

The Importance of Language in Cross-Cultural Interaction

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Abstract

Language and culture are connected. Because of this connection, people have a preferred language with which they have an emotional or cultural connection. In Latin American cultures, it is beneficial to speak to a person in their preferred language. Using a person's preferred language as opposed to any other language will facilitate a deeper connection with that person, cross cultural barriers that may separate them, and be more effective when attempting to share the gospel.

The Importance of Language in Cross-Cultural Interaction

Introduction

Language is an essential part of human interaction, as it is the primary means through which people communicate. In cross-cultural interactions, the use of language becomes even more complicated and important because of how language reflects culture. Focusing primarily on Latin American and Hispanic cultures, this paper will explore the way using a person's preferred language can impact the communication and relationship between people. Using a person's preferred language is crucial because language is more than just the words used to communicate. It has emotional connotations, cultural importance, and even spiritual significance. Therefore, even when people can communicate proficiently in a second or other language, there are still significant benefits to speaking to bilingual or multilingual people in their preferred language. The benefits to using a person's preferred language as opposed to another language—both in Latin America and with Hispanics residing in the United States—in developing relationships and having conversations about the gospel are a deeper relational connection, a reduction in cultural barriers, and a higher likelihood for openness to the message one desires to share.

Before laying a foundation for the connectedness of language and culture, particularly within Latin American culture, it will be beneficial to define the term *preferred language*. This will be the primary term used in this paper, occasionally interspersed with *first language*. A person's preferred language will refer to the language a person is most comfortable speaking—the language they most often think and dream in.

A person's first language refers to the language they primarily heard and used when learning to talk. Nevertheless, a person's preferred language will not always be their first language, such as in cases where a child's family moves to another country and speaks a different language soon after they learned to speak their first language. However, the vast majority of people will prefer their first language to any other, especially because it is often the language used in the home.¹ The term *first language* is used interchangeably with *preferred language* in certain sections because some of the research provided speaks specifically to the first language a person learns. As this is generally a person's preferred language, the research supports the thesis. However, the term preferred language will occur most often as it is the language a person generally thinks in and not their first language that will impact them the most.

Foundation

In order to delve into the importance of using a Latin American person's preferred language, it is necessary to first discuss why a person would prefer one language over another. A preference for a language stems from the fact that "[l]anguages carry and transmit much more than merely words," as an ethnographic study on first-generation migrants in the United States, described by prolific researches of race and racism Tiffany Y. Davis and Wendy Leo Moore, demonstrates.² One reason to further examine in regard to the question of why people prefer a language over another is the emotional connection

¹ Hurisa Guvercin, "Mother Tongue: The Language of Heart and Mind," *Literature and Languages*, no. 76 (July-August 2010): para. 4, accessed February 1, 2018,

² Tiffany Y. Davis and Wendy Leo Moore, "Spanish Not Spoken Here: Accounting for the Racialization of the Spanish Language in the Experiences of Mexican Migrants in the United States," *Ethnicities* 14, no. 5 (February 2014): 681, accessed February 1, 2018, doi:10.1177/1468796814523740.

to a language that people feel, whether positive or negative. Another reason people will prefer one language over another is because it is linked to their culture. This is especially true with the Latin American culture, although, as research will demonstrate, this is seen a little differently between Latin Americans in a Latin American country versus those living in a different context, such as the United States.

One primary reason why people prefer one language over another is that people establish emotional connections to a language. Davis and Moore's study of Mexican immigrants in the United States explains that one's emotional ties to a language begin forming during childhood when using language to "interact with and make sense of the world."³ According to education specialist Hurisa Guvercin, a person's first language links them to their culture and provides an identity for them.⁴ Another study by Collage Group, an organization that helps other organizations and companies better reach a multi-cultural population, seeking to understand the importance of language in marketing shows that Hispanic people "tend to maintain a deeper, more emotional connection to the first language they learned."⁵ Their childhood memories of home and comfort are in that language, for they remember their parents talking to them as young children and feel attached to some of the words they may have repeated. This study demonstrates that if a person grows up to be bilingual, they may use another language in school and their job, but their first language will be the one they connect with on a more emotional level.⁶ In

³ Davis and Moore, "Spanish Not Spoken Here," 681.

