

Richard Rodriguez's thoughts on language evolution

Literature



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In Richard Rodriguez's essay "Aria: Memoir of a Bilingual Childhood," Rodriguez contrasts his relationship with language as a child and as a man. Rodriguez details his progression from a timid boy knowing almost entirely Spanish, to an adult who speaks solely English with confidence.

Beginning as a young child, growing up in the city of Sacramento, Rodriguez's story starts as the only Spanish speaking student in a Roman Catholic school. Knowing little English, Rodriguez struggles to speak complete, coherent sentences. He speaks freely in Spanish with his family while at home. Being his first language, speaking Spanish is more natural for him than English. Throughout this part of the essay in which Rodriguez is describing his childhood, Rodriguez's adult voice interjects in order to provide further insight. He develops his perspective regarding the conflict of having a bilingual education. "Supporters of bilingual education today imply that students like me miss a great deal by not being taught in their family's language" (298). When at school, Rodriguez perceives English to be a "public" language, while among his family at home; he views Spanish as a "private" language. Rodriguez proposes that if the teachers would have addressed him in Spanish, it would have made for a more comfortable learning environment, in which he would have been much less "afraid." In fact, his teachers did just the opposite. They attempted to show him the necessity in speaking a public language. His acknowledgment of the language barrier that he faced gave him a greater focus for language in general. From this point on, he began to analyze the intricacies of spoken word in detail. After studying his classmates speaking English, after time, everything began to make sense. Rodriguez gained the confidence to answer

questions in class. While learning English, a profound transition in his life took place: Richard Rodriguez attained American citizenship. With this citizenship and learning of the English language came a greater sense of public identity.

The comparison and contrast components of this essay can be found between Rodriguez's first-person account of his childhood encounters with language and his analytical voice as an adult which follows. As Rodriguez writes about when he was a child, he depicts himself as a timid and shy kid. Rodriguez describes that part of this reluctant attitude stems from his heritage. As a young Hispanic child growing up in America, Rodriguez is divided between an intimidating English speaking culture and the Spanish speaking culture which he was already exposed to. He lacked a definite identity. After gaining citizenship and becoming more aware of the bilingual environment which he was a part of, Rodriguez parallels this change by detailing his transition into manhood. He begins the next section with the sentence: " This boy became a man."

At this point in the essay, Rodriguez maintains a more educated stance. As compared to the first half of the essay, he has an elevated diction and changes his syntax to become more concise. The words that Rodriguez uses in this part of the essay are quite cultured. Words such as " timbre," " brazen," " delicatessen," " marinade" and " barrio." These are not the most traditional or conversational words. This advanced diction which Rodriguez begins to implement parallels the developmental change within the story in becoming a man. This new diction has a direct effect on the language, giving the story a more formal feel. Showing how educated he has become in his

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understanding of language and vast vocabulary, Rodriguez gives greater credibility to the assertions which he makes in the essay. His syntax also appears to be more direct, by composing his sentences in a shorter fashion. This progression in his sentence structure underlies this invigorated confidence which Rodriguez has in himself as an adult who now speaks and understands English very well.

In the second half of the essay, Rodriguez has made the transition from a Spanish speaking immigrant to a cultured English speaking US citizen with a Hispanic heritage. He takes note of all of the varying cultures which he encounters during the day as well as their respective euphemisms and differing tones. He now approaches others maturely and confidently, unlike his younger self. As an adult, Rodriguez has embraced the English language and accepted who he has become. By being an individual who was raised among two different cultures and languages, he feels he has the perspective to comment on the issue of a bilingual education. Rodriguez's stance is that it is fine to stay true to cultural ties, while still conforming to the accepted public language that is spoken at school. Taking this route himself, Richard Rodriguez is the best proof that a bilingual education consisting of a public and private identity is the best route.

From the story of Richard Rodriguez's exposure to a culturally diverse and bilingual society, we obtain a greater sense of what being in the minority entails. Learning an unknown "public" language as well as adopting a new culture may be crucial, but staying true to your own family heritage is just as necessary.