



Excuse my French

Exploring the complex relationships between language, emotion and identity

BY MARIE ASAOLU

A note about the language in this written piece: This piece is about me as a multilingual counsellor and as a multilingual client. Some parts may be in French, some may not be in "proper" English, but as you read it, I would invite you to reflect on the impact it might have for you. In particular, reflect on how it may feel to not understand all the words or statement or that it doesn't sound quite right.

I am French and I have been living in the UK for roughly 17 years. I mainly speak English at home and out. I speak French back home. I trained as a counsellor in English, and it is only when I started to see French speaking client that I discovered the complexity of the relationships between language, emotion and identity. Complexity for them but also for me, I had to learn to be a counsellor in French, I had to develop my professional identity in French. What started as two different entities took quite some work to feel integrated. The complexity of working with multilingual client is beyond understanding the language or finding the right translation.

"Many psychological therapists around the world do not know enough (often think they don't need to know) about the complex relationships between language, emotion, and identity among their multilingual and multicultural clients"

Bager-Charleson et al, 2017 in Tuning in, 2023

Being bilingual is more than speaking two languages, it has changed who I am. I lost some parts and gained others. It is hard to put into words, to explain this complexity in writing. Below is a written piece talking about some of the feelings around being bilingual. It is worth noting that these are mine and they can be different for other people:

Am I here or there? Suis-je là ou là-bas?

I am in London...I miss hugs from my parents, I miss long dinner at the table with family, I miss l'apéro, I miss seeing my niece and nephew growing, I miss events, birthday dinner, weddings, baptême, Sunday lunches. I missed seeing my grandmother before she passed. I miss Home....

Je suis en France, I miss English tea with sugar and milk, I miss my house, I miss friends, I miss family, I miss events: birthday party, celebration. I miss Home....

I am back "home", I am aching for "la maison"... Tout était familier, les sons, les goûts, les odeurs...now back home everything feels unfamiliar again, until it become familiar again...

Home is a bit here and a bit there....there is always a part that is longing for the other side, I am not quite from here but not quite from there either..





I speak English with a French accent, I am not from here. Often asked: "so where are you from?"

I speak French with an English accent; I am not recognised as being from here. I am told that I speak very good French and feel like justifying that I am indeed French.

It's like having one foot in each country, never fully here or there. Never seen as being from here or there. Never recognised.

I am a tourist in my home country, left so long ago that sometimes it doesn't feel familiar anymore.

I am an immigrant in the country of my home, it still feels unfamiliar sometimes, and sometimes I am told that I shouldn't be here.

"Home is where the heart is"...Where is home when your heart is in different places?

Being multilingual can be an invisible difference.

Some of us speak more than two languages. Some of us, speak English so well that we might even struggle in our native languages. For most of us, in the therapeutic context, our ability to speak the "lingua Franca", might hide our needs to speak our native language. We might have never been asked in therapy what our languages are, what they mean for us and what part of us speak in which language. When is the last time you enquired about it and how did you do it?

Working with a multilingual client is not only about words, or about language, it is understanding the complexity of those different parts, that some emotions speak French others express themselves in English. Some parts of me only knows one language.

I have experienced therapy in English and French and found it difficult to access some parts; it always felt like something was missing, like a part of me was not heard.

An English therapist welcomed me in the first session and said she could understand some French, she had done GCSE French. My first thought was that she would not be able to understand me if I spoke French, how could I express the complexity of my emotion, feelings and anxiety in basic French, so I never spoke French.

I tried French therapists, we spoke only French, it left me wondering what happened to my English part? It felt forgotten. It didn't feel integrated. I didn't feel able to bring some part of myself to the room.

With another French therapist, the "vous" was dropped for the "tu", boundaries were crossed. It became too friendly; I ran away.

The reality is that finding a counsellor (or more accurately, finding the right counsellor) has been a challenge. It was difficult, I thought maybe I was the problem, as I struggled to fit in. There was always a whisper of not being a good enough client. Working through it, I learned how I could be a better counsellor myself for my bilingual client in integrating a Multilingual Framework (Costa, 2020). Being part of the multicultural supervision group has also helped me see I

am not alone in this as the extract below shows. This extract is from *Tuning in: an anthology of unheard experiences of multilingualism in psychological therapy*; a "collection of shared reflection and creative writing about the important topic of languages in our lives in general, and in talking therapy in particular". (Bermudez Otero et al. 2023:5):

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"I'm curious about what you said about your accent? It's so lovely to hear it, though?" I looked at her and felt tension in my jaw while I clenched my fists; here we go again, for goodness' sake, why does everyone have to draw attention to my accent all the time?

The old falseness, "oh it's so quaint ..." and so on. Suddenly I feel uncomfortable; I really don't want to be here at all. "Well, I'm a bit self-conscious of my accent actually ...", I said. "You really shouldn't be, it's so lovely, you should be so proud ...", she said trying to flatter me.

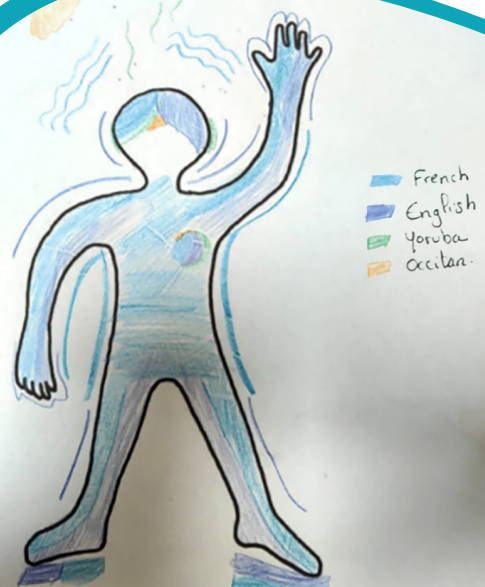
"Well, it does and I'm not," I said quite abruptly. The woman looked straight into my eyes; she looked confused. "You sound angry ..." she said. "Angry," I said to myself. "You haven't a clue how I feel and you're not even trying either. What's the point in my wasting my time trying to explain how I feel about this – I haven't started with the things that are really worrying me." From that point onwards, emotionally, I left the room; this person wasn't going to get to know what was going on in my head – no way!

Bermudez Otero et al. 2023:59



References

Sources of references used in this article can be found on page 29





Sharing experiences and struggles with other bilingual therapists has helped to consolidate my identity, to look further than those two languages and to realise that this is more than words but about identity and cultural understanding. That what's needed is more than a language, but a multilingual, multicultural frame that can hold all of me.

The language portrait (Busch, 2012) has further helped me to look at those different parts and to integrate them as a whole.

I am a bilingual therapist, my mother tongue is French.

This is the language of my childhood, my teenage years, the language of one of my homes. This was my main language until I was 24.

Then I moved to the UK, and English took over. English became the main language, the language of adulthood, of my professional life, a language that I learnt to express emotion in.

But there is more, other languages are part of me. The Occitan, the language from the south of France, synonym of resistance, cultural differences with the rest of France, a language that got lost, not understood or spoken but nonetheless familiar, part of my cultural identity. A language that creeps up in my French, that when I am heard by other French people would be recognised as from the south. A language that is not surprising but *espanté* :

My English is also punctuated by differences of accents, and words learnt from my Nigerian family. Indeed, a Nigerian accent sometimes creeps in.

My languages are more than words. It talks of my cultural identities, about my journey, who I was and who I became. It can appear shy, confident, sometimes seen as rude or too straightforward.

My languages say more about me than I could ever tell you



About the author

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