⁴ Hurisa Guvercin, "Mother Tongue: The Language of Heart and Mind," *Literature and Languages*, no. 76 (July-August 2010): para. 2, accessed February 1, 2018, <http://www.fountainmagazine.com/Issue/detail/Mother-Tongue-The-Language-of-Heart-and-Mind>.

⁵ Collage Group, "Just How Important is Spanish for Bilingual Hispanics?" *Hispanic* (Bethesda, MD: Collage Group, 2017), para. 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 9.

fact, a study that experimented to discover how speaking in a different language affects people's decisions reports that people will make more logical and less emotion-driven decisions in a language other than their first language because it does not have the same emotional connotations.⁷ This means, while they may be able to process information equally as well in another language, they will not feel emotions as strongly in a second language, and as such, people remain connected emotionally to their first language.

A language can also bring about negative emotions. In contexts where a language is forced on a group of people, that language can have a negative connotation. According to Kate Miller, education expert and interim director of the Institute of Youth and Community Research in the United Kingdom, and Henry Miller, education sociology expert, the repression of a language can cause it to flourish when finally given the opportunity and people will be less inclined to use the imposing language.⁸ On other occasions, a person may feel negative emotions towards their first language because they have been told it is less worthy than another and must be changed, as William F. Hanks, sociocultural anthropologist and professor at University of California, Berkeley discovered researching language in Latin America.⁹ Others may be told their culture is inferior and feel their association with a particular language stigmatizes them, as Bible translation consultant William E. Bivin found to be the case in countries in Latin

⁷ Boaz Keysar, Sayuri L. Hayakawa, and Sun Gyu An, "The Foreign-Language Effect: Thinking in a Foreign Tongue Reduces Decision Biases," *Psychological Science* 23, no. 6 (2012): 667, accessed February 1, 2018, doi:10.1177/0956797611432178.

⁸ Henry Miller and Kate Miller, "Language Policy and Identity: the case of Catalonia," *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 6, no. 1 (July 9, 2006): 116.

⁹ William F. Hanks, *Converting Words: Maya in the Age of the Cross* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), 8.

America.¹⁰ People may experience different reactions from other people due to the language they speak and these factors can contribute to the positive or negative emotional response a person has to a particular language.

Latin American Culture

Another reason people prefer one language over another is because of the links between language and culture. The two are interrelated because, as Davis and Moore explain, “language shapes cultural ideas” and the way people see the world.¹¹ In Latin America, language reflects not just modern culture, but also a rich history. Before the influence of Spain on the Latin American world, Latin America was comprised of many indigenous people groups with their own languages. Latin America is generally considered to have no equal in “its linguistic multiplicity and diversity,” asserts anthropological linguist of Mexican and Guatemalan languages Norman A. McQuown.¹² According to McQuown, thousands of languages and dialects exist in Latin America, and these are divided into seventeen large family groups or thirty-eight smaller ones, along with hundreds of unclassified languages.¹³ Each language represents a separate group of people with their own culture. Civilizations and languages developed in Latin America based on geography, because Latin America contains a vast array of geographical features and climates.¹⁴ This means some indigenous groups did not have much contact

¹⁰ William E. Bivin, “Mother-Tongue Translations and Contextualization in Latin America,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 2 (April 2010), 72.

¹¹ Davis and Moore, “Spanish Not Spoken Here,” 681.

¹² Norman A. McQuown, “The Indigenous Languages of Latin America,” *American Anthropologist* 57, no. 3 (October 28, 2009), 501.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Michael LaRosa and German R. Mejia, *An Atlas and Survey of Latin American History* (Armonk: Taylor and Francis, 2006), 4.

with others, due to being on separate sides of a mountain or jungle, which contributed to the cultures and languages of some indigenous groups being incredibly different from other groups in what is now the same country.¹⁵ These indigenous cultural-linguistic people groups provided a variety of languages that have impacted Latin American culture.

