

Learning English with Shotaro

— RUTH BEHAR —

I HAVE SPOKEN ENGLISH for more than 40 years and I still haven't forgotten that English is not my first language. Even now I hesitate as I put down this first sentence. Does it sound right in English? Is it stilted? Is it correct to say "I have" and "haven't" and "is not" in the same sentence? I honestly don't, do not, know.

It's strange, and maybe even absurd, that I should feel this way. I speak English perfectly. I wrote my Ph.D. thesis in English. I think, dream, and live much of my life in the English language. "You're from Cuba?" people say, surprised. "But you don't have an accent." No, I don't have an accent, though as a teenager I tried hard to imitate a British accent, because I thought it was more refined than the accent I heard around me growing up in Queens, New York. I spoke to my parents only in Spanish, as I do even today, because that is the language in which they're most comfortable.

Mami and Papi definitely have an accent, a thick Cuban accent, when they speak English, and I continue to correct their grammatical and pronunciation mistakes, as I started to do as a child. For me English was always the public language, the language of power, competition, and progress, and also the language of solitude, the language where I was totally on my own, without my parents to help me. Now I speak an English that can't be recognized as being from anywhere specific. My younger brother, years ago, put it exactly right. He said what I have is a "college accent." It's the English of a person who went to school, studied hard, and

got good grades because she feared if she didn't she'd be sent back to the dumb class.

No one can tell by looking at me or hearing me speak that another language burns inside me, an invisible but eternal flame. No one can tell I came to the English language the way a woman in another era came to her husband in an arranged marriage—trying to make the best of a relationship someone else chose for her and hoping one day she would fall in love. I'm still waiting... I depend on English, I'm grateful I speak English, I wouldn't be anyone if I didn't know English. But I'm not in love with English.

My mother tongue is Spanish. This is the language I spoke as a little girl in Cuba for the first four and a half years of my life. I am told I spoke that little girl's Spanish with a lot of spunk. They tell me I was a nonstop talker, *una cotorruta*. But after we arrived in the United States I became shy, silent, sullen. I have no memory of myself as a little girl speaking Spanish in Cuba. I guess that's why every time I'm in Cuba and I see a little girl letting Spanish roll off her tongue so naturally, so effortlessly, my heart melts. "That was me!" I think. That was me, once upon a time, before I became self-conscious about which *lengua* I was speaking. I go to Cuba as an anthropologist, the way I also go to Spain and Mexico and Argentina, continually seeking opportunities to listen to Spanish and to speak Spanish, and in those countries I can't help but imitate their accents, so that my Spanish is a hodgepodge, the Spanish of a woman who no longer knows where her home is.

When we left Cuba after the revolution, we went to Israel, and I am told I became fluent in Hebrew. I might have already known a few words, because in Havana I attended kindergarten at the Centro Israelita, a bilingual Spanish-Yiddish day school founded by Jewish immigrants who settled in Cuba in the 1920s and 1930s. But Hebrew didn't stick in our family, because after a year we left Israel for New York and we never spoke it at home. Hebrew was

the language of the liturgy and it lost for us its connection to everyday life. Spanish became our home language, and I spoke it with my grandparents, not only my Ladino-speaking grandparents from Turkey but also my Yiddish-speaking grandparents from Poland and Russia.

So before the age of five I spoke two languages, Spanish and Hebrew, and then I was dropped into a first-grade classroom at P.S. 117 in Queens, where I was expected to somehow survive even though I was unable to utter a word of English. This was in 1962, before bilingual programs and English as a Second Language were introduced into the public school system. You sank or you swam. You learned English by osmosis, ear training, lip reading, like a baby, without any special instruction and not a drop of mercy. Or you failed to learn English and you entered the dumb class and stayed there forever.

In that first-grade classroom, I vividly recall the teacher, Mrs. Sarota, writing a math problem on the blackboard. I knew the answer and I raised my hand. Mrs. Sarota smiled and nodded, raised her eyebrows, and waited, chalk in hand. I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I knew the answer, but I didn't know how to say it in English. I sat there mutely. "Ruth," the teacher said. "Do you know the answer or not?" I wasn't accustomed to hearing my name spoken in English. It sounded harsh. Ugly. In my family, I'm called "Ruti," and the two syllables are said slowly, languorously.

"Well, Ruth?" The teacher said my name like an insult. I attempted sign language, trying to write the answer in the air with my fingers. Soon the other children were giggling and pointing at me, as though I were a monkey escaped from the zoo. I felt so ashamed, I lowered my head and pretended to disappear. I retreated into silence for the rest of the school year.

By second grade I was in the dumb class and I definitely felt I deserved to be there. Although the school claimed not to make any distinctions, as kids we knew that for each grade there was a dumb

class made up of children who'd flunked out the previous year. To be in the dumb class in second grade was a sure sign you'd gotten off to a terrible start in life, because things had to be pretty bad for a kid to flunk first grade. The teacher acted as if we were not only dumb but deaf, and she repeated things and stood over us, watching as we wrote in our notebooks, ready to pounce on our mistakes. Some of the kids in the class were slow learners, but a few were retarded, like Grace, who had a huge head and wore shoes several sizes too large and was so friendly that you knew something had to be wrong with her. In those days, the dumb class was also where they put the foreign kids until they could speak and prove to the world they were actually smart and just needed to learn English—or until they revealed that deep down they really *were* dumb.

Fortunately I wasn't alone in the dumb class. Shotaro, a boy from Japan, was also in the dumb class because he spoke a language that wasn't English. As the only two foreign kids, we became close friends. We looked at picture books together and read to one another and played tag and hopscotch during recess. He was the only boy I invited to my birthday party in second grade. One of the pictures I most recall from those years is the Polaroid of a group of girls posed around the M&M-studded cake, me and Shotaro in the middle beaming from the sheer joy of standing next to each other. I think we learned to speak English to be able to communicate with one another, though there was an understanding between us which was mysterious and deep and went beyond words.

We both did well and got good at English. By the end of the school year we were both released from the dumb class and assigned to a regular third-grade class. But Shotaro and I didn't continue together in third grade. His family decided to return to Japan, while for my family, it had become clear, there was not going to be any return to Cuba.

I was sad to see Shotaro go. He gave me a going-away present that I still store at my parents' house with other keepsakes from my

childhood. It was a pair of miniature wooden male and female dolls, outfitted in matching kimonos and nested together in a silk brocade box. Maybe the dolls were intended to represent the two of us, a girl and a boy, who grew into the English language together during a year spent in the dumb class. Neither of us spoke the other's language, so English was our common tongue—English and a faith that we were not dumb, that what we were was dispossessed.

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