‘innovating’ varieties. The use of two languages in this manner encodes a ‘dual identity’ showing that the speaker is both an African and a member of an educated elite, (Swigart 1992: 89).

She explains that rather than switches between French and Wolof within the collective code that are noteworthy, it is rather codeswitches to “Wolof spoken without a trace of French [or] use of pure Wolof that stands out, and Dakarois will call attention to it by
remarking that a certain speaker uses Wolof bu set ‘clean Wolof,’ (Swigart 1992: 90). These sorts of codeswitches focus less on the internal switches between the codes that make up the hybrid (in this case French and Wolof), and more so on what the hybrid as a whole indexes, and in the case of my couples, what switching in and out of the hybrid might signal. For inter-linguistic couples, switching between the couple-code and a more standard variety of a language is typically indicative of the presence of outsiders, but as you will see later on, at times these switches can become quite nuanced. Both the internal codeswitches within the couple-code, as well as the switches between the couple-code and language varieties that are not specific to the couple, help the couple feel connected by their own language.

**Methodology**

Finding interviewees proved easier than I had anticipated. After I had focused the topic of my research, it seemed like inter-linguistic couples popped up more and more, and I realized that I actually had a considerable number of friends and acquaintances whose relationship matched what I was looking for. As I spoke with more interested couples, I began to realize the breadth of language backgrounds and relationships that my research could encapsulate. Clearly defining the bounds of what could be considered an inter-linguistic was challenging, because much of this definition was to be based upon each individual’s self-identification and perceptions. Partners I encountered ranged from couples who shared the same second language and communicated exclusively in that language, to couples in which one partner was monolingual and the other trilingual and communication happened solely in the first language of the monolingual partner, to
couples who despite having differing first languages, both were bilingual and shared two languages fully together. After thinking considerably, I decided that the primary requisite of my interviewees would be that the partners identify their first language as different from the first language of their partner.

Narrowing to only this factor still provided a lot of wiggle room for the sorts of backgrounds possible; however, my own background as a researcher was certainly a limiting factor as to who my interviewees could be, at least to some degree. Despite my conversational abilities in Spanish, French, and Portuguese, I was unsure if I could do justice to an in depth interview process in any language apart from English. Comfort speaking English for both partners therefore became another limiting factor for my study. Due to this English requirement, as I continued to speak with potentially interested couples, I found that oftentimes, English was the native language of one of the partners. My group of couples quickly seemed to be amounting to a collection of American-born, native English speakers who were married to, or dating, someone who was born outside of the United States and did not speak English as a first language. In the end, twelve out of the fourteen couples followed this pattern, and two couples were made up of partners for whom English was not a first language for either partner.

After identifying eligible couples, I set up meeting times for in person or skype interviews. When I initially began the interview process, I intended to interview couples together at the same time, however as my process continued, this process was not always as easy to maintain as I had anticipated. Busy couples were often not available at the same times, and sometimes I ended up meeting with couples separately. Additionally, there were times when two couples who were friends offered to meet with me together,
and while initially hesitant about this, meeting with couples together proved an effective way to have couples bounce their thoughts and ideas off of each other and break the occasional timidness of couples to share with me. While I arrived to interviews with a specific set of 18 questions to ask every couple, oftentimes couples had their own stories and ideas that I let be the guides of the interviews. My interviewees were often shy during the beginnings of interviews, but as we progressed through questions, they would begin to feel more comfortable and eventually became more open. Out of the fourteen couples I spoke to, I had known nine of them prior to beginning my interview process. This pre-established acquaintanceship sometimes served as an aid in helping couples feel comfortable; however, other times couples may have felt less comfortable divulging information to someone who they might see in the future. The majority of interviewees agreed to be recorded, and after interviews I poured over the data I had collected, honing in on banter between the couple or particularly poignant parts of interviews. Throughout the process, I was extremely pleased with the stories and information that couples provided me with.

I want to draw attention to how my positionality has unequivocally impacted my data. As a white, native-English-speaking, American, my search for couples, my interactions during interviews, and my interpretation of data are all areas that have been slanted by my personal lens. While of course as an anthropologist I attempted to avoid this as much as possible, I recognize how some parts of this were unavoidable. It pained me that I was not able to interview each individual in their native language; my need to interview in English felt like a direct reproduction of many of the ways that non-native English speaking partners are often forced to conform to the linguistic comforts of
English-only Americans in other parts of their lives, and I believe that had I been able to interview speakers in their native language the results of my study would have arose differently. Additionally, the cultural frames that I have to work with impacted my data as well. My personal conceptualizations of ideas like love, commitment, and romance were all pertinent to parts of the study, and while I tried to neutralize these to a certain degree, they were pervasive in certain parts of my study.

Beyond my own personal limitations, my study is representative of only a fraction of possibilities within the world of inter-linguistic romance. Apart from the constraints of English, the couples that make up the core of my study do not show significant diversity in terms of racial backgrounds or sexual orientations, which inherently limits the depth of perspectives in the study. The majority of the couples came from European or Latinx backgrounds, with a few exceptions. Additionally, every person I interviewed is a college graduate and is from a relatively narrow socio-economic bracket. These factors are things that could affect any sort of anthropological study; however, the nuances of the linguistic backgrounds of my couples are something that I had less control over. Though as described above, there are numerous possibilities in terms of couple’s styles of communication, for reasons I cannot explain, out of the fourteen couples I interviewed, every couple but two was comprised of individuals who identified themselves as bilingual or multilingual. This dramatically impacted my data because couples were operating from a point in which both partners had at least some level of knowledge of their partner’s first language or a second language that they and their partner shared. I want to note that my analysis is not intended to generalize the experiences and narratives of all inter-linguistic couples, but rather is an attempt to shed light on the experiences of
these fourteen couples and couples similar to them. Finally, it is important to note that I studied the relationships of partners who are currently together; that is to say, I did not work with partners for whom an inter-linguistic relationship was not successful. My data encapsulates the experiences of couples that are currently in happy and satisfying relationships, and this of course significantly changes the perspective. Studying inter-linguistic relationships that failed would be an entirely different angle with which to approach this work.

* * *

While at times interlinguistic couples encounter misunderstandings and disconnects because of their different first languages, in most cases, these difficulties are able to be overcome by the partners, because overtime they find ways of combating these challenges and learn how to communicate and understand each other in ways that work for both of them. The sorts of problems that do persist for inter-linguistic couples, that monolingual couples do not need to confront in the same ways, have causes that can all be traced to people, circumstances, or social structures outside the bounds of the relationship itself. Family dynamics, friend groups, workplace expectations, discrimination in public spaces, and the remnants of colonization are all factors external to the relationship that weigh on the language systems that each couple creates and adapts to within their relationship. These outside factors can cause damage to the methods of communication that the couple relies on to successfully connect with each other. Throughout my thesis, I will prove that when inter-linguistic couples have space from the
outside world, their relationship is able to function and thrive in a way that eliminates any grievances a language barrier may have caused, and that it is only with the addition of external forces that troubles arise.

In my first chapter, I will explain more about the construction of the couple-code and how it works specifically for each couple. I will unpack the nuances that go into its creation and discuss specific examples of its use in action. I will also discuss how the idea of “developing understanding,” is pertinent to the formulation of the couple-code and define what it means to “feel understood” in the context of an inter-linguistic relationship. In my second chapter I will discuss how communication changes for couples when they interact with friends, family, and the outside world. In this chapter I discuss emic perspectives on authentic representation of the self, shifting feelings of self worth, and I distill what it means to be confident in regard to speech and communication. In my final chapter, I discuss language ideology, how inter-linguistic romance changes in different locations and scenarios, and how a couple’s communication is impacted by broader structures within society. The two levels of codeswitching that I outlined above help the couple’s language continue to accommodate their individual linguistic needs and enable their connection to endure through challenging social situations. Throughout the chapters, it will become clear how a couple’s ability to maintain the fluid communication that their couple-code enables them to have in private, shifts dramatically in the presence of outsiders.
CHAPTER ONE

Constructing the Couple-Code: Finding creative methods for successful communication and understanding for inter-linguistic couples

People on the outsides of inter-linguistic romances often view the idea of “misunderstanding,” as an inevitable part of communication for inter-linguistic couples. In this case, misunderstanding can refer both to the idea of the incorrect receipt of the meaning of an utterance, or, on a deeper level, the incorrect interpretation of a person’s values, thoughts, or feelings. As I interviewed more couples; however, I saw that this was not something that partners in long-term, inter-linguistic romances pointed to as a primary concern or point of tension in their relationships. Couples described small miscommunications that sometimes occurred, certain topics that were more difficult to talk about than others, or specific words or phrases that often tripped them up. Despite these lower level “misunderstandings;” however, the overall consensus that was salient among the couples I interviewed was that after being together overtime, communication happen easily, and understanding each other in deep ways was an expectation that was certainly able to be satisfied. Completely contrary to the belief of outsiders, some interviewees even suggested that inter-linguistic couples are able to communicate more effectively than their counterparts in mono-linguistic relationships.

After speaking extensively with all of the couples I interviewed, I found that this ease of communication that inter-linguistic couples experience (apparently, in the minds of monolinguals, against all odds) is a result of the construction of a system of speaking that is specific to a given set of partners. As explained in the introduction, I will refer to this system of speaking as the “couple-code.” This idea was one of the many
commonalities among the people I interviewed. Sometimes, even during interviews, a couple’s language habits would be revealed in how they took turns speaking or in what languages, varieties of languages, or mixtures of languages they spoke together. Though each couple did also provide anecdotes of times when they did not receive the intended message of their partner’s story or idea, or experienced moments of disconnect, for the most part, a couple’s reliance on their couple-code enabled them to communicate successfully the majority of the time. In this chapter, I will explore the way in which couples define and develop understanding of one another, how they work together to create a language that meets their needs and helps them avoid misunderstandings, and discuss the moments when partners had more difficulty communicating and how they worked to overcome these sorts of challenges. This chapter focuses on couple’s communication with each other, with emphasis on how they develop systems that work for them, regardless of how the outside world may or may not impact their relationship. As you will find, I highlight here the successes of inter-linguistic communication, before unpacking the ways that outsiders and social structures can be cause for turmoil in these relationships. This chapter also underscores how codeswitching functions as an integral part of the couple-code and how it can be used by partners to help create important couple dynamics.

**Building Understanding**

In each of my interviews, one complication that I encountered was navigating the linguistic and cultural barriers and frames that I have. At times, I knew that my ability to conduct interviews primarily in English inhibited my ability to connect with each
interviewee in the most full and effective way possible. I became very cognizant that my
native-English speaking informants were, in some cases, better equipped to answer my
questions than their non-native English speaking partners. The ways that I phrased
certain questions sometimes perplexed non-native English speaking interviewees. I had
to be especially conscious of important and intangible, relationship-related words like
“intimacy,” “trust,” “understanding,” or even-- as explained in the introduction-- “love,”
that could easily be interpreted in many different ways. I began to realize how important
unpacking these sorts of words would be to the integrity of my study and how, similarly,
distilling the meaning of these words was vital for the maintenance of healthy
relationships for each of the couples as well. Talking to so many people about these
types of words and ideas made me question whether or not these concepts were even
cross-culturally similar enough to easily ask about in interviews. Sometimes interviews
prompted interviewees to begin to question their individual and shared perceptions of
these words and ideas as well. Establishing shared definitions that relate to inter-
linguistic romance became necessary for the execution of my study, just as it is necessary
within the relationships themselves. One of the important parts of developing the couple-
code is creating these sorts of common understandings of important words, whether
implicitly or explicitly, so that both partners are able to feel stable and confident in their
communication and connection.

Both for the purpose of my study and within each of these relationships, one of
the most important words that required defining was “understanding.” This word that I
had never given significant thought to suddenly was one of the most important words for
my interviewees and me to be on the same page about. I decided the best way to land on
common ground about this word was to ask my couples, “What actions/signs/words/etc. tell you that you’ve been understood by your partner?” Of course we have to unpack this further to encapsulate the duality of the word in this context, as when working with multilingual people, understanding could be taken to mean “Was the message my words were trying to get across received in the way I intended for them to be received?” or, perhaps on a deeper level the question of “Do you know who I am, what I value, how I feel?” the “Do you get me?” side of understanding. Some individuals seemed to separate these two meanings of the word while others appeared to conflate the correct or incorrect reception of word meaning with the deep knowledge of the speaker’s self.