While the exact number of indigenous people throughout Latin America before the arrival of Europeans is not known, tens of millions of indigenous people lost their lives after the arrival of the Spanish and other Europeans due to disease, relocation, and enslavement, among other causes.¹⁶ The surviving population of indigenous people in Latin America was obligated to abandon distinct cultures and languages, leading to the loss of some cultural traditions and languages.¹⁷ The Spanish explorers divided the land into what are now countries without regard to the indigenous people groups, thus separating many people who shared a culture and language while lumping other distinct groups together.¹⁸ Spanish exploration and colonization of Latin America resulted in many indigenous languages being lost and forgotten as the Spanish language and culture were imposed on many of the people native to the land. Because the Spanish wanted to convert the indigenous people from their native religions to Catholicism as well as increase their own power, they needed to speak a common language with the people in Latin America. They taught European culture, the Spanish language, and Christianity

¹⁵ LaRosa and Mejia, *An Atlas and Survey of Latin American History*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

together.¹⁹ As the indigenous Latin American people were forced to trade their native languages for Spanish, they lost not just one but many essential parts of their distinct cultures.²⁰ Many tried to resist this outside influence and hold onto their own languages, yet even for those who kept their indigenous language, learning Spanish as their second language was necessary in order to be a part of the new Spanish empire that was beginning. While some languages and people groups were forgotten and died away as the Spaniards set up their territories, others remained separate from European influence, and many more contributed to a mixture of both cultures.²¹

Many indigenous people survive today, however, and Latin America consists of a blend of indigenous and European cultures, along with influences from Africa and even Asia.²² It is important to note that research shows that “proportionally fewer Native American languages have been lost in continental Latin America than in Anglophone North America,” according to linguist and distinguished University of Chicago professor Salikoko S. Mufwene.²³ Many of these languages have survived and continue to be spoken in their respective regions in Latin America. Certain languages are spoken by at least a million people each.²⁴ Quechua is the most widely spoken indigenous language in Latin America, with over eight million speakers in six countries: Peru, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador, and Colombia.²⁵ In fact, in Peru, Quechua has the status of an

¹⁹ LaRosa and Mejia, *An Atlas and Survey of Latin American History*, 1.

²⁰ Hanks, *Converting Words*, 4.

²¹ LaRosa and Mejia, *An Atlas and Survey of Latin American History*, 6.

²² Ibid.

²³ Salikoko S. Mufwene, ed. *Iberian Imperialism and Language Evolution in Latin America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014): 6, accessed February 1, 2018, ProQuest.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ LaRosa and Mejia, *An Atlas and Survey of Latin American History*, 8.

official language.²⁶ The subsequent language is Guaraní, which is spoken by approximately three million people in Paraguay.²⁷ Other indigenous languages still spoken by a vast amount of people include Quiché in Guatemala, Náhuatl, Otomí, and Totonaco in Mexico, and Miskitu in Nicaragua and Honduras.²⁸ There are many more indigenous languages still spoken by smaller groups of people throughout Latin America. In some countries, such as Guatemala and Bolivia, the majority of the population speaks an indigenous language, according to Nora C. England, linguist, Mesoamericanist and professor at the University of Texas at Austin.²⁹ These languages represent the cultures they have come from and the rich history of each people group, both from before the arrival of the Spanish and after.

Just as language has always been a powerful force in Latin American history as a means to control other people groups or preserve one's own culture, today, the preservation of indigenous languages in Latin America is important to many people because it preserves their cultural backgrounds. While some indigenous Latin American languages are being lost because no one uses them anymore, many of the languages are still important in Latin American culture.³⁰

The indigenous languages, however, are not the most prominent languages in Latin American culture, as most countries in the region are Spanish-speaking. While some people argue that the Spanish language has imposed itself over the indigenous

²⁶ England, "Latin American Indigenous Language Research," 37.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ LaRosa and Mejia, *An Atlas and Survey of Latin American History*, 8.

