

# I Thought You Were Vietnamese

by Jennifer Tran

As the night sky flashed bright red and yellow, the children of Vietnam looked up and felt the fear of death. It happened every night – the bombings and fires – and as a four-year-old, my mother could only watch as her country destroyed itself from within. My grandparents had to make a decision that would affect not only their children but also our family's future generations: stay in Vietnam and witness warfare, or leave home to seek refuge in America. A few days after Saigon fell, my family crowded onto a small boat, leaving behind the only life they knew for an uncertain future in America.

I am a child from an immigrant family that entered a country with nothing on their backs. I was born and raised ten minutes away from Versai, a Vietnamese ethnic enclave in New Orleans. As a child, I never questioned my cultural identity because Vietnamese culture was always around me. Even though I knew that a part of my identity was largely influenced by American culture, no one in my community seemed to complain. It was considered normal for my generation to be more Americanized than previous ones. As I grew up, my parents spoke to me more and more in English, and slowly I lost the fluency in Vietnamese I'd had as a kid. But I was content with not being entirely fluent, and my family was too. I still ate Vietnamese food every week, celebrated Lunar New Year every year, and embraced my community's core values. I was still Vietnamese.

But when I was in eighth grade, insecurities about my cultural identity sprouted. I was in my school's office when an older Vietnamese woman approached me. She asked me questions in Vietnamese, but I could not understand anything she said. When she noticed my confused expression and lack of response, she asked, "Do you not understand Vietnamese? I thought you were Vietnamese!" Instantly, this stranger's words shattered my pride in being Vietnamese American. I wondered whether I truly could call myself Vietnamese if I could not speak my mother tongue. Had exposure to American culture destroyed my Vietnamese cultural identity?

In her essay "Teach Yourself Italian," author Jhumpa Lahiri reveals the consequences of losing one's native tongue from solely speaking English in daily life. Since Lahiri's "mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America," she recounts feeling a "distance" from the language. Living in America has made her feel she must prioritize the English

language, especially since she is a writer. Even after winning a Pulitzer Prize for one of her novels, Lahiri writes that she still felt in tension with the English language, as “English has represented a consuming struggle, a wrenching conflict, a continuous sense of failure that is the source of almost all [her] anxiety (Lahiri). At a distance from Bengali and unable to overcome her “failure” in English, Lahiri is left without a language she can call home. Only when she starts learning Italian, despite her lack of fluency, does she come to recognize “the most genuine, most vulnerable part of” herself (Lahiri). Lahiri’s story shows the dilemma faced by many immigrant families: as the American dream is most likely to be achieved in English, their children must choose how much of their home language and culture they are willing to sacrifice, at the risk of having to seek their ‘most genuine’ selves elsewhere.

Sadly, many immigrant families acknowledge this erasure of culture, but they accept it because of the fear that their kids will not be successful if they are not Americanized. Recently, I spoke with my best friend, Anamaria, who also grew up in Versai, about our shared problem of cultural erasure. Her family incorporates the Vietnamese language slightly more in their daily life than mine. Even so, Ana told me that “The only Viet phrases I really hear are like simple phrases, like food and titles, or simple stuff like ‘Go brush your teeth’” (Bao-Loc-Trung). Our families both prioritize English language and culture more than our Vietnamese roots because they “really want our generation to be successful,” Ana explains, “So they definitely put more emphasis on learning, school, and English” (Bao-Loc-Trung). Our families want to offer us the best possible lives, so to honor them, we feel pressured to do whatever is necessary. We know we’re losing the language, but the pressure to be successful prevents many of us from regaining fluency. I feel regret and despair, because my generation might not be able to pass our culture on to our own children. And yet, we don’t want our parents’ struggles to equate to nothing.

We both recognize that the Vietnamese words we can still speak represent more than just another set of phrases. As Anamaria relates, “it creates a bigger bond between me and my Vietnamese family” (Bao-Loc-Trung). For Ana and me, the Vietnamese language allows us to connect more deeply with our family and embrace our birth culture, which fills up the “void of [our] origin” described by Lahiri. By speaking Vietnamese, we show our family that even in America, we still remember and cherish our cultural roots. We bring back a sense of home in Vietnam to them through the language.

Language is also tied to cultural representation. I perceive someone’s ‘Asian-ness’ in part based on their fluency in their native language. When Ana and I find ourselves complaining about Asian representation in American entertainment, we say, ‘This person isn’t even that Asian,’ or ‘They could have chosen someone more Asian.’ When I asked Ana what she thinks of language as a standard of authenticity, she said, “The

people of the culture see it as the bare minimum” (Bao-Loc-Trung). But many of us in this newer generation don’t even meet this ‘bare minimum’ that we impose on others. It’s interesting and hypocritical that we strongly identify with our culture and call ourselves proud Vietnamese Americans, but also judge others’ ‘Asian-ness’ based on a quality that we do not have either. Maybe we place our own feelings of regret for losing our native language on others so that the burden of keeping our culture alive is off our backs. Maybe if we criticize others for not knowing their mother tongue, it makes us feel less guilty about forgetting our own.

The English language has granted me access to opportunities of which my ancestors could only dream, but these opportunities come at the expense of losing a connection with my older family members. I recognize that even as the intimacy of speaking your native language strengthens your relationship with your culture, it is not the only determinant of that relationship. Defining a true woman, a true Asian, or a true American entails many contradictions and exceptions. I feel wrong defining my or others’ cultural identity as one precise thing because culture is always evolving. Still, the beauty and importance of native languages is undiminished, since our mother tongues allow us to embrace our culture, an integral aspect of who we are – a piece that fills that inner ‘void.’ Language reveals, in its own way, the indestructible aspects of who we are. My simple Vietnamese words and sentences may not be the most profound, but they share a glimpse of my family’s story of sacrifice and bravery.

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## Works Cited

Bao-Loc-Trung, Anamaria. Personal interview. 14 September 2022.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. “Teach Yourself Italian.” *The New Yorker*, 29 November 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/12/07/teach-yourself-italian>.