This was clearly visible in their responses to my question about understanding. I was met with a variety of responses to that question of how you know if you’re being understood. Some responses showed an intertwined interpretation of linguistic understanding with identity understanding, like one from an informant that said, “I can tell if he understood me, I think usually with the questions he asks me, if they make sense to me and are about what I’m saying then I know we’re, sort of, thinking together.” A more separated response, as explained well by another informant was,

I think when he understands me like, with what I’m saying, I know because the next thing he says will flow with the conversation, but I think for if, like, I know he understands, kind of like, my personality and what I feel or something, I know because later on, like a lot later on, he will reference things, like, he’ll mention a story that I told him that relates to a new thing we’re doing, or he’ll remember something I wanted to do or see, or something that connects to what he knows I value.

This response showed the informant’s separation between “Did you get that?” and “Do you get me?” As evidenced by some interviewees grouping of these two types of
understandings together, there are times when these two varieties of understandings do become bound up in one another and result in either extremely positive communication on all levels, or layered disconnects and misunderstandings. Other times; however, these two types of understanding were separated. In some cases, couples showed that they might be communicating well on the surface without reaching the targeted, deeper connections and bonds relating to their identities, or visa versa, feeling extremely connected on a “soul level” without having successful discourse or reception of meaning. Despite some errors or disconnects every once in a while, in large part, couples found strategies (like the couple-code) to form understanding in all of the ways they desired. Every partner I interviewed expressed feeling satisfied with the ways they are understood by their partner, and the strategies that I will unpack in the following section help clarify how this is achieved by couples.

**Code Construction**

One of the main ways that couples are able to combat the possibility of misunderstanding is through the development of their own personal language that they use with each other. Many couples referenced a sort of “secret language,” “secret code,” or “language just for us,” that they use to communicate. There are many commonalities that I was able to observe between the couple-codes that my interviewees described using: incorporation of at least some part of all of the languages spoken by both partners, use of codeswitching, erasure of one partner’s speech variations by the other partner, and success of use in isolation compared to around people outside of the relationship. To address the first element, these codes tend to include words and elements from all of the
languages used by both partners. For example, since Leor’s first language is Hebrew, and he speaks English and some Spanish, and Raquel’s first language is Spanish, and she speaks English and Hebrew, all three of these languages were incorporated at least in some way within this couple’s code. The first languages of each of the partners often made up the largest percentages of the mixture; however, not in all cases. If a couple shared a specific language, even if it was neither person’s first language, this language often made up a significant part of the couple-code instead. Couples tended to explain their usage of every language as a way of “leveling the playing field,” to make sure both partners felt equally represented and included within the language dynamic; however, it was apparent that this was also a way to engage with each partner’s multilingual identity and self. Utilizing each language of each partner was one way to make the couple feel more holistically in touch with their partner.

The use of codeswitching, among all of the languages used by one or both partners was extremely prevalent in the communication habits of every couple. The codeswitching here refers to the internal compilation of languages that make up the couple-code as a whole, rather than the switches between the couple-code (which is not accessible to outsiders) and other standard forms of language that are accessible to those outside of the couple. Some couples spoke very overtly about their use of a certain language for a certain purpose, time, or topic, while others were less aware of when and where each language was used. As explained in Kathryn A. Woolard’s work, while codeswitching was formerly viewed, mostly by those less well versed in bilingualism, as speech that represented, “… disorder, ineptness, and laxity… researchers celebrate [the] not only virtuosity but even virtue [of codeswitching]: codeswitching is taken to enrich
communicative potential. ‘What the outsider sees as almost unpredictable variation becomes a communicative resource for member,’” (Woolard 2006: 75). Woolard underscores the innovative possibilities that codeswitching allows for speakers of more than one language or language variety. The idea of codeswitching acting as a “resource” for an in-group, is easily visible in the construction of the couple-code for the inter-linguistic partners I interviewed. Codeswitching can actively unite partners by indexing different emotions and connections, and can show membership in the “in-group” of the relationship as a unit. Having access to a language that has been specifically crafted for couple use helps the couple feel united through language, despite having differing first languages, because the language that they build for themselves is something that only they know. As explained in the introduction, while the internal codeswitches that make up the couple-code are important, on the secondary level, use of the couple-code as a complete language itself that can be switched in and out of, is a primary way that couples can index connection and solidarity with one another.

One interviewee gave an example of a time when codeswitching occurs in her relationship internally within their couple-code. Iris is a native English speaker from Martha’s Vineyard and Amav is a native Hindi speaker from India. Amav is fluent in English and Iris is comfortable communicating in Hindi as well. Their couple-code was described as a “50-50 balance of the two languages.” Iris explained that when she and Amav are chatting about their days or engaging in “small talk” certain topics are discussed in Hindi while others are discussed in English. She said that the, “...two main things that I would talk about [in English] are either food or travel, because those are two things everyone wants to talk about in English- in Hindi, [we talk about] the next time
[we’re] going to India, about different family members, we talk about phones, types of phones.” Amav and Iris’s ability to switch between the two languages depending on the topic being discussed is an example of one way that they adapt their speaking to meet the needs of both partners. In Woolard’s work, she noted that, “A situational codeswitch may not simply be triggered by a changed context, but may actually in itself contribute to creating that changed context,” (Woolard 2006: 76). The use of codeswitching to signal a change in topic, stance, or context was certainly part of the codeswitching habits of many of my interviewees. These types of situational codeswitches could even be easily observed in small ways during interviews. For instance, when we had been speaking about family and then began to talk about fighting, one informant noted that, it would be easier to discuss fighting in Chinese because they do not typically fight in English.

While the use of situational codeswitching was valuable to learn about from the couples, metaphorical codeswitching was perhaps more fascinating because the consequences of this variety of codeswitching were more constant across the spectrum of couples. While the specific topics and trends that fall under the category of situational codeswitching were harder to pin down since they changed dramatically couple to couple, metaphorical codeswitching, or codeswitching that, “allulde[s] to different relationships that [the speakers] also hold… [and] that serves as a ‘metaphor’ for another social relationship regularly associated with” the language being spoken, was more standardized throughout the relationships I had contact with. The most common use of metaphorical codeswitching within the bounds of couple-codes themselves were switches from the speaker’s first language, to their partner’s first language, in order to index closeness, intimacy, and understanding. For example, Annie explained,
When he’s feeling sad about something, or like, is being particularly, like, open and vulnerable, I’m definitely going to try to switch to Spanish because I want him to feel like I’m really there for him, and like, that we’re on the same page. Even though I know I could speak English, it’s like an added effort to that shows like, extra attention in the moment of need.

This is a perfect example of a codeswitch inside of the couple-code that indexes connection between partners and shows how the couple-code can be used to help couples feel comfortable with each other. Metaphorical codeswitches can also be used on the secondary level-- between the couple-code as a complete language and a more standard variety of another language. For example, Mona and Gavin explained that their couple-code frequently includes humor and jokes, and when one of them is angry, they might switch out of the couple-code by ignoring an opportunity for a joke that they normally would have taken. This avoidance of a joke becomes a form of marked speech for them, because their couple-code (the unmarked code) often includes jokes. This switch out of the couple-code signals anger, while the use of the couple-code signals harmony between them.

While the dynamics and specifics of each couple’s codeswitches were telling of certain details, what was more important in the emic perspective of couples, was the mere idea that each partner’s native language was represented in the couple’s typical mode of communication and that each partner, was at times, able to speak in, or use elements of, their preferred language. Using all of the languages available to both partners enables them to both feel equally included and involved in the conversation, and their fluid and mutual switches from one language to the other enable them to feel closer and connected
because they feel aligned linguistically and emotionally. While they might not share the same native language, the couple-code provides them with a new language that is only for them and elevates their ability to be linguistically connected, perhaps even beyond what might be typically achievable for monolingual couples. It is important to note that while in some cases, codeswitching within the bounds of the couple-code carried specific meaning, for example calling a partner by a nickname in their own native language to index closeness, or telling a story in a partner’s native language to signal an “inside joke,” some codeswitches within the bounds of the couple-code were not significant beyond the fact that they included elements of both partner’s dominant languages. Sometimes, this fact alone was indexical of the connection that they have. These types of codeswitches can be seen in the work of many linguistic anthropologists. For example: in Myers-Scotton’s work on hybrid languages in East Africa, she noted that, “Each switch need have no special significance; rather it is the overall pattern of using two varieties which carries social meaning,” (Myers-Scotton 1988:162). For some couples in certain instances, this rings quite true. Rather than switches between, for example, Mona’s native Mandarin, and Gavin’s native English, being linked to specific meaning, random switches themselves, at times, could signal meaning insofar as showing both partners’ commitment to including multiple languages into their couple-code.

Another commonality that I found was that often after the couple has been in a rhythm for sufficient time, the couple becomes so comfortable with their system of speaking that they often do not notice their partner’s speech “flaws” or rather, how their partner’s speech might deviate from standard speech, or from how a native speaker would
produce an utterance, from here referred to as “non-standard blindness.” I frequently asked partners to rate their own perceived language proficiencies, as well as their partner’s on a scale from 1-10 for each language used by the couple; couples tended to rate their own skill level below their partner’s perception of their skill level. Most individuals explained their level of proficiency in their partner’s native language in negative terms, commenting that it was “rusty,” “not as good as I want it to be,” “need to improve,” or “kind of lacking at the moment.” Despite being harsh critics of their own language abilities, partners consistently deflected the idea that their partner was not speaking well- this was a product in part of their non-standard blindness and in part a way to defend their partner to an outsider, me.

One interviewee told me, “It’s so funny when people tell me [she] has an accent and stuff, because honestly I don’t think she does, or like, I don’t really hear it. I mean I know it’s true because enough people have told me and sometimes I notice it in little ways or when we are removed like, speaking on the phone or something, but in general, it’s just like, that’s her voice and I don’t really think about it as being ‘an accent.’” A person’s ability to ignore their partner’s speech quirks helps smooth communication and allows the couple to interact in a more fluid and less inhibited manner. Non-standard blindness works to preserve each partner’s self esteem, because when a person’s partner focuses on what their partner is saying, rather than how it is being said, each partner can be more comfortable and open. This greatly increases the potential for a conversation to be deep, genuine, and meaningful and thereby reduces the chance of misunderstandings between the partners.
The fourth and final commonality that frequently surfaced around these couple-codes that I observed was that these codes tended to work best in isolation. When couples were alone and did not have to manage any outside input—linguistic or otherwise—their codes worked effortlessly and conversation flowed freely between them. When outsiders were added to the equation the balance was suddenly interrupted, and sometimes this jeopardized the couple’s ability to use their code successfully. Many interviewees explained that in public the code was often still intact; the times when their couple-code was disrupted was often in the company of closer friends or family because of a pressure to adapt to or include others participating in the conversation.

One couple, Vanessa and Frank explained this dynamic. Vanessa is from Nicaragua and her first language is Spanish; Frank is from Germany and his first language is German. Both Vanessa and Frank speak English proficiently. Frank knows some intermediate Spanish, and Vanessa is learning German. The couple communicates primarily in English; however, there are certain phrases, words, and topics during which they typically defer to either German or Spanish. Vanessa and Frank, like many of the interviewed couples have been at some point during their time together, are in a long distance relationship. Vanessa lives in Boston and Frank lives in Munich; the couple met during a study abroad program in Barcelona. When Vanessa visited Frank for the first time, their couple-code that they had unknowingly perfected over the course of many months became useless when Vanessa visited Frank for the first time and met his friends from home. Vanessa told me the story,

Um, so for us like I said we kinda like have our own little system of like we speak English and then we incorporate like these
Spanish things and then I call him German names it’s, it’s really crazy, um and then I visited him in December so I went to Germany, and ya it was the first time that I was like meeting his best friends from home that speak mostly German and they’re not very into like changing their language if someone else is present, so it was very frustrating, um because I wanted to be part of it like I really wanted you know his friends to like me and to be part of his life and like he was so excited to like bring me into his you know childhood and like people who he’s grown up with and I think he was also frustrated ‘cause he did tell me that like he was really mad at his friends for not trying harder and like it was just like a very strange experience, um for the both of us...he really wanted his friends to try and he did tell him several times but like no one is going to completely change their language for another person… you start feeling a little excluded.

What Vanessa describes, perfectly exemplifies the challenges of their couple-code being disrupted when they entered a new context in which they wanted to interact with other people. Their balance of English, Spanish, and German worked well for them when they were alone because they were accustomed to the give and take and instances that each language would be used in, but in the presence of others, they were unable to maintain this balance, and their system collapsed leaving Vanessa on the outside of the social circle.

