One Hundred and Ninety-Four

Josef Nguyen
University of the Pacific

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My father and mother sat side by side on the living room couch, looking at my high school yearbook, which I had received the day before. My parents were scanning the student photos with extreme concentration. It was 7:30, so my grandparents were watching Wheel of Fortune on the television.

The game required a certain level of familiarity with the English language, since adeptness at spelling and an adequate vocabulary were favorable traits to possess and surely necessary to win. My grandparents, however, wouldn’t even have known the show was in English if not for the fact that it was an American show, let alone be able to play along in the setting of our suburban home.

Sometimes, when my grandfather was in complete domination of the television remote, my sister or I would stumble across him watching Spanish news or a novella. He didn’t understand a show in English. He didn’t understand a show in Spanish. What did it matter what language the show was in if he wasn’t going to understand it anyway? So there was no need to inform him about the languages of the programs he watched. It could have been in Sanskrit or Polish or even Tongues and my grandfather wouldn’t have known the difference.

It seemed like my grandparents would never learn English. It wasn’t that they didn’t have the resources. My parents purchased instructional video tapes to help them learn the language, but we never determined if the tapes worked or not since my grandparents only watched them once. After that, I’m not sure what happened to them. They weren’t of the best quality, so, in the end, it wasn’t a grave loss.

...twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six...

My parents were flipping through the pages rather quickly, quietly mumbling in Vietnamese and pointing out photos to each other. My grandparents were still watching their favorite show intently. The goal was for
both of them to earn U.S. citizenship and part of that goal required a rudimentary understanding of the English language. On their first attempt at the citizenship test, they both failed the basic English component. They weren’t even allowed to demonstrate their keen ability to regurgitate information they had crammed their skulls with from the past four months. That there were the House of Representatives and the Senate comprising the Legislative Branch or that the current president was Bill Clinton or that there were currently fifty states and thus fifty stars on the American flag.

When asked what color the table was, both my grandparents looked at each other completely dumbstruck. “Brown” was not in their lexicon. Months were spent repeating phrases such as “Constitutional Amendment,” “Electoral College,” and “Supreme Court” and months fell to waste because my grandparents underestimated the tremendous weight and power of knowing the word “Brown.”

...fifty-nine, sixty, sixty-one, sixty-two...

To be fair, it was unreasonable to expect my grandparents to learn English at their old age, since both were in their early seventies. Their brains simply weren’t as flexible as a teenager’s. I sat there in front of the television with my French book, conjugating irregular verbs in the subjunctive mood as easily and as naturally as breathing.

je puisse, tu puisses, il puisse...

I was halfway through my French exercises when my grandmother spoke to me in Vietnamese; it was the only language she knew. I nodded, unsure of what she said. I didn’t know Vietnamese. I was familiar with words here and there and recognized the language when it was spoken, but comprehension was limited if almost nonexistent. It seemed personal but exceptionally foreign at the same time. I remembered thinking to myself that I could probably understand her if she spoke to me in French. Sometimes, I was able to think in French naturally, like I thought in English. I couldn’t remember a time when I ever thought in Vietnamese. I always thought in English and then worked through the deliberate process of translating what I wanted to say into the butchered Vietnamese that I choked out of my mouth.

That’s when I realized that I knew more French than Vietnamese.

Oddly, Vietnamese was my first language.
Even though I was born in the U.S., my parents made it a point for me to know our culture’s language. So I was a proficient speaker for the first few years of my life. Once I started school, my parents spoke to me in English at home since that’s what I would come home speaking.

Years later, we all realized that trying to speak Vietnamese to me was an epic labor none of us wanted to perform. Vietnamese was no longer my language; it was my parents’. The only time that I would hear my parents speak Vietnamese to me was when I was in serious criminal trouble, by their definition. Normal negligible trouble resulted in my parents lecturing me in English but I knew I was in for it when they yelled at me in their native tongue. Regardless of whether or not I knew Vietnamese, I knew by their tone that they were oceans away from pleased.

...ninety-three, ninety-four, ninety-five, ninety-six...

It was hard to communicate with my grandparents because they could only speak Vietnamese and the only languages at my disposal were English and limited French.

I never had the opportunity to become close with my grandparents. I never was able to find out their likes, how they grew up, or their thoughts from their own lips. I needed a translator. But it also went the other way. They never were able to find out my interests or anything else for that matter without the aid of my parents or other relatives. Private conversations didn’t exist.

It was a reflex by that point to nod when they spoke to me, like when the doctor strikes a knee cap with a small hammer or when you try to catch something that was suddenly knocked off a table. They asked me something in Vietnamese and I nodded.

So I finished another French exercise and looked around the room. My grandparents were still watching Wheel of Fortune on the television. My parents were still rifling through my yearbook, but now I noticed that they were counting.

...one hundred and eleven, one hundred and twelve, one hundred and thirteen, one hundred and fourteen...

I asked them what they were counting.
The response was Vietnamese students.
That didn’t surprise me. They always asked if I had Vietnamese friends, how many Vietnamese
students were in my class, and how many Vietnamese students there were at school.

I would reply something to the effect that I didn’t spend my time sitting on the ground with an adding machine accounting for every Vietnamese student that I saw. It didn’t matter to me if I had Vietnamese classmates or not.

But it mattered to them.

I asked them why it was important that I could quantify the Vietnamese population at school. But they didn’t reply. They just continued to point, count, and turn pages.

...one hundred and thirty-two, one hundred and thirty-three, one hundred and thirty-four, one hundred and thirty-five...

...nous sachons, vous sachez, elles sachent

I had finished conjugating verbs when I closed my book to watch some television. The game show was almost over. The contestants were a white woman, a white man, and an Asian woman. My grandfather turned to me and mumbled that he hoped the Asian woman would win.

At least, that’s what I deciphered.

My parents nodded in agreement as they continued to scour my yearbook.

...one hundred and sixty-five, one hundred and sixty-six, one hundred and sixty-seven, one hundred and sixty-eight...

I think it bothered them that my close circle of friends didn’t contain anyone of Vietnamese heritage like myself. I did have Vietnamese friends, but none that I would deem close. My parents did find solace in the fact that my friends were predominantly of Asian decent, which I suppose was good enough for them.

...one hundred and ninety-one, one hundred and ninety-two, one hundred and ninety-three, and one hundred and ninety-four.

There were one hundred and ninety-four Vietnamese students at my school, according to the yearbook anyway. My parents then asked me how many Asians there were at my school.

I mentioned something indifferently about not knowing the precise number off the top of my head. If I didn’t know the Vietnamese population, how would I know the entire Asian population? I figured that other Asian parents did the same. They asked their children how many there were at school as a way to earn peace of mind. It was a comfort to know that they were
not alone in a continent far away, an ocean away, from the home they knew. It was the same way my parents and grandparents were rooting for the Asian woman on Wheel of Fortune, despite the fact that she wasn’t Vietnamese.

But she was Asian, and that was good enough.

I decided not to think about it anymore and returned to my bedroom with my French book and homework.

The show had ended but I didn’t see who won.