

## Language for Love

Whoever said that two hearts in love have no need for words was wrong. If you ever tried communicating with a person who did not speak your language, you can certainly vouch for the advantages of body gestures, but even body gestures have their limits. This statement may be especially true in multilingual relationships, in which two people from different backgrounds have to find common ground by speaking one language. “How are you?” in Punjabi is “Tusee kee hal hai?” but how do you convey this in body language? Or if you want to ask your Swedish beloved to marry you but you only speak Portuguese, she simply won’t understand if you say: “Quer cesar comigo?” Like it or not, sometimes you do need words.

The question is: whose language? Just because English is more popular than Czech, does it mean that it automatically becomes the language of the relationship? This was not a problem for Jim, and ESL instructor at Rennert, and Denise Osborne. Denise, who comes from Brazil, moved to America and married Jim, so it had to be English, although one could call it a compromise since Jim speaks Portuguese as well, and they have even worked as translators together. The contrary is true in Noga Laor’s marriage. Noga, the Academic Director of Rennert, speaks Spanish at home. Her husband, Juan Carlos, is Colombian and when they met he spoke no English. The Lesson to be learned? Whatever language it is, it better be the same one!

But sometimes even if you do speak the same language, it’s not enough. Harpreet Dhalinal and her husband Christopher Dameron are both native English speakers, and yet, they took Punjabi classes together at Rennert. Since Harpreet’s family is Punjabi, they’d decided to learn to communicate with her side of the family. “It’s easier to do it as a couple,” said Harpreet, adding that doing homework together can be quite bonding. Adam Mandell, whose girlfriend, Isabell, is German, has started taking German classes at Rennert after a client of his had told him that he was taking German classes at Rennert so that he could communicate with his girlfriend’s family. Coincidence? Or perhaps yet another proof that love is the best aphrodisiac. “When you are motivated by love, it just starts to happen,” Adam says, and adds that when he fell head over heels in love with a woman who lived thousand of miles away, he simply boarded a plane to Germany. Yet another example is Min and Jung Choi. Min is Korean and so is her husband, but he’s been in the US since he was a baby, so English feels like his native language. At home, they speak Korean, but Min is trying to improve her English so that she can communicate better with his friends and co-workers. Where there is love, there must be sacrifice.

And a sense of humor, too. It seems that multilingual relationships have their share of laughter. When Harpreet, together with her husband, visited her family in Chicago for Thanksgiving, even a line as simple as “Yes, please” in Punjabi coming out of Christopher’s mouth would earn him a round of applause. When Noga’s mother, who is Israeli, asked Juan Carlos how he was doing in Hebrew, and he answered her back, also in Hebrew, no one was more shocked than Juan Carlos himself. “The brain works in funny ways,” says Noga. Being around a foreign language being spoken won’t kill you, that’s for sure. On the contrary, it’s good for you. You can laugh at linguistic misunderstandings and take advantage of your situation. “Sometimes I want to say something to Jim but I don’t want other people around to listen to us. So I say it in Portuguese,” reveals Denise. They do the same with English in Brazil. “It is cool to be

able to switch from one language to another,” she continues. Adam recalls another funny, if embarrassing, situation. They were at Shop Rite doing their weekly grocery shopping, when he saw Isabell load five large bags of oranges into the cart. He asked for an explanation. “They are having a sale. Five for a dollar,” Isabell responded. Surprised at the low cost, Adam glanced at the sign and noticed that it said “Limes. 5 for a \$1.” He pointed this out to Isabell, and they both “cracked up.”

When I moved to Paris to be with a man I had fallen in love with, my French was far from being perfect. After a few failed conversations resulting in miscommunications ranging from the number of Metro tickets to the meaning of my life, I gave up. Seven months later, I returned to New York, with my boyfriend in tow, and enrolled in French classes at Rennert. Yes, learning a new language, and often, what comes with it, a new culture, can be as rewarding as it can be frustrating. Min remembers a time when she barely spoke when her husband’s co-workers were around, because she didn’t feel confident about her English skills. On their first date, Jim and Denise spoke English, but Denise would switch to Portuguese every time she had a hard time explaining something to Jim. But then Jim wouldn’t understand everything she said, so they’d switch back to English, and so on. “I couldn’t ask Jim the meaning of all the words I didn’t know because there were too many words,” Denise recalls.

But they didn’t give up. In fact, none of the other couples did either. With time, Denise’s English improved. So did Min’s who now has more confidence to speak up in a social setting. As for me, I use French with my boyfriend every other day, rain or shine, and the thought of going back to Paris no longer gives me the shivers. If being a multilingual couple is not always easy, you are always learning something new. “We learn from each other and we learn to accept our differences,” says Denise, adding that, after nearly seven years of marriage, Jim never ceases to surprise her. Noga, on the other hand, turns her linguistic disadvantages into a relationship advantage, knowingly or not. “I always lose my Spanish when I am angry, so it’s really hard to me to fight in Spanish!” she confesses. As a result, they don’t fight much. What’s more, Adam says that learning German has made him a better drummer. “I think that it opens up other areas of the brain,” he says.

Since Valentine’s Day is just around the corner, I asked the five couples about their plans. Jim and Denise don’t have anything special in mind, “as long as they are together,” although Denise pointed out that Valentine’s Day in Brazil is on June 12<sup>th</sup>. In Korea, it is the women who give men chocolate on February 14<sup>th</sup>, so Min and Jung Choi are looking forward to a dinner out. Noga and Juan Carlos will also go out to dinner, “something romantic.” Adam’s design is still in the making, but whatever it is, “it’ll be very memorable.” He also plans on confessing his love in German. Harpreet and Christopher will be in India, with Harpreet’s family, and, of course, they will be speaking Punjabi.

So, how many languages can you say “I love you” in? “Muje se mu habbat hai,” (Pakistani); “Obicham te” (Bulgarian); “Jeg Elsker Dig” (Danish); “Ma amas vin” (Esperanto); “Doset daram” (Farsi); “Je t’aime” (French); “Ta gra agam ort” (Gaelic); “Ich liebe dich” (German); “Ani ohev otach” or “Ani ohevet otcha” (In Hebrew, the first man to a woman, the second woman to a man); “To amo” (Italian); “Aishiteru” (Japanese); “Sarang Heyo” (Korean); “Te amo” (Latin); “Bahibak” (Lebanese); “Kocham Cie” (Polish); “Ya tebya liubliu” (Russian); “Mai tuhanoo pyaar karda haa” (Punjabi);

“Eu tea mo” (Portuguese); “Te amo,” (Spanish); “Wo ie ni,” (Manderin). If speaking a few languages makes you smart, then being able to confess your love in many languages must make you more knowledgeable about... love. Or something like that. Either way—get on with it!