Couple-codes are one of the tools that inter-linguistic couples employ in order to streamline their communication and make it more inclusive and accessible to both partners. The couple-code is a primary way that couples can avoid the pitfall of misunderstanding that so many people assume inter-linguistic couples might often encounter. When I asked couples about their communication habits, it was surprisingly common for them to meet my question with a small chuckle or bout of laughter. Oftentimes, they had been made aware by their close friends or family members that the couple-code that they had constructed together was unusual or funny to
the outsider’s ear. I would argue that in many ways, the ability for inter-linguistic couples to build a language that suits them and is separate from how each partner would interact with anyone else fortifies their connection by allowing them space to connect linguistically. Many interviewees described being able to form connections more easily and quickly with people who speak the same native language as they do; the couple-code is an attempt to make one’s partner the only other speaker of a special language that works only within the bounds of the relationship, with the hope of building connections and understanding between the partners. The ability to weave multiple languages together, utilize codeswitching, and ignore non-standard speech, are all tools that enable better communication between couples that might initially struggle to communicate in more typical ways for romantic couples.

**Beyond the Couple-Code**

While the couple-code, and the flow of communication that it brings, helps couples be proactive about potential miscommunications or issues within their relationship, there are some disconnects that are too deep for it to resolve. While these deeper issues are sometimes related to linguistic or cultural differences, often, the sorts of issues that reach beyond what the couple-code can change are problems that monolingual couples face too. These sorts of problems unearth personal conceptions of ideas such as “love,” “intimacy,” and “trust.” While language can sometimes be an added burden when navigating conversations about these sorts of topics, overtime, just like in any relationship, these topics were fully unpacked by inter-linguistic couples in ways that eventually enabled both partners to feel satisfied and understood. The stories
that follow are examples of more challenging encounters described by two couples about instances in which their misunderstandings were not able to be circumvented through the use of their couple-code. In both cases, these couples were able to come to a positive conclusion about the misunderstanding that they encountered, and this ability to come to a resolution was representative of the stories provided to me throughout most of my interviews.

Zena and Karim have been together for two years. They are students at a Canadian university where they met. Karim grew up in Montreal and his first language is French. His parents are Moroccan and spoke to him in a combination of French and Arabic. He learned English in school but grew up in a French-speaking community with French-speaking friends. Zena grew up in the United States in a bilingual household. Zena’s mother is French and spoke some French to Zena while she was growing up. Zena categorizes herself as “close to fluent” in French. Karim and Zena converse in a mixture of French and English. During a conversation with Zena, she told me that Karim thinks that he does not love her, and that he will not say the words “I love you” to her. She initially told Karim that she loved him after five months of their being together in a committed relationship. At the time, he responded by saying that he did not feel the same way about her. At first, Zena was heartbroken. She thought that she and Karim felt the same way about each other. She described feeling shocked because her perception had been that loving feelings were felt mutually and that her sentiments were shared by him. She felt caught off guard by his response because she felt that “all of the signs” that he loved her were present. Soon after this interaction, Zena and Karim
discussed the conversation that had transpired, and came to the conclusion that Karim simply needed more time to process emotions and was just “not there yet.”

After more months passed; however, Zena began to feel insecure and impatient without Karim’s reciprocation of the three words that, to her, were the only way to fully validate their relationship. She began to wonder if there was something else going on, because in her eyes, his feelings and actions did not seem to be matching his words. She told me, “I was thinking maybe it was an ‘ESL’ thing tbh.” After she grew tired of waiting, Zena decided to try to unearth what else might be causing this alleged lack of loving. She thought that maybe what was really happening was that Karim had a different understanding of what saying “I love you” meant because of his linguistic and cultural background. She sent him the following text message that read,

I have a really hard, two part question that I wasn’t brave enough to ask you so I’m going to ask you [via text message], but don’t answer now, think about it and tell me when you’re ready but I need to ask because it’s been bothering me. Ok here goes. 1. Do you think that you and me have different meanings for the word love? And you feel the same way about me that I feel about you? Love just means something different to you than to me? 2. If no, do you think you could ever love me?

Zena, waited three long days for the answers to her questions from Karim. When she saw Karim, he told her that he thought she might be right, that perhaps their misalignment stemmed not from different feelings, but from different understandings of the word love and what it means to each of them.

Karim explained to Zena for the first time, that to him, saying “I love you” was reserved for a person you were certain you would marry, a person you knew would be
part of your family forever. This was the understanding of the word love that Karim had, based on the linguistic and cultural meanings of the word that his French-speaking, Canadian-Moroccan parents had surrounded him with and that he had internalized. In Zena’s language, she and Karim were in love, and in Karim’s he and Zena were not. When they realized the misunderstanding that had occurred, they were quick to clarify their feelings to each other, and soon discovered how aligned they were. Zena and Karim soon developed a new addition to their couple-code, to talk about this sensitive subject that, even post-clarification, sometimes made Karim squirm. After realizing how this miscommunication had affected both of them, they were careful to be particularly explicit when speaking about these sorts of topics. In many cases, couples explained that when talking about feelings like this, explanations of actions and emotions were more useful than words like love that had cloudier definitions.

In an interview only a short time later, another couple, Billy and Joao, explained a similar misunderstanding that arose in their relationship. It seemed common, that especially in the beginnings of inter-linguistic relationships, coming to a mutually understood definition of “love” was necessary. When speaking to them about their situation, Billy commented that,

The one word that we argue about and always think about is love, and the definition of love, especially being in love with someone versus loving someone. Our definitions are different and the ways that we show love is different, and that’s the biggest barrier. Before Portugal we go into a big fight and he was like (pause) he told me that he never loved me...but it was really obvious that he did [love me] through the things he did and through the way he acted... like he would do everything for me, he would be so happy to see me, and he wanted to be with me all the time, and I think he
just didn’t understand what love was… I think that’s one of the biggest fights we’ve had.

Billy and Joao struggled to understand each other’s interpretations of the word “love,” in a similar way to Zena and Karim. The frequency of this disconnect about love proved that when the definitions of a word, even for people who share a native language, might be divergent or contested, confusion more quickly ensues. In Billy’s explanation, he commented that through Joao’s actions, “it was really obvious” that he was experiencing the same emotional connection that Billy was. In this case, as was salient in other relationships as well, when navigating concepts like love, actions were sometimes more telling than words. During their fight, Billy and Joao relied on each others consistent acts of love, to remind themselves of their shared feelings. Couples often described body language and other non-verbal forms of communication being particularly important in the early stages of the relationship before the full formation of the couple-code. Both Zena and Karim, and Billy and Joao’s pain during their journeys to understanding their partner’s different interpretation of love was extremely apparent during our conversations. Zena began to tear up when she recalled how betrayed and alone she felt when she and Karim were, at first, unable to communicate their feelings to each other in a way that resonated with the other person. These stories encapsulate some of the turbulent feelings experienced by people in inter-linguistic relationships when their most vulnerable feelings are not received in the ways they anticipated they would be. The Western idea of a relationship entails that feelings should be reciprocal, and when these sorts of misunderstandings take place and lead partners to believe that how they feel
might not be mutual, this can cause rifts and heartaches. As couples spend more time together, they are able to circumvent these sorts of miscommunications more easily.

People have misunderstandings about the meanings of words because of linguistic and cultural barriers every day. The assumption that, because the relationship in question is a romantic one, these misunderstandings are insurmountable, destabilizing parts of the equation is simply not true. A simple miscommunication can often be corrected with a quick, “what that means to me is…” when the word is superficial or insignificant, like the difference between a bedsheet and a towel. When the miscommunication involves an abstract and meaning-filled word like “love,” correcting a definition becomes slightly more challenging as it begins to nag at cultural underpinnings that every person has grown up having, but it is still easily achievable, especially for these partners who have daily practice with this sort of navigation. Overall, every couple I interviewed reported feeling positive about the understanding, on both a linguistic and “soul” level, that they had of their partner and that their partner had of them. This is not to say that misunderstandings, linguistic or otherwise, do not happen, but rather that when they do, experienced inter-linguistic couples know how to overcome them. The misunderstandings that inter-linguistic couples experience are in many ways no different than those that monolingual couples experience. Partners are able to use their couple-code to prevent misunderstandings from happening by using a language that is representative, accessible, and enriching for both partners. When couples encounter a barrier that is larger than what their couple-code can alleviate, they can be helped by a variety of other resources, from more intentional explanations, to considering actions and body language; inter-linguistic couples have an arsenal of communication skills both
verbal and non-verbal that more than compensate for any deficits that divergent linguistic backgrounds might mean for them. Since inter-linguistic couples do not take their ability to communicate with each other perfectly, for granted, the conscious effort to be clear and thoughtful can lead to even stronger communication. My couples often discussed how their initial language barrier eventually became a tool that enabled them to become better storytellers, stronger explainers, and more active listeners. Unfortunately, when inter-linguistic couples leave the safety of their couple-bubble, communication becomes more challenging and solutions require more nuance.
CHAPTER TWO

Finding Confidence: Addressing issues of identity and acceptance that arise for inter-linguistic couples

When I began to think more closely about the two levels of codeswitching that are active forces in the communication habits of inter-linguistic couples, I tried to hone in on when the switches between the hybridized form of the couple-code was switched in and out of for each couple. I realized that while the internal codeswitches seemed to take place primarily when the couple was alone, the switches between the couple-code and other standard varieties of various languages were typically triggered by the presence of outsiders. When partners were forced to switch out of using the couple-code in the presence of others, it challenged them in significant ways. Most importantly, it challenged their ideas of how they were able to present their thoughts and ideas to others in effective ways, or rather their ability to be confident in, or sure of, themselves. My interlocutors tended to have relatively essentialized ideas of “the self” and how that translated to feeling “self-confident.” They seemed to be beholden to the idea that each person has a “core-personality” and that, that personality needs to be redeveloped or rediscovered when a person is speaking a language that is not their dominant one.

Most of my interviewees seemed to be of the belief that when they were speaking their own native language, they were most easily able to be their “true-self.” When they became romantically involved with someone who did not speak the same native language as they did, they adapted to the language gap by creating their own special couple-code, that eventually enabled them to communicate more freely with their partner, in a way that they felt comfortable with and helped them to feel that their identity was understood by
their partner. Speaking a language that was neither the couple-code, nor the speaker’s first language, was what produced this fear for many partners that they were going to be misunderstood, or that led to these deficits in confidence that so many partners described encountering when interacting in situations that included both their partner and outsiders. In order to break down these ideas, I have divided the idea of “confidence” into two separate varieties: one that deals with a partner’s notion of their ability to effectively portray themselves and their identity, and one that deals with couples feelings of self-worth and finding their place in social contexts in relation to their partner. While interviewees used the idea of “confidence” to describe many different things, if there was one word that seemed to surface in every interview without fail, it was this. When searching for external sources that would augment my findings about confidence, I was shocked to find a dearth of material that dealt with this topic that seemed so vital to understanding multilingual people and inter-linguistic relationships of any kind. In the context of inter-linguistic romances, confidence comes into play at many different points in the relationship. These confidence-related situations could arise between the partners, in wider groups of friends and family members, or in society as a whole.

**Accuracy-Confidence**

The first conceptualization of confidence, which I will call “accuracy-confidence,” is the one that relates to sureness of the accurate of the portrayal of something shared. Interviewees referenced this type of confidence when talking about a specific word or phrase they wanted to use, an idea they were trying to convey, or most importantly, in how they were presenting their identity as a whole. It was evident that
couples subscribed to an idea that preserving the nature of the “true-self” was an extremely important part of communication, and that the way that they communicated with their partner, ideally allowed them to do this with ease. While interviewees sometimes expressed concerns that they might not be able to convey significant parts of their identity to their partner due to a language barrier, they often worried more that they would encounter difficulties with this when interacting with their partner’s friends or family. Partners felt comfortable using their couple-code to convey their “true-self” in their relationship, and were used to navigating misunderstandings with their significant other; however, because couple-codes are not accessible to outsiders, the fear that something might not be able to be communicated to others beyond their partner was typically a large concern for my interviewees.

Though in anthropology we tend to avoid endorsing to this idea of the “true self,” throughout my interviews, couples explained this idea of their “true personality” and how they often found it difficult, particularly in the beginnings of their relationship, to convey themselves in a way that felt authentic to them. While my interviewees tended to describe this idea as a difficulty “being themselves” or “finding their original personality,” in their second language, what they really are getting at is simply the challenge of conveying their thoughts, opinions, and feelings in a way that feels as fluid to them as it normally might have in their first language. One interviewee explained her experiences, and noted that these feelings surfaced most commonly in situations when she was with her boyfriend in a group setting, rather than with him alone, because their “normal way of communicating” could not happen. She said,
When I’m speaking another language, it’s hard because, like, I know what words to use to explain the, like, general ideas I mean, but I don’t know what the, sort of, mood of those words are, or if they are the specific kind of words I would use if, if it was my first language. I mean I don’t really, like, worry about my overall message being, understood, but like, I worry that my attitudes or, and um my tone might be misunderstood and I think those are, like, the things that represent your personality, so it makes me stressed that I won’t be seen as who I feel that I am.