²⁹ Nora C. England, "Latin American Indigenous Language Research," *Lilas Portal*, (Austin: University of Texas, n.d.), 37.

³⁰ Mufwene, ed. *Iberian Imperialism and Language Evolution in Latin America*, 6.

languages that are truly part of the Latin American culture, everyone will agree that Spanish is the “language of power” in Latin America, as Brendan O’Connell, scholar of languages in Central and South America explains.³¹ Regardless of whether it is the most representative of Latin American culture, Spanish is the language used for education, business, and even social life in most Latin American countries.³² Although some resent the Spanish influence over language, for many there is a level of pride associated with the Spanish spoken in Latin America. According to Vicente Cervera Salinas, a scholar of Argentinian author Jose Luis Borges, as Latin American authors and poets began to write and create distinct literary forms, an increasing sense of pride in Latin American Spanish, with all of its regional variations, began to grow.³³ Instead of Spanish being viewed as an outside influence, Salinas explains that it became, for many Latin Americans, what tied their different cultures together and allowed for art and poetry, such as the poem *Alocución a la Poesía* (Discourse to Poetry) that testified about the creativity of Latin America.³⁴ In the Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History, Ilan Stavans explains that in later years, Latin American *modernismo* emerged and created a sense of “linguistic unity” that furthered this sentiment.³⁵ According to Stavans, as Latin America

³¹ Brendan O’Connell, “Language Shift and Revitalization in Central and South America,” *Prospect Journal of International Affairs at UCSD* (June 30, 2011): para. 2, accessed February 4, 2018, <https://prospectjournal.org/2011/06/30/language-shift-and-revitalization-in-central-and-south-america-2/>.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Vicente Cervera Salinas, “La Poesía Viaja a América: La ‘Alocución’ Lírica de Andrés Bello,” *Philologia Hispalensis* 25 (2011): 68, accessed February 1, 2018, http://institucional.us.es/revistas/philologia/25/art_5.pdf.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁵ Ilan Stavans, “The Spanish Language in Latin America since Independence,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History* (April 26, 2018): para. 2, accessed February 1, 2018, doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.371.

and Latin American Spanish distinguished themselves from Spain, a greater sense of pride in distinctly Latin American Spanish developed.³⁶

Additionally, according to Dilyara Yakubova, Elena Pleuchova, and Ricardo Garda Munoz, specialists in Caribbean Spanish, each country and region has a specific brand of Spanish that has developed since the Spanish came to Latin America, based on geography, the influence of indigenous languages, and the particular culture.³⁷ Because of this, people in Latin America can tell what particular culture a person is from due to their accent, grammar, and choice of words. As Guvercin explains, Latin American people often find their identity in their culture and language and are, therefore, proud of their particular dialect of Spanish.³⁸

Hispanic Culture in the United States

Latin Americans living in the United States place a high value on language but tend to understand its significance differently than those in Latin America. In a different culture and situation, language takes on a new significance to people from a Latin American background. Language is still linked to culture, but the connection is viewed differently. In Latin America, language provides a link to the history and background people come from but, for Latin Americans living in the United States, language helps to define identity and find a balance between two or more different cultures.

³⁶ Stavans, "The Spanish Language in Latin America since Independence," para. 2.

³⁷ Dilyara Yakubova, Elena Pleuchova, and Ricardo Garda Munoz, "Linguistic and Cultural Characteristics of the Caribbean Spanish," *Journal of Organizational Culture, Communications and Conflict* 20 (2016): 263, accessed February 1, 2018, Questia.

³⁸ Guvercin, "Mother Tongue," para. 4.