This interviewee’s idea encapsulates what many expressed in regard to their fears that relate to accuracy-confidence. Rather than the idea salient in my interviews that, finding their “true-self” was challenging, what seemed to be the true challenge was confirming that they were being perceived in the way that they wanted to be by their partner, and the people who were important to them and to their partner. When partners were speaking exclusively with each other, they could rely on the familiarities and patterns of the couple-code; however, when friends or family were around, the ease of communication that the couple-code allowed partners was no longer available, and thus partners often felt nervous about how they were “coming off” in their non-native language. Informants most commonly described being nervous about seeming shy, aloof, uninterested, not-funny, or distant because of their differing first languages that they perceived to be barriers for expression of their “truest selves.” Though many informants seemed to hang on to this fear of having their values, or attitudes be “misunderstood” due to their potential inability to communicate as fluidly in their non-native language, in large part this fear seemed to materialize only outside of the immediate relationship- meaning partners were typically able to circumvent these issues when alone, and were more often affected by these sorts of problems when in the company of extraneous people like friends or family members.
Before continuing with my explanation of “accuracy confidence,” it is important to establish that this understanding of the “core-self” or “true-personality” that my informants spoke of so often, is nothing more than a construction. As noted by Nikolas Rose,

… modern Western societies are unusual in constructing the person as such a natural locus of beliefs and desires, with inherent capacities as the self-evident origin of actions and decisions, as a stable phenomenon exhibiting consistency across different contexts and times. They are also unusual in grounding and justifying their apparatuses for the regulation of conduct upon such a conception of the person, (Rose 1996: 22).

Though my interviewees came from many different places and cultural backgrounds, for whatever reason, their belief in this westernized idea that they had some sort of “true-self” could be seen throughout my interviews. While I cannot validate the existence of a true self or personality, my interpretation of this idea that I pulled from my interviews was that partners were very much concerned with the idea that they wanted to be able to convey themselves in a specific way that felt representative of their identity and did not want language to be an inhibiting factor of this. Thus, I present the idea of accuracy-confidence, which I can best describe as the belief that an individual has successfully preserved their self-proclaimed identity across the borders of different languages. A person with a high level of accuracy-confidence feels that they are able to accurately represent themselves in another language as they would in their first language without anyone misinterpreting or misunderstanding how they want their identity to be presented. The first story about confidence comes from Cleo and Huberto. This is a story is about how they met and the beginnings of their relationship. It nicely exemplifies
accuracy-confidence and also is telling of the complications of beginning an inter-linguistic romance.

Cleo and Huberto met at an intensive Spanish language immersion program. Cleo was raised in Vermont and grew up speaking English. Huberto is from the Dominican Republic and speaks Spanish as a first language. At the program, they were required to sign a language pledge, promising to speak only in Spanish for the entirety of the summer, so when Cleo and Huberto met, they met within the confines of an artificially crafted Spanish bubble. They began seeing each other during the program, and when the program ended, Cleo anticipated continuing to speak in Spanish some of the time, but she says, she “...wanted to hear [Huberto] speak in English because [she] had never heard him speak in English before and...wanted to hear what he sounded like speaking English.” Huberto wanted to continue their Spanish-based relationship, in part because it was comfortable for him and in part because it was how their relationship had been thus far, and changing that seemed strange. The first time they spoke English together was intimidating. They explained that they felt like they were learning about a whole new side of each other that had not been part of their relationship before. Speaking English felt like it framed their relationship in an entirely new way that posed a risk to their ability to continue to present the versions of themselves that they had grown accustomed to portraying through Spanish during their time together at the program. Switching to English provoked an accuracy-confidence based threat. So, for a few weeks after their program ended, Spanish accounted for the majority of their couple-code. Spanish signaled an important connection for them, because neither of them were used to a relationship, romantic or otherwise, that was based completely in Spanish. In the
beginning, this felt new and exciting, and challenged them both in a positive way while allowing them to preserve the parts of their personalities that they both had shown to each other.

As Huberto and Cleo’s relationship continued after their language program was over; however, the dynamics of their relationship changed both linguistically, and otherwise. As these changes occurred, Cleo and Huberto experienced drastic changes in their levels of accuracy-confidence, as they explored what their different first languages meant for their budding romance. While they were both comfortable with their couple-code being primarily Spanish based, they realized that as their relationship became more serious, there were certain things that were harder for them to speak about in Spanish. They noted that topics that were highly personal like health, finances, and humor were especially challenging to discuss exclusively in Spanish. While Huberto could describe his thoughts and feelings about these sorts of intimate matters in Spanish comfortably, since Spanish was not Cleo’s first language, topics like this took a concerted effort to discuss without the help of English for her. Subjects like this were simply less accessible when spoken about in a second language because they were talked about less frequently and were oftentimes topics that were more emotionally charged. Conversations that were already hard to feel comfortable speaking about became especially sensitive when the added challenge of doing it in a second language was present. Additionally, when Cleo and Huberto had to venture outside of their isolated couple bubble, the dynamics of their couple-code was forced to shift. This shift was most noticeable the first time that the two of them traveled to Vermont to visit Cleo’s family.
When Cleo and Huberto went to see Cleo’s parents, Spanish was no longer a viable language for communication because Cleo’s parents only speak English. Huberto explained that he felt nervous about being accepted by Cleo’s family; he knew that his ability to connect would be dependent upon how well they understood him, and that would require him to switch from the couple-code that he and Cleo were comfortable with, to a variety of English that was more standard and that Cleo’s parents had access to. Even though Huberto is completely fluent in English, he explained that when he speaks Spanish, there is an automatic closeness that he feels that is not present when he speaks in English. He said, “I would say that I feel closer to people when I speak my native language, that’s independent of how long I’ve known the person, I feel closer to that person… there is a feeling that we share something in common… it makes me feel like we have something in common even if we don’t.” Speaking exclusively in English felt like a challenge. Huberto did not have a high level of accuracy-confident in this situation; he doubted his ability to represent himself as accurately in English as he would be able to in Spanish or in the couple-code he had grown accustomed to speaking. Huberto described a pressure that existed that, “…subconsciously there is a level of acceptance associated with that… if I speak English to her parents… I think there’s a level of acceptance, it’s a way of saying, I am also part of this circle, I would have felt excluded otherwise.” Huberto did not want his lack of comfort speaking exclusively in English to preclude him from speaking well enough to convey his thoughts and ideas to Cleo’s family. He worried that his lack of ease might lead to him be read as shy or aloof, two things he felt he would never be interpreted as when speaking in his native language.
This need to practice conveying deeper thoughts and emotions (explained emically as “practicing being myself”) in another language is a task that exists for both partners in any inter-linguistic relationship; however, the pressure to do so can sometimes be more significant for one partner than for the other as a result of a variety of factors. One important factor that determines this is what the dominant language is in the country, neighborhood, and social circles of the couple. Janet Fuller succinctly explains the importance of this principle in her work entitled, “Language Choice as a Means of Shaping Identity.” Fuller says,

One aspect of identity negotiation in a multilingual community is the status of a given code as majority or minority language in a particular society (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2011). The symbolic associations and socio-pragmatic meanings of a certain code choice may vary across communities of practice, as well as within them, but such macro factors are nonetheless present in the context of the interaction. In the setting for my study...the status of English as the language of the wider community and mainstream education, and Spanish as a minority language spoken primarily by members of a particular ethnic group in ingroup settings are critical aspects in the negotiation of identity. This does not mean that English is de facto the language of authority or prestige, or that Spanish use necessarily indexes solidarity; both languages can be used to develop a variety of speaker roles and identities. However, the availability of these interpretations in the community must be incorporated into the analysis, (Fuller 2007:106).

In Fuller’s study, she examined the dynamics of a bilingual classroom in Illinois and studied how each student in the classroom individually constructed their “bilingual identity.” For many of the inter-linguistic couples that I worked with in my study, the construction of a bilingual identity is also extremely important. In order for a person to feel fully understood by their partner and others close to them, their entire linguistic identity must be considered, because each person’s multi-linguality in any social context
is intrinsic to who they are, how they are treated, and how they feel. The reduction of a multilingual person to a monolingual frame can trigger a lack of accuracy-confidence, because it leaves out an entire other side of the individual. In the case of a partner whose dominant language is the minority language of the given social context, when their multilinguality is not considered, this can be even more challenging and anxiety provoking.

The need to consider the bilingual identity of each partner is important among close friends and family as in the situation described by Cleo and Huberto; however, it is even more urgent when thinking about each partner’s identity in society as a whole. When a misunderstanding relating to how someone is perceived transpires between people who already have a connection (i.e. friends and family), steps can be taken to alleviate the confusion or misinterpretation that occurred and partners can work together to try to correct these issues. When these sorts of situations take place outside of the bounds of the couples close relationships, these “misunderstandings” can become hurtful impositions of stereotypes and degrading essentialisms that can lead to a lack of self-worth, because they can make a person feel inferior. One couple explained how these sorts of “public misunderstandings” put a strain on their relationship. This will be explained more in the next section about value-confidence, but before that, another couple contributed a useful story that demonstrated a different example of accuracy-confidence.

Cleo and Huberto described a story that related to difficulties coming from a shift in their couple-code as they moved through different social contexts with each other, Cleo’s family, and in society; however, what interlinguistic couples discussed most
commonly in relation to this idea of accuracy-confidence were the relationships with one another’s friends and social groups. One couple gave an archetypal example of how accuracy-confidence can come up for couples within their social spheres. Lena and Sebastian have been married for almost ten years. Sebastian was born in France and Lena was born in the United States. For the first year of their relationship, they communicated almost entirely in Spanish, the second language for both of them. Eventually; however, Sebastian began to learn English and Lena began to learn French, and their couple-code became comprised of all three of these languages. Lena said that as a couple, they have many friends who speak exclusively English, and other friends who speak exclusively French, but that it is hard to find other couples to befriend who are also multilingual. This is a common problem that interlinguistic couples face. They often find that in group settings, one partner ends up being slightly left out, or on the fringe of the conversation. Unless a group dynamic is truly inclusive of both partners’ preferred languages, it is challenging to avoid one partner feeling like an outsider in the group.

When I spoke with Lena and Sebastian, it appeared that out of all of my informants, Lena was perhaps the most fixated on the idea of a personality being attached to a language. She explained that while she and Sebastian were alone, he had one personality, and when he was in public, she and her friend perceived Sebastian to have two other personalities-- one personality that she associated with him when he spoke exclusively in French, and another one that she associated with him when he spoke exclusively in English. She said that this called into question whether or not her husband
was “accurately” portraying his identity across all social contexts-- here Lena demonstrated a lack of accuracy-confidence. Lena explained,

My husband definitely has two personalities, another person pointed it out three years ago- so- we were hiking [with a group of friends] and [my husband] likes to try and be funny and his jokes- pretty much all his jokes- are like depreciating himself and his English, or like, asking questions about American culture and then making comparisons to French culture- and… those are- his um, his two platforms of jokes, like pretty much his only jokes, and we were hiking with a big group of friends and he was like, making jokes, being the class clown, talking about his bad English and my friend was like I wonder what he’s like when he’s making jokes in French. So since then I’ve paid attention because that question was just really funny to me because clearly when he speaks French he doesn’t make jokes about his own French being bad, since it’s his first language, and comparing French culture to American culture would never go over well in the, in the the French setting. He jokes around with his friends in French but he’s not like trying to be the star of the show and he’s a lot more reserved, having that like, [access to the French] language kind of gives him… more confidence.

Rather than proving that Sebastian has some sort of “dual personality,” what Lena’s observations about Sebastian show are that his different levels of comfort in speaking one language or another are reflected in how he performs his identity and in how he is perceived. When he and Lena spoke in their couple-code, Sebastian was comfortable because he was relaxed with Lena and accustomed to the way they spoke together. When he spoke English, he was less comfortable and so he was more prone to making jokes and being which led people to view him as a sillier person as a whole. In French, his first language, he was most confident, which made people read him as more serious. Lena claimed that his personality is, “almost unrecognizable,” to some of her friends when they see him speaking in French and noted that he has more substantive comments to
contribute to the conversation in French contexts. This is not because his personality has changed, but simply because he is more comfortable when speaking his first language.