According to research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are over 46 million Hispanic people living in the United States, many from Mexico and others from Central and South America as well as the Caribbean islands.³⁹ In fact, according information published by Elaine Allard, Katherine Mortimer, Sarah Gallo, Holly Link, and Stanton Wortham, graduate students from the University of Pennsylvania and researchers of education, linguistics, and culture, approximately one in five students in the American public school system is Hispanic.⁴⁰ Additionally, as Davis and Moore explain, Spanish is the most-spoken language, not counting English, in the United States.⁴¹ According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, most Hispanic-Americans speak English regularly, and some, especially the younger generations, speak only English.⁴² Others, especially those who have recently migrated, only speak Spanish or would say they do not speak English very well.⁴³ Many Hispanic people in the United States, however, are bilingual. Because of this, they must balance not only their Hispanic culture and American culture, but also two different languages.

Language is important as mentioned above because of the emotional and cultural connections. It is important to note, however, that just as some Hispanics only speak English, not every bilingual Hispanic-American's first language is Spanish. When a

³⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Building Our Understanding: Culture Insights Communicating with Hispanic/Latinos," *CDC's Healthy Communities Program* (2010): 1, accessed February 1, 2018, https://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dch/programs/healthycommunitiesprogram/tools/pdf/hispanic_latinos_insight.pdf.

⁴⁰ Elaine Allard, Katherine Mortimer, Sarah Gallo, Holly Link, and Stanton Wortham, "Immigrant Spanish as Liability or Asset? Generational Diversity in Language Ideologies at School," *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 13, no. 5, (2014): 335, accessed February 4, 2018, doi:10.1080/15348458.2014.958040.

⁴¹ Davis and Moore, "Spanish Not Spoken Here," 678.

⁴² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Building Our Understanding," 13.

⁴³ Ibid.

group of Hispanic bilinguals were surveyed in 2014 by the previously mentioned Collage Group marketing study, 62% said Spanish was their first language, 27% identified English as their first language, and 11% were not sure which language they had learned first.⁴⁴ Because of this, the preferred language of every Hispanic person in the United States will not be the same. However, what remains true is the idea that language has a huge significance in their cultural identity.

Language is also extremely vital for Latin Americans in the United States because it can either give them a sense of community or lead to people feeling excluded and like outsiders. According to Davis and Moore, Spanish connects many Hispanics to their heritage and links them together, even though they come from different countries and cultures.⁴⁵ A study conducted in a United States high school by Django Paris, associate professor of language and literacy at Michigan State University, reveals that Spanish is used by Hispanics to create a deeper sense of community and solidarity, even if it sometimes makes other non-Hispanic peers feel excluded.⁴⁶ To solve this problem, some non-Hispanic students learn Spanish words to communicate better with their Hispanic friends, creating a friendly and open atmosphere.⁴⁷ Other times, in environments like schools and churches, completely separate social groups emerge based on the languages people speak. Speaking Spanish can make a person feel both included into Hispanic-American culture and excluded from majority American culture.

⁴⁴ Collage Group, "Just How Important is Spanish for Bilingual Hispanics?" para. 8.

⁴⁵ Davis and Moore, "Spanish Not Spoken Here," 679.

⁴⁶ Django Paris, "'The Second Language of the United States': Youth Perspectives on Spanish in a Changing Multiethnic Community," *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 9, no. 2 (2010): 140, accessed February 4, 2018, doi:10.1080/15348451003704883.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 148.

Other Americans from a Latin American background, according to Paris's study, speak more English than Spanish, even to the point of forgetting Spanish at times, which can cause them to feel excluded from Hispanic culture in some ways.⁴⁸ At times when almost all of the people from a Hispanic background are in one group speaking Spanish, a Hispanic person whose first language is English can feel excluded and confused about their identity.⁴⁹ Older generations express concern that younger generations are speaking more English than Spanish because they feel the younger generations are losing their ties to their cultural background and families in Latin America.⁵⁰ The different values of older and younger generations regarding language often creates tension because, in one family, there might be two different preferred languages and individual family member will assign different connotations to each language.