When couples are in situations in which they cannot use their couple-code, both partners might feel lower levels of accuracy-confidence. Couples become accustomed to use of the couple-code as a means to portray their identity in a way that feels representative of their thoughts and feelings and in a way that allows others to perceive them in the way they want to be perceived. In the two scenarios above, couples experienced difficulties navigating their ideas of their own identities and their partners’ identities as the social contexts that they were in changed. While couples often experienced issues with accuracy-confidence in the beginnings of their relationships, couples reported that over time, they felt like they were able to convey their thoughts and feelings (emically, their “true self”) to their partner much more easily. Couple-codes are a huge way for partners to meld language in a way that makes both individuals comfortable, thereby increasing levels of comfort and helping both partners feel as though they are able to convey their identities how they want to. Nevertheless, it is also useful for partners to consider how differing levels of comfort, when speaking other varieties of a language, might impact their ability to perform their identity in the ways that their partner is used to. Regarding a person’s portrayal of their personality as authentic in all linguistic settings, and considering how changing levels of comfort might impact this portrayal, can help alleviate the potential pitfalls that reliance on accuracy-confidence can pose. Thinking of bilinguality and multilinguality of bilingual and multilingual partners as part of their identity can help all of presentations of personality feel valid.
Value-Confidence

The second way that confidence was spoken and thought about by my interviewees was related to if a person felt comfortable and welcomed to “be themselves.” This sort of confidence, which I will refer to as “value-confidence,” relates primarily to notions of self-worth and self-esteem, and finding one’s niche in society both as an individual and as part of an inter-linguistic romance. This interpretation of what confidence means was relevant when discussing relationships between partners themselves; however, it became especially pertinent in social settings that also included couple’s families and friends, and also strangers and people in public settings. Between partners, a lack of value-confidence during interactions was usually not a barrier beyond what any monolingual couple might encounter.

As one might expect in any relationship, at the beginning, many inter-linguistic couples felt nervous about their romantic inclinations, and perceived connections being mutual, but informants did not report significantly higher levels of insecurity in this respect when they compared their inter-linguistic relationships to their previous monolingual ones. Many of my interlocutors explained that the times when they felt a significant lack of value-confidence were situations where they and their partner interacted with large groups of friends or family members who were speaking together, and they wanted to feel included and accepted into these social groups through participation in these conversations. This lack of value-confidence stemmed from the idea that an in-group of people existed through their ability to easily participate in this conversation. This in-group cohort would be able to fluidly share information, stories,
and jokes, and relate to each other in general, in ways that might be more challenging or inaccessible to the partner whose native language was not the dominant one in the given social context. Just like we might see in Zentalla’s depiction of how certain patterns of codeswitching for Puerto Ricans living in New York “…serv[ed] as their badge of membership in el bloque… [and] was a way of saying that they belonged,” participation in group conversation with friends and families using the dominant code would also signal membership to this group, (Zentalla 1997: 114).

As mentioned above briefly, accuracy-confidence and value-confidence can sometimes overlap, and Cleo and Huberto’s story began to touch on some of the ways that feelings of confidence that are tied up in notions of self-worth can become particularly relevant when the couple interacts within, or inside of, larger social spheres. In order to best understand why interactions with family members, friends, or even complete strangers can be so detrimental to an inter-linguistic couple’s level of value-confidence, we can look to an idea presented in Bucholtz and Hall’s piece “Identity and Interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach.” In their piece they explain the idea that although as humans we construct our identities ourselves in our own minds, our interactions with others provide substantial grounds for identity building as well. They write, “While individuals’ sense of self is certainly an important element of identity, researches of individuals’ language use (e.g., Johnstone, 1996) have shown that the only way that such self-conceptions enter the social world is via some form of discourse,” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 587). This idea, known as “the emergence principle,” can be applied to the following story told to me by Billy, another one of my interviewees.
Billy was born in New Jersey and was raised by English-speaking parents. He grew up in a relatively homogenous town surrounded by white, English-speaking people for most of his life. When he began studying at Rutgers University, he met his boyfriend Joao. Joao was an international student from Brazil who had come to study at Rutgers as well. Upon arrival, Joao struggled to communicate in English, “Prior to [arriving in the United States] he had like no English… in Brazil their schooling was very bad, he could string together like- somewhat coherent sentences,” but anything beyond basic conversation was a huge challenge. Joao and Billy began their relationship soon after Joao’s arrival. In the beginning, they muddled through their conversations, their couple-code relying on a mixture of hand gestures, laughter, and basic English. In these early stages, Billy knew zero Portuguese, so their system of communication was entirely monolingual. As time went on, Billy began to pick up some simple Portuguese phrases, and after one year of being together, their couple-code began to include bits of Portuguese here and there. Joao’s English had also improved greatly through spending time with Billy, and the two were comfortable in their rhythm of speaking together. Later in their relationship, Billy and Joao spent a summer in Brazil with Joao’s family so that Billy could learn more Portuguese. Billy worked hard during their trip to ensure he spoke only in Portuguese in order to learn as much as possible. These sorts of internal couple-code, codeswitches signaled effort and care on Billy’s part. He wanted to learn Portuguese for Joao and for the betterment of their communication and relationship. Billy was proud of what he had learned while in Brazil, and when they returned to Rutgers, Billy’s Portuguese had improved greatly. The following spring, Billy studied abroad in Portugal. When he and Joao were reunited once again, Billy’s
Portuguese was advanced enough they could include a more full-fledged Portuguese in their couple-code, or so Billy assumed.

Before spending time in Portuguese speaking countries, when Billy was unable to speak Portuguese comfortably, the ability for the two of them to choose which language to communicate in had never come up, because it was obvious that they had to communicate in English in order for them to both understand each other. Because there had not been a choice before, the pair had not discussed that Joao actually preferred not to speak in Portuguese with Billy. Even after Portuguese became an available language of communication, Joao deferred to English, his second language. This perplexed Billy, he had been so excited to finally get to use his Portuguese in his relationship and “even the playing field” in terms of who was putting in the effort to speak the other person’s first language. To his dismay, Joao had no interest in speaking Portuguese at this time in his life. Billy explained that,

One of the bigger things now is that he’s kind of adverse to speaking Portuguese because now that he’s back in school he’s like I want to master English. When we speak, he will answer me in English even if I speak in Portuguese. I think he doesn’t like the Brazilian identity that he has, and he’s trying to denounce that by being like, a full fledged American and not speaking Portuguese, I think he just wants to be like, an English-speaking American. It’s frustrating because as somebody who grew up monolingual and [as] somebody who loves learning languages and practicing other languages, it’s difficult for me because I want to learn Portuguese. I want to practice and… so it’s just difficult, like, I get it, I understand, I think if I was living in another country I would want to be fully immersed in the culture but it does put a strain on our relationship.

For Billy, speaking Portuguese together seemed fun and exciting. It seemed like a way to index his connection to, and interest in Joao’s Brazilian identity and bridge the gaps that
sometimes existed between them since Joao was initially always forced to speak in his second language when with Billy. Billy was excited to understand Joao in a new way and bring elements of his Brazilian past into their American present, but Joao felt entirely different about speaking Portuguese, around Billy and in general.

Joao explained that when he spoke Portuguese in America, it reminded him of times when he was made fun of, misunderstood, or belittled, leaving him with low levels of self-worth and therefore low levels of value-confidence. Additionally, because Joao and Billy’s relationship was framed by their membership to an academic community, since they attended school together, English contained certain positive associations in this context that Portuguese did not. In Fuller’s study of the bilingual and monolingual classrooms in Illinois, she noted that, “Because of [a] clear message in the school that academic achievement meant participating in the monolingual classroom, it would be rational for the children to equate speaking English with academic success,” (Fuller 2007: 115). In Fuller’s study, the students were injected with the message that success at school meant being fluent in English; Joao had internalized this idea as well-- being smart meant “mastering English.” While this idea was challenging enough when isolated to the university context, when it also became mapped onto Billy and Joao’s personal relationship, Billy found this challenging.

When Joao spoke Portuguese in the United States, he did not always feel comfortable or accepted by society. Speaking Portuguese in America did not feel comforting; it felt like a reminder that he was an outsider. He wanted to appear to be “an average American.” This is Bucholtz and Hall’s emergence principle in action. Despite what ideas about his Brazilian and Portuguese-speaking-self Joao may have created prior
to his arrival in the United States, his repeated interactions and conversations in the United States after his arrival implanted new ideas about Joao’s language associations and sense of self in his mind that greatly affected him. Bucholtz and Hall tell us that, “Identity is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore as fundamentally a social and cultural phenomenon,” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 588). Identity construction is not a static or singular occurrence. The construction of identity based on language is a fluid and ongoing process. When huge shifts happen in the way that you speak to others and in the way that others speak to you, your sense of self can change immensely, and an identity that you might have previously been comfortable with, might suddenly become a source of immense insecurity.

Joao’s choice to avoid speaking Portuguese with Billy initially caused a large misunderstanding to erupt between them. At first, it seemed incomprehensible that Joao would choose not to speak his native language with his boyfriend after his boyfriend had lovingly learned it for the benefit of their mutual communication and connection. Billy felt upset that his work to connect with Joao was not appreciated by him; this then impacted Billy’s levels of value-confidence. Eventually, Joao explained that from his perspective, he lives in an environment in which his first language is constantly working against him and he is looked down upon because people’s negative perceptions of the Brazilian identity that are associated with the language. While for Billy, speaking Portuguese made him seem like an educated and sophisticated world-traveler, for Joao it made people think he was uneducated or that he did not belong in the United States. It was unappealing to speak Portuguese because of this, especially during times when
feeling high levels of value-confidence was especially important, like in a relationship. Joao wanted to speak in English with Billy because he was proud that he had learned English quickly and speaking English, rather than making him feel minimized (like Portuguese), made him feel empowered. Despite Joao’s explanation of why speaking Portuguese is unappealing, Billy described how painful it was to watch Joao struggle to embrace his Brazilian identity for him. Billy was attracted to Joao specifically for some of the qualities that Joao wanted to rid himself of. Billy wanted Joao to be content in his Portuguese identity. We will revisit stories like this in the next chapter when we unpack the dominance of English and how language ideology affects couples, but the moral of the story is that Joao and Billy had to go through some trial and error when constructing a couple-code that enabled both of them to feel comfortable in American society. While Billy and Joao still emphasize English in their couple-code, they have found ways to incorporate Portuguese at times when it can work for both of them.

**Stability-Confidence**

While this variety of confidence was not emphasized in my introduction to this chapter as it diverges slightly from the ideas of selfhood and acceptance that the other varieties are both linked to, this variety of confidence was also commonly spoken about during interviews. This third and final variety of confidence, which I will call “stability-confidence,” relates to sureness about the relationship itself. My interlocutors often described being nervous at some points, most significantly in the early stages of the relationship, about whether or not the relationship would progress in a way that was
satisfying to them, and if developing understanding of one another in deep ways would be possible. As partners were with each other more consistently over time, this nervousness about stability-confidence seemed to disappear for the most part. I would point to communication methods like the couple-code, helping to soothe these sorts of fears, but in the beginnings of inter-linguistic romances, these concerns were clearly prevalent.

This variety of confidence is the one that couples spoke about the least, mostly because the majority of couples were well beyond a point in their relationship in which they had significant doubts about their abilities to communicate with each other. Nevertheless, this doubt of the ability to actually make the relationship work was salient among younger couples who were just embarking upon their relationships, and older couples alluded to these sorts of feelings when reflecting on the beginnings of their relationships. Stability-confidence is important because it demonstrates the difficult realities that couples might initially encounter, as well as shows how inter-linguistic couples grow and change as they find creative ways to overcome these sorts of doubts as time passes. The following quote comes from a partner in the couple that had been in a relationship for the shortest period of time out of all of the couples I interviewed. At the time of the interview they had been together for only six months and were able to reflect on the stability-confidence related problems that they initially encountered. Raquel grew up in Costa Rica and speaks Spanish as her first language, and English and Hebrew as second and third languages respectively; her boyfriend, Leor is Israeli; he speaks Hebrew as a first language, English as a second language, and is currently learning Spanish. The couple communicates primarily in English with Hebrew and Spanish augmenting their
couple-code. Raquel spoke extensively about how challenging bridging the language gap was for them initially, but how she feels language is no longer a barrier for them.

The first time we went out… we spoke English, like just English, and we were both a little nervous, so it was very formal- not formal, but very- English… um, I had no idea how to be myself in English, it was very very hard, I think that was the hardest part for me… not only like say jokes that I would say in Spanish but also like just being comfortable like talking in English and expressing myself… it was just like oh my god I have to be like me in another language is so hard… but I [had] never been so like, intimate with someone in another language, so of course with my friends we talk very deep stuff and everything, but this was different for me. Um but we talked a lot about it since the beginning of the relationship because he had the same problem as well, so many times we were both a little frustrated that we couldn’t completely say what we wanted to say because of the language barriers and what I always told him was like ok I can say it and I can repeat it and try to explain it but if I were to speak in Spanish I can say it like so many different ways, um so I can get my message through but it’s not the same…I think that by this point the language is not a huge barrier for me it’s mostly the culture and I know they’re kind of related, but um like we can speak English we understand each other, and he’s trying to learn Spanish he’s very excited about that and like I know Hebrew, so the language… at this point is not a huge deal but the culture is soo- for example when I went home for winter break in December, I was like oh my god like, what am I doing dating this guy like he’s never gonna understand my culture, he’s never gonna be able to be like part of my world back home, we’re just good for eachother in the Brandeis bubble… so- that was a huge like oh shit, what am I doing… but umm we’ll see what happens.