Language and cultural identity for Latin American people living in the United States becomes even more complicated when the person's first language is an indigenous language instead of either Spanish or English. In 2014, *The New York Times* published an article about Latin American immigrants, primarily from Mexico, living in New York and the difficulties they have finding anyone who speaks their language.⁵¹ Rather than joining the Hispanic-American community, Latin American speakers of indigenous languages become extremely isolated and excluded even from their own ethnic group.⁵²

⁴⁸ Paris, "The Second Language of the United States," 142.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 143.

⁵¹ Kirk Semple, "Immigrants Who Speak Indigenous Languages Encounter Isolation," *New York Times* (July 10, 2014), accessed February 4, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/11/nyregion/immigrants-who-speak-indigenous-mexican-languages-encounter-isolation.html>.

⁵² Ibid.

For indigenous Latin Americans who end up in the United States, their language both defines their culture and separates them from people of a similar culture.

Both in Latin America and in Hispanic culture in the United States, language and culture are intertwined so that language reflects culture. As all the above research demonstrates, no language is without cultural significance and connotations. A person may prefer a certain language for an emotional connection, an association with community, political and historical reasons, or other personal reasons. Using this preferred language as a vehicle for communication is beneficial in developing close relationships, crossing cultural barriers, and sharing the gospel.

Building Deeper Connections

Having established a foundation for the link between Latin American culture and language, it is possible to delve into how speaking in the preferred language of a person from this background can form deeper relational connections. Research performed by a group of psychologists, professional counselors, and professors of psychology at various universities, has shown that “sustained, escalating, reciprocal, personalistic self-disclosure” is a key factor in developing intimacy between people.⁵³ People build deeper relationships when they can share that which is most important to them with another person and be understood and accepted.⁵⁴ While close relationships also require spending time together and sharing interests and activities, being able to communicate the

⁵³ Arthur Aron, Edward Melinat, Elaine N. Aron, Robert Darrin Vallone, and Renee J. Bator, “The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness: A Procedure and Some Preliminary Findings,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 23, no. 4 (April 1, 1997): 364, accessed February 4, 2018, doi:10.1177/0146167297234003.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

innermost parts of oneself is essential.⁵⁵ In the context of a bilingual Latin American person and a non-Hispanic North American, the Latin American person may be able to hear and understand those important details of the non-Hispanic person's life told in English. However, disclosing those important things about themselves in a language that is not their first or preferred language may be uncomfortable or less meaningful. In order to develop that kind of intimacy with a person from a Latin American background, it is beneficial to speak and understand their preferred language.

Aside from self-disclosure or revelation, speaking a Latin American person's preferred language can make a stronger connection on a psychological level. People react to what is familiar to them, and the way people respond to the familiar is seen in everyday life in many ways, such as how people hear their own name, even in a noisy room. Dennis P. Carmody, professor of nursing science at Rutgers School of Nursing and Michael Lewis, distinguished professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at Rutgers Medical School, establish that different regions of the brain are activated when hearing one's own name as opposed to the names of others.⁵⁶ This study shows that the brain responds differently when hearing the person's own name and uses the same parts used when a person makes judgment decisions about their own selves and personal qualities.⁵⁷ This research was done among adults, but there is even more research showing that children, especially under sedation, will "respond selectively" to their own name.⁵⁸ Clearly,

⁵⁵ Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, and Bator, "The Experimental Generation of Interpersonal Closeness," 364.

⁵⁶ Dennis P. Carmody and Michael Lewis, "Brain Activation When Hearing One's Own and Others' Names," *Brain Research* 1116, no. 1 (October 20, 2006): 155, accessed February 4, 2018, doi: 10.1016/j.brainres. 2006.07.121.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

responding to one's name as contrasted with other words or names in the same language is different from responding to one language over another, but the idea is that the brain responds to that which is familiar. One cannot assume the brain responds the same way in these two situations. However, further research shows that the overall idea of the brain recognizing and responding to what is familiar is true.

According to Oludamini Ogunnaike