Raquel’s description of her experience navigating what she described as initially a language barrier with Leor, and then progressively what they thought of as exclusively a cultural barrier, is an idea expressed by many of the younger couples or couples in the earlier stages of their relationship.

The couples with more experience as inter-linguistic dyads tended to report high levels of stability-confidence, going along with their generally high levels of satisfaction.
in their relationship overall, and did not seem to be afflicted by the sorts of problems that Raquel and Leor experienced more recently. A lack of stability-confidence has the ability to impact inter-linguistic relationships significantly because it can cause a partner to misunderstand a doubt a partner has about their ability to overcome barriers, as a doubt in their love of, or commitment to their partner. Additionally, as Raquel showed, sometimes the immediate response to doubts in communication abilities is to shut down all communication or shut the other partner out, which inevitably only adds to the barriers that are already in play. Raquel, as well as other interviewees, explained that as time passes, she has seen that their ability to develop a system of communication that works for them (their couple-code) has enabled them to bypass most of the pitfalls they encountered at the beginning of their relationship, but also beyond that, she says of her relationship with Leor that, “… since we started being together, my personality in English has gotten stronger, so it’s like steps. I feel like… now that I got to this romantic relationship, I definitely got to another level, and I feel more comfortable saying that I’m myself, completely or almost completely myself in English.” She means by this-- and most of my other interviewees feel similarly-- she currently sees her relationship as something that adds positively to her identity and to her life. As one informant put it, “I feel like it’s really enriching, [and] I honestly think that it’s attractive that he speaks another language.” Stability-confidence increases steadily over time, and eventually couples do not seem to be negatively impacted by this barrier that impacts inter-linguistic relationships at their start.

Romance is a relationship platform that, as described by my interviewees, is something that inherently requires vulnerability and openness- qualities that demand all
three of the varieties of confidence for success. Though this conceptualization of romance is quite a Western take, all of my interviewees seemed to value these characteristics and uphold them as the way to most easily navigate inter-linguistic romance. Informants explained that while the language barrier itself can be a factor that adds more stress to a relationship, oftentimes, the primary sources of emotional stress come from the dominance of the English language and its ability to render all other languages and linguistic identities inferior, and the dynamics of friend groups and family situations that can leave one partner excluded from the in-group. These varieties of confidence are all issues that were significantly improved by couple innovations with language, but in situations that included outsiders, navigating communication became much more difficult and a partner’s ability to feel perceived in the way they wanted to be, and accepted by others. In Fuller’s study on bilingual classrooms, she notes that, “Although the children use language to indicate their membership in pre-existing groups, they also use language to bridge the gaps between these groups, combine them, and create new categories and identities as they do so,” (Fuller 2007: 107). In the same ways, couples learn to use their couple-code to make them feel comfortable and ease them into social situations that might otherwise be unwelcoming. They use the couple-code as a way to remind themselves that they are members of their own group-- within their relationship.
CHAPTER THREE

Navigating the Outside: Exploring the impact of language ideology and English dominance on inter-linguistic couples

As I explained in the introduction, when I first decided to begin working with inter-linguistic couples, I did not initially expect the majority of the couples to contain at least one native-English-speaking partner; however, as I continued my search for couples, it became clear that having one partner who was a native English speaker would be somewhat of a constant for the majority of the couples I worked with. Of all of the couples I interviewed, only two had partners who were both non-native English speakers. In part, this is a result of the study taking place primarily in the United States, but it also has to do with the social circles that I am a part of, and how I formed the connections necessary to conduct interviews.

As a native speaker of English who grew up in Burlington, Vermont, an extremely homogenous city, I was surrounded in large part by people who spoke English as a first language, and who likely only knew bits and pieces of a second language, perhaps that they learned in school. My friends, family, and general community were predominantly white Americans who had grown up in New England or the in Midwest, and who spoke only English. Once a student at Brandeis, while my community diversified slightly, my close friends remained primarily women who are native speakers of English, who have grown up in the United States. More than half of the couples I connected with to interview came through my friendships with these women. This is to say, that it was easy for me to find couples in which one partner was similar to me. This, of course, has had a significant effect on my data. As I noted in my introduction, I
recognize that my scope is narrow, and does not encapsulate the breadth of possibilities in terms of sexual orientation, race, age, or language, in the realm of inter-linguistic romances. By the same token, having couples feel comfortable enough with me to divulge sensitive information about their vulnerabilities and relationships was necessary to produce the sort of data I hoped to acquire, and feeling similar to me, the interviewer, certainly was helpful for doing for this.

While I did not initially intend to replicate the pattern of having a native English speaking, American-born partner in each couple, this dynamic eventually became a sort of “control,” for all but two couples. When I was first presented with the opportunity to interview couples in which neither partner was a native-English-speaker, I declined, thinking this would inhibit me from honing the focus of my study; however as time went on, and I continued to get more offers from couples like this, I decided that I wanted to see how their experiences were similar and different from the group of couples that I had already interviewed. Though the effect that English had on my partners, both those living in the United States and those living elsewhere, was clearly quite strong, after speaking with the two couples for whom English was not a native language for either partner, the impact of English felt even greater. These two couples drew my attention to how strong a force English was for every couple to which I spoke. When I reflected upon my interviews with the couples I had spoken to previously, the power of English was highlighted for me, and the relationship that English has to other languages became an important factor to consider in how many parts of each couple’s relationship play out. English, has a special place in the world, and especially within the United States. Linguistic anthropologists have long studied why certain languages gain more or less
clout, why certain languages become more and less dominant, and why certain languages flourish while others become extinct. When looking at these inter-linguistic relationships, the role of English in developing power dynamics and altering a couple’s ability to move through spaces in an equal and unperturbed way is vital to unpack.

I would be remiss not to discuss the power that comes with the English language without mentioning colonization. The forces of colonization have no doubt had a great impact on the trajectories of my couples’ interactions in many situations. There are many both direct, and indirect ways that histories of colonization can be traced to the problems that many of my couples encounter, most especially when they leave the privacy of their couple-bubble. Anthropologist Jonathan Friedman has done significant work thinking about colonization and language. In his work, “Globalizing Languages: Ideologies and Realities of the Contemporary Global System,” he discusses Hawaii’s linguistic past and present, unpacking the nuances of the systems of language and power that are at play. Friedman explains that, “English has indeed become this dominant world language,” (Friedman 2003: 47) and that, “The current expansion of English on a global scale is related to an interesting process of stratification or even specialized differentiation-both within the domain of English and between local and national languages and an increasingly dominant elite English, which is often itself a localized variant of the original,” (Friedman 2003: 43). What Friedman is drawing attention to is the idea that English not only occupies an elevated position in relation to other languages, but also, specific varieties of English are more highly regarded than others are, and these sorts of distinctions matter in terms of the power and status that a person has.
This hierarchy is clearly present within American society and is extremely relevant to the daily lives of people participating in inter-linguistic romances. Codeswitching, and the couple-code as well, are greatly impacted by these types of discrepancies in the power a language has, because switches between more and less contextually dominant languages can index different relationships or membership in a certain social group. When one partner is a native-English-speaker, they are automatically advantaged within the majority of contexts in the United States, creating an imbalance between the partners. If one partner is consistently regarded more positively by society because their dominant language is English, or because of how they choose to speak English, it can cause partners to have very different lived experiences. This can lead to difficulties for partners, both individually, in their interactions with each other, and also in how they move through social settings as a couple. This imbalance of power can be attributed to specific language ideologies. The idea of language ideology refers to how perceptions of a language reflect perceptions about the speakers of that language and of their wider culture; this idea is an important part of linguistic anthropology. There are hundreds of examples of ways that people who speak different variations of English, or other languages entirely, are marginalized within the world, and in particular, in American society. One relevant example comes from Mary Bucholtz and her piece entitled, “The Whiteness of Nerds: Superstandard English and Racial Markedness.” In her essay she explains some of the language ideology at work within English; she notes,

Among European American students at Bay City High School, a three-way ideological division of English corresponded to similarly ideologically based social divisions: most students of color were thought to speak nonstandard English, most white students were thought to speak colloquial Standard English, and nerds, who did not always incorporate
colloquial forms into their speech, were heard to speak an exaggeratedly formal version of Standard English; that is, superstandard English, (Bucholtz 2001: 91).

In the same ways that the identities of the participants in Bucholtz’s study are reduced to the way they speak English, the partners who participated in my thesis often experienced having their identity be reduced to their manner of speaking, and it can weigh heavily on them and their relationships. This is why using the couple-code is such an important part of communication between partners. In most forms of partners’ couple-codes, all languages spoken by both partners are included in at least some way. This use is an active way that partners can index solidarity with one another, and meet each other in the middle. If one partner’s first language is one that many people view in a negative way, when their partner uses this language, this might, in part, show their commitment to their partner by risking the baggage that can come with speaking it.

In the following chapter, I will discuss how the dominance of English and the deeply rooted language ideologies that surround English affect my interviewees in a variety of ways. This chapter contains different stories from a few couples, but what links all of these stories together, are the overtones of English dominance that are present in each of them. While the majority of the couples I interviewed currently reside in the Boston area, some of the most important data I collected came from the two couples that do not currently live within the United States. The couples I interviewed who do not live in the United States live in Montreal and Israel. These two couples were able to provide an entirely different perspective than my U.S.-based couples could, and what they shared with me spoke volumes to what a significant effect living in the United States has on inter-linguistic couples. Throughout this chapter, I will show how language ideologies
surrounding English connect to the couple-code in a variety of situations, and I will address instances in which codeswitching carried particularly important meaning for couples, oftentimes showing partner solidarity against the forces of English. I will also explain some of the problems that English dominance causes for couples, and how the power of English produces noticeable differences between how couples feel when they are in private, versus when they are in public.

English Expectations

At different points throughout my work so far, I have discussed some of the ways that language ideology can be troublesome for couples. Thus far, stories from Billy and Joao, Cleo and Huberto, and Lena and Sebastian, have helped express how the position of English in American society affects the experiences of couples. In Zentella’s study, she explains that,

English enjoyed symbolic domination because of its power on international, national, and local levels. Whereas English was the language of an independent and wealthy US, spread by its technologically superior media and spoken by its first class citizens, Spanish was the language of a dependent and impoverished Puerto Rico, and of its second class citizens, (Zentella 1997:108).

This power that English holds, affected all of my couples in one way or another, and while we can trace the roots of the oppressive nature of English to colonialism, on the ground, couples attributed their difficulties with English to smaller-scale, more tangible issues that directly impact them on a day-to-day basis. One of these more emically visible problems is a discrepancy in previous access to second-language education between couples. Often, when English is one of the languages involved for a given
couple, the non-native-English-speaking partner began learning English well before their native-English-speaking partner began to learn a second language. Of course, this is dependent on many factors, including nationality and socio-economic status, among other demographic variables; however, for the majority of those I interviewed, the non-native-English-speaking partner began learning English on average between ages 8-10, while their native-English-speaking partner who grew up in the United States typically began learning their partner’s first language at one of two points, either in high school around age 14, or upon meeting their partner, typically after having dated them for six months or more. The perspective held by many countries that learning English is a priority, is not something mirrored as strongly within American society about any specific second language. Americans who are white, and monolingual speakers of English, tend to exhibit a sort of “English-speaker-fragility” that shelters them from feeling like there is an urgent need to speak any other language apart other than their own.

When a non-native-English-speaking partner has learned English long before their partner has learned a second language, most relevantly, the first language of their partner, it automatically positions English as a more “obvious” choice for communication use. Learning a language earlier on in life not only enhances the speaker’s comfort and dexterity in using the language, but according to some studies, actually enables the speaker to have a stronger emotional response to words in that language than they would have if they learned it later in life. One such study, “predict[s] a general decline in the emotional force of language as age of acquisition increases and proficiency decreases,” (Harris, Berko, and Gleason 2006: 66). This would imply that typically the non-native-English-speaking partner might be able to have higher emotional connections to words
and phrases in English than a native-English-speaking partner would be able to have in a second language that they learned later in life. This divergence between potential emotional connections to a language was clearly visible in some couples. This discrepancy makes the inclusion of all of the languages spoken by both partners into the couple-code all the more necessary as this inclusion indexes the persistence of both couples beyond the rather depressing expectations that society has of their linguistic possibilities.

Cleo and Huberto demonstrated this idea of an emotional discrepancy. During their interview, I asked them, “Would your relationship change if Cleo no longer understood and spoke Spanish?” Cleo replied saying, “I think for me no… I don’t want to lose Spanish for who I am like intellectually and for a life skill but I don’t think it would affect our relationship like just between us.” Huberto disagreed strongly; he explained,

I don’t know to what degree it would affect our relationship, but I would definitely be disappointed if you did, because I think part of our connection is that… I don’t know what it would look like or what it would feel like, but I definitely think we would lose something, I think if she lost Spanish then there would be parts of me that she would never understand. I think there are important moments when I can’t say something in English and I know that she will probably be able to understand my Spanish and if she couldn’t do that, that would be something I would miss.

While Cleo explained her connection to Spanish as more of an academic one, when speaking about English, Cleo and Huberto both expressed having strong connections to the language. This discrepancy is telling of a possible emotional connection as predicted by the language and emotion study, but perhaps more importantly, it is indicative of
Huberto’s need for his second language, English, as a means of survival in the United States, while Cleo’s relationship to Spanish is much more cavalier because there are not forces outside of her relationship that insist that she maintain this part of her identity in order to be trusted, taken seriously, or perceived in the way she wants to be.

While Cleo and Huberto may not have felt connected to each other’s first languages in quite the same way, it did not mean that they were unable to perform care through language in important ways. While many couples felt particularly connected to their partner’s first language, in some cases because of their own personal reasons, and in some cases specifically because it was their partner’s first language, regardless of whether or not a partner felt connected to the language or not, use of it as part of the couple-code could index many significant things. It is important to separate the different meanings that become associated with speaking one partner’s first language versus the other partner’s first language--in most cases, English, versus a minority language. While speaking English as part of the couple-code could still be extremely valuable to building a connection between partners, I would argue that particularly when the couple is in broader social settings or in public, speaking the minority language carries more meaning and weight because of its lower ranking in American society’s hierarchy of languages. In the case of Cleo and Huberto, if they speak English in public together, it might index a desire to avoid attention or blend in. If they spoke Spanish in public together, this might index feelings of community and connection between them since it is rarely the dominant language of the social settings they find themselves in.

Even though Cleo might not feel a particularly strong connection to Spanish naturally, if she speaks it in public, it can actively build her relationship with Huberto and
allow her to feel connected to him through speaking. When Cleo and Huberto are in private, a switch between Spanish and English might have less gravity, because the language ideologies imposed by strangers are not directly impacting them when they are alone; however, in public, these sorts of switches are more significant. When Cleo and Huberto encounter disharmony caused by English dominance behind closed doors, it can easily be corrected because they know and care about each other, and can take steps to change their actions and recalibrate whatever might not be in order. Within broader social contexts, Cleo and Huberto do not have control over how one of their first languages, namely Cleo’s English, is consistently prioritized over Huberto’s Spanish. This bridges us to a dual problem produced by English dominance that inter-linguistic couples frequently experience: non-native-English-speaking partners are expected to speak English regardless of their own feelings towards speaking it, or their level of fluency.

_for those who Rated their English Speaking Abilities as Lower_  

Those who were less comfortable, or previously less comfortable, speaking English, described feeling embarrassed about their speaking abilities, particularly when they were with their partner in a public place where they were more susceptible to the judgments of outsiders. One non-native English speaking interviewee explained this feeling saying,

_I just feel nervous about speaking English, because, like, I know there is going to be a judgment if I get it wrong, like, not about my speaking only, but like, about me, and who I am- or who they think I am. It can be kind of, debilitating at times, because I just don’t know what the response I’m_
going to get will be and how it will affect the person’s, like, image of me as a whole.

This sentiment is why the native-English-speaking partner’s use of the minority language as part of the couple-code is so important. One native-English-speaking partner explained that, “I like speaking [Spanish] because I know that there are moments when that, like, makes life harder, and I want us to battle that together, we’re a team, so our language can be kind of a team effort also.” Use of the minority language as part of the couple-code in public helps the non-native-English-speaking partner feel more comfortable because they are not alone in their struggle against English dominance. Non-native-English-speaking partners frequently expressed that oftentimes, people seemed surprised that they were dating or married to a native-English-speaking partner and did not speak English perfectly fluently. The idea that it is the non-native-English-speaking partner’s job to learn English, rather than the native-English-speaking partner’s job to learn the first language of their partner, seemed common for many couples and this idea feeds into this generalized burden on non-native-English-speaking partner who live in the United States, that learning English in a certain way is a moral obligation, and by not fulfilling this requirement, they might be unfit to be dating a native-English-speaking American.

**For those who Rated their English Speaking Abilities as Higher**

For non-native-English-speaking partners who were completely fluent in English, or spoke more comfortably, the power of English was no easier to navigate. Partners who felt confident in their English often experienced a different kind of issue, in that it was often automatically assumed that they would want to speak English and that because
of their advanced knowledge of, and access to, the dominant language of most American contexts, they should defer to English and speak it in the most “correct” and “standard” way that they possibly could. The structures and people putting this pressure on non-native-English-speaking partners often do not realize that the way they hold standard English as the idealized way of speaking, or as the way of speaking that everyone should aspire to, is reflective of an internalized hierarchy of peoples that can be directly linked to forces of racism and colonization. Non-native-English-speaking partners explained that often, it seemed unfathomable to many white Americans that despite their knowledge of English, they might prefer to maintain their own first language, or a different second language other than English as their dominant one. In the context of their relationships, not choosing to speak English with their partner, especially in social settings, cast them as a “bad” non-native-English-speaker, rather than a “good” one who might defer to English to meet the needs of the English speakers around them. This is a narrative that is present among many English speakers who speak both a more “standard” English and a less standard, perhaps AVEE for example. Making the choice to not conform to a standard way of speaking, or choosing to maintain a language other than English as their first language, is a way for non-native-English-speaking partners to preserve the identity that they choose to align themselves with.

These sorts of choices can be extremely challenging for both partners to navigate. Cleo and Huberto shared with me another story that demonstrated this sort of situation well. One example of a public instance in which English dominance was harder to overcome happened for them in their shared workplace, the high school where
they are both teachers. Cleo explained that during lunch, she and Huberto often sit together, she noted that,

A lot of times we are at a lunch table together and a lot of times the Spanish speakers, we all sit at a lunch table together and there are sometimes people, one or two, who don’t speak Spanish, and I feel obligated to speak in English to them, even if the conversation is in Spanish. A few months ago, I noticed that [there] was a pattern during lunch... to me it seemed like people in [the Spanish] department were ignoring the math teacher or science teacher who came to say hi, and I [said to Huberto], [a person who doesn’t speak Spanish] is here why don’t we include her? … and Hugo was like that’s work (meaning speaking English) I want to enjoy my lunch.

Huberto explained that at lunch,

It’s liberating-to speak Spanish. When I spend a whole day at work and I am forced to speak a language, when I have to sacrifice again [at lunch], when I have to do that all day or all week or all year, so those are the moments that I treasure and …. [that] is the time I get to kind of get rid of the mask that I have, where I can laugh.

Cleo and Huberto both consistently speak a fluid mixture of Spanish and English together when they are alone, as part of their couple-code and this works very successfully for them. While they are at work and the language ideologies of more people are involved, we can see that the codeswitch between their couple-code and more standard forms of English and Spanish that other people are able to participate in carry meaning for them and those around them. Monolingual, English-speakers compelled Cleo to ask Huberto to speak English more, signaling that the inclusion of Spanish in their speech did not conform to their English-preferring views. Meanwhile, Huberto used standard Spanish to show that he was taking a break from work and did not wish to engage in work-related conversation. In this instance, it is clear that the language dynamics that usually work for
Cleo and Huberto were thrown off when outsiders became part of the couple’s world, and the codeswitches that ensue demonstrated this well.

**English in Israel**

Twelve out of fourteen of my interviewed couples currently live in the United States, but two of the couples live elsewhere. These couples provided different insights that my United States-based couples could not offer. One such couple, Mabel and Chai, live in Tel Aviv, Israel. After being in a long distance relationship for more than two years, Mabel moved to Israel last year to live with Chai and improve her Hebrew speaking skills. Mabel and Chai explained that during the beginning of their relationship, English accounted for a large percentage of their couple-code, because while Mabel did not yet have significant knowledge of Hebrew, Chai was relatively comfortable communicating in English. As their relationship continued and Mabel learned more Hebrew both through taking classes, and from speaking with Chai, the balance was able to shift toward a more balanced combination of English and Hebrew. When Mabel arrived in Israel, she was excited to continue improving her Hebrew and anticipated speaking with Chai’s family and friends in Hebrew regularly. As she settled in; however, she realized that people were less inclined to speak in Hebrew with her than she had anticipated.

Mabel noted that outside of Chai and his family, people typically tried to speak to her in English rather than in Hebrew. She explained that Chai is the main person who she is able to speak Hebrew with, which is ironic because before her arrival she anticipated Chai being the primary person with whom she would speak *English*. When Mabel spends time with Chai’s friends, she says they often defer to speaking English with
her. This use of English signals an assumption that their English speaking skills are stronger than her Hebrew speaking skills. Mabel and Chai explained that the couple-code that they use when they are alone is funny to their Hebrew-speaking friends who cannot make sense of the switches and swaps of words and languages that are now an effortless part of communication between Mabel and Chai. Beyond the couple-code though, she explained that among many Israelis with whom she interacts, there exists an idea that it is more convenient to avoid listening to Mabel’s flawed Hebrew by using English, an “already mastered” second language for many Israelis in Tel Aviv. Mabel encountered a strange feeling of being simultaneously belittled and rewarded when she tried to speak Hebrew. Many Israelis seemed to have an attitude that said, “Your efforts to speak Hebrew are kind and valiant, but we all know that you can’t handle anything but English, so let’s just cut to the chase.” Mabel’s experience is not one that was shared by all native-English-speaking, American partners. You might recall Vanessa’s time in Germany during which Frank’s friends were reluctant to diverge from their German-only conversations, or interviewees like Lena, who explained that while in France, she was usually expected to speak in French while in the presence of her husband and his friends and family. Mabel’s experiences in Israel show that English’s status and dominance can be felt in many places, but the counter examples prove that certain language powers like French maintain their positions even when English speakers are around.

While Mabel explained how she is expected to speak English, even in Israel, Chai explained that when he spends time in the United States, he too is expected to speak English, even though it is apparent that it is not his first language. He discussed feeling very nervous the first time he met Mabel’s family and friends from home. He said that he
was worried that they would think he “was stupid if [he] made mistakes.” He explained that when in the presence of other people, he felt that he could not rely on the couple-code that he and Mabel typically use. While he and Mabel exhibit high levels of non-standard blindness, others are quick to note the “errors” that they make while speaking their non-native languages, and this can impede them from being able to use their couple-code as successfully when around others. The way that Chai is used to speaking English with Mabel is different than the way that he speaks English with other people. While Mabel was accustomed to the ways that Chai spoke English, her friends and family were not, and his speech quirks that she no longer took any notice of were very obvious to her friends and family, and made him feel nervous about his speaking. The way that Mabel and Chai naturally communicated between each other was not positively received whether they were in Israel or the United States, because their couple-code made up of English, Hebrew, and Chai-Mabel-isms, that worked so well for them, did not fit in properly with the ideal of “standard” English that their American friends had, nor with the glorification of “pure” English that their Israeli friends conceived of. While their couple-code works perfectly for them when they are alone, when in America or in Israel, speaking around other people becomes more challenging.

When Neither Partner is a Native English Speaker

As I noted earlier, two of my couples, Frank and Vanessa, and Leor and Raquel, contain no native speakers of English. My interviews with both of these couples provided me with extremely fruitful insights. While certain dynamics explained by them were in keeping with what I had learned from the rest of the couples, other ideas were completely fresh, and validated my data in completely new ways. Though these couples
gave me much to consider, one of the most interesting seeds that they left me to digest was, evidently, their relationship to English. Though one couple was made up of partners from Costa Rica (Spanish) and Israel (Hebrew), and the other couple with partners from Nicaragua (Spanish) and Germany (German), both couples explained their couple-code as extremely English dominant. What complicated this dynamic was that for both of these couples, there was a language apart from English that both partners knew. For Vanessa and Frank, both partners knew Spanish in addition to having English in common. For Raquel and Leor, both partners knew Hebrew as well as English. Despite the option to speak in one of the partner’s first languages, English was the leading language across the board. While this is a product in part of the couples meeting in the United States, their English-speaking surroundings, and their mutually higher level of fluency in English than any other language, the overtones of English that pervaded both of these couple’s interactions spoke to the assertive nature of English and how it is able to maintain its position at the top of the language pile in every relationship.

**English Only Please**

For two of the couples I interviewed, the American, native-English-speaking partner did not speak more than a few basic phrases of their partner’s native language, and the non-native-English-speaking partner was fluent, or mostly fluent, in English. For these couples, their couple-code was more than 90% English. This drastically changes at lot of the dynamics that were typically at play for the others of the couples I worked with. In these couples, the bilingual partner was constantly making the conscious choice to not be speaking their first language, while the native-English-speaking partner was always able to speak in their first language. While in some relationships, most in fact, the partners
interactions with one another strengthened their conversational skills and overall fluency in their partner’s dominant language, in these relationships, the non-native-English-speaking partner’s English skills were typically greatly improved, but the native-English-speaking partner only learned enough of their partner’s language to say a few key phrases or to make little jokes with their partner as part of their contribution to the couple-code. In these relationships, when the native-English-speaking partner used some of their partner’s language, it carried significant weight because of their limited access to the language as a whole. Use of their partner’s language in this case often signaled an increased desire to connect or express intense emotions like love. Native-English-speaking partners often learned specific phrases to be able to express these sentiments in their partner’s first language, but in both of the relationships that followed this pattern, the native-English-speaking partner expressed a desire to learn their partner’s first language more completely, in one case Turkish and in the other Portuguese.

Despite this expressed desire, in both cases, the non-native-English-speaking partner explained that the thought of their partner speaking their native language felt strange to them. The non-native-English-speaking partners were completely accustomed to the level of English speaking in their relationship. One interviewee, a Turkish woman named Isil, explained that imagining her partner David speaking in Turkish felt strange to her. She said that because her idea of him was so rooted in English, hearing him speak in Turkish would be to change who he was, what she understood his personality to be, and erase part of the person she had fallen in love with and been attracted to. In part, this is a product of a significant change like this being challenging no matter what, but in other ways this is a byproduct of English dominance. Despite the non-native-English-speaking
partners in both of these couples wanting to maintain the English-dominant status quo, they still acknowledged how their partner not speaking their native language sometimes impacted their relationship. Most significantly of course, when the couple was outside of their own bubble when their couple-code might not be sufficient for communication with outside friends, family, or the like. Every couple eventually adapts to their partner’s and their own language preferences, whether that means they are speaking their partner’s native language all the time, half the time, or never, and once the couple-code is established, it is how partners become most comfortable interacting. While the couple-code has the ability to evolve and change over time, because partner’s rely so much on the couple-code as a means of connecting them to each other and separating their language from that of the outside world, the thought of the couple-code changing significantly might lead to difficulties for the couple.

**Bilingual City Provides Balance**

The other couple I interviewed that does not currently reside in the United States is Zena and Karim. This couple began their relationship in Montreal when they were both students at McGill University. As discussed before, Zena speaks English as her first language, and Karim speaks French as his. Both Zena and Karim consider themselves bilingual in both French and English. Montreal, where they currently live, is one of the most bilingual cities in North America. According to the Canadian census data, in Montreal, 7.1% of residents speak only English, and 36.9% of residents speak only French, and the vast majority, 55.9%, are bilingual in both French and English, meaning most of population of the city mirrors Zena and Karim’s bilingual background (Statistics Canada 2017). While Zena and Karim expressed times when their communication habits
can be slightly strained when in public, just like any of the other couples I spoke to, the bilingual social circles that they spend time in make their communication in public significantly different than that of my United States-based couples. Zena and Karim painted a picture in which linguistic burdens could be distributed equally between the two of them. Being constantly surrounded by French-English bilinguals made their couple-code seem less out of the ordinary, even for their friends who speak only one language, because the city as a whole is accustomed to bilingual communication. Zena explained these dynamics saying,

I mean it’s Montreal so everyone pretty much speaks French and English, which is good, but at the same time, pretty much everyone has a preference, of which one they’re more comfortable with, so like, if we’re like, at a restaurant or something like that, and like I dunno, like the waiter or waitress is like, a lot stronger in French, then maybe like, he would order the food, and like, if they’re a lot stronger in English, it might just be easier for like, him to tell me what he wants and then me to order it, not that like we couldn’t do it the other way it’s just sometimes it’s easier, you know what I mean? So it’s kinda good, because then we like, it’s like, kinda like, since there are two sides of it here, we can like kinda support each other, especially like deep Quebecois people, like I don’t know what they’re saying, but he would, and like super like American people or like English people, sometimes he’s like ‘what? I don’t understand’ and I’m just like ‘I got it.’

While the majority of the other couples I interviewed often expressed feeling like their style of communication was completely unique to them, Zena and Karim are surrounded by an entire society that is constantly flip flopping between the two languages that they both speak.

The city of Montreal is a giant replica of their couple-code. Couples in the United States often assumed the roles of primary speaker and “side-kick” when in a social setting that contained one partner’s family members or close, personal friends, but Zena and
Karim manage the give and take of these roles constantly, and know exactly how to grapple with the confusion that these roles can sometimes present. Zena and Karim experience less of a shock when they exit their couple-bubble, because they exist within a community that is already accustomed to shifting between English and French, incorporating both languages into daily life, and evaluating which language would be most useful in a particular interaction depending on who it is with and where it is happening. Zena and Karim are also surrounded by other couples that share the same linguistic makeup that they have. While United States-based couples tended to have some friends who were in inter-linguistic relationships, often, the specific languages spoken by their friends in these couples were not the same as their own. For Zena and Karim, finding other specifically French-English bilingual couples was extremely easy. The data that Zena and Karim contributed shows how vastly different an inter-linguistic relationship could be if it did not take place in the United States. While some parts of their relationship are still challenging, a lot of the issues that come up in the U.S. are erased when a majority of the people who surround the couple are bilingual and are used to bilingual communication styles like the use of the couple-code. The bilingual identities of Zena and Karim are common in Montreal, and this leads to less strain on each of them individually, and thus less strain on them as a couple. Zena and Karim’s couple-code might feel less special since other people in their world are able to participate in it, and this idea of the couple-code being something unique and exclusive to the couple can sometimes be a huge advantage and asset to the couple being able to connect. Nevertheless, the ability to use the couple-code without attracting as much negative attention as a couple might in the United States is a bonus. Zena and Karim
experience fewer difficulties navigating social settings as a couple, because the city is already equipped to handle bilingual communication with ease. Hearing about Zena and Karim’s life as an inter-linguistic couple in Montreal shows how significantly different a couple’s lived experiences could be when outside of the United States or outside of a place in which English is regarded so much more highly than every other language.
CONCLUSION

When I began studying the relationships of inter-linguistic couples, I predicted encountering stories of difficulties, and turmoil regarding communication, however what I found, was that inter-linguistic couples find ways to communicate in effective ways that meet the needs of both partners and that allow for language to serve as a form of care and connection. The couple-code that I have spoken about at length throughout my chapters is the name that I have given to the creative ways that couples interact and relay messages to each other; however no number of quotes, and no amount of analysis, can truly do justice to the ways couples communicate with each other in such fluid and inspiring ways that I was privileged to get to see during my interviews.

When I asked couples during interviews about the parts of their communication that they like the most or think are the most valuable, partners had so much to say that completely negated the assumptions from outsiders that their communication was “broken” that I so frequently encountered. I received a wide range of answers to this question. Cleo and Huberto explained to me that they think being in an inter-linguistic relationship makes them more forgiving people because they do not take automatic understanding of language for granted and are therefore more able to forgive their partner when things go wrong. Iris and Amav discussed how they think their relationship enables their fighting to be less harmful and more productive because rather than letting out hurtful insults or words they would later regret, they have to stop and think about how they can best convey their thoughts and feelings to their partner which leads to more effective communication overall. Raquel and Leor noted how much their speaking skills improved through intimate and in depth conversations with one another. Annie and
Rafael explained that their communication in other areas of their lives has improved through speaking with each other because they have become more patient and gracious during conversations. Shai and Mabel erupted into happy fits of giggles and told me how much they love having “their own secrets.”

Though couple’s interactions were not always as full of sunshine as the above examples might make them appear, overall, the twenty-eight individuals whose stories appear in my thesis reported being satisfied with their partner, and their ability to communicate together as a couple. The couple-code seems to be a key to inter-linguistic communication in how it combines each partner’s background of languages to level the playing field and employs non-standard blindness to protect couples from unnecessary fixation on “errors.” The two levels of codeswitching that are an important part of the couple-code are also a huge part of successful couple communication. The ways that codeswitching within the couple-code enable couples to determine which language suits them for which occasion, and simultaneously can be used to index closeness, and connection are vital. Additionally, the ways that the couple-code becomes its own stand-alone language for each couple that can be switched in and out of in other settings, particularly when around outsiders, can be extremely useful and important for couples in their navigation of different and complex social contexts.

When couples move outside of their couple-bubble into different types of more public settings, sometimes their connection and ability to communicate effectively is pushed. When couples are forced to contend with complicated family dynamics and friend groups they often have to bend their language preferences and leave the comfort that the couple-code usually allows them. Beyond that, reconciling language needs and
wants in the face of oppressive language ideologies, and in a world that prioritizes English above other languages can be extremely trying, but couples eventually find ways to overcome even these sorts of burdens and inequalities. My data emphasized the experiences of fourteen couples, the majority of which currently live in the United States, speak English as part of their couple code, and are beholden to many Western conceptualization of love and connection, which leaves much to be explored. The story of Zena and Karim gives us a small window into some of the other possibilities of inter-linguistic romance.

There are many ways that this study could be expanded and information contained within it that could be more thoroughly explored. First and foremost, the stories of a more diverse range of couples would certainly enrich the data tenfold. Beyond this, one important part of inter-linguistic romance that I did not include was how having children drastically changes the dynamics. The majority of my couples did not yet have children, and thus the inclusion of data about them felt like it strayed from the core focus of my work. The language or code used with a child, rather than being fluid like the couple-code, typically becomes an active choice that parents make, because parents have to choose how they will speak with their child; this would disrupt the couple-code significantly. Involving the familial interactions when children are involved would alter my data immensely. In addition to how children would impact my work, this study could hone in more deliberately on how the couple-code works specifically because of how Westerners value ideas like individuality and compromise. The couple-code is not something that can be mapped onto all inter-linguistic couples throughout the world, and the nuances of this exploration would shed new light on how and why the couple-code
might work for some couples but not others. Finally, there are racial dynamics that undergird the language ideology that inherently impact inter-linguistic couples. These overtones of racism (and other isms) could be further unpacked in order to truly identify how couples are affected by the hierarchies of race and language that structure our world. I hope someday to look further down these sorts of pathways because I believe that inter-linguistic couples are part of the future of our world.

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The night before I finished writing my thesis, I was taking an Uber-Pool from Cambridge back to Brandeis. During the ride, the driver and I had a rousing conversation about his experience in an inter-linguistic relationship. He was Turkish and his wife was Romanian. I told him all about my thesis and about how I conducted interviews with various couples in the Boston area and beyond. He was very excited to hear about my work. As we neared Brandeis, the driver informed me that we were picking up another rider. When the rider got into the car, I was shocked to realize that it was one of my informants, Leor, who had been added to the Uber-Pool. The three of us got to discuss my thesis together in our car ride through the city. The odds of encountering not only a driver who spoke with me so openly about his inter-linguistic romance, but also then out of all of the possible people to pick up along the way, that we picked up one of my informants, seemed so slim; however, through this study, I have seen how inter-linguistic romances are spreading and are a way that people become connected throughout the world. This encounter filled me with joy. When I began studying inter-linguistic
romances I hoped that my work would bridge connections between couples that have experienced this type of love that I have grown to believe is so special. On this day, it did, and I hope that it can continue to do so.

Throughout my interviews, there were many stories and aspects of inter-linguistic romances shared by my couples that intrigued and excited me: the give and take that was clearly apparent in each of the relationships that I got to study, both linguistically and in general; the ways that couples employed humor to conquer many of their problems; the breadth of cultural and linguistic knowledge that couples adopted from one another to evidence their love of each other; the resilience of couples, both together, and as individuals, particularly the partners who live in a place where their own native-language is not the dominant one. My boyfriend Jordi speaks English as his first language, and though that’s something we share, there are times when I would not guess that, that was the case. I have learned a lot about how to communicate in my own relationship from listening to all of the couples that I had the privilege to interview. Their ability to communicate across barriers is something that everyone can learn from. Their communication is fresh and connected, it constantly adapts to their each partner’s needs, and through secret language, brings them closer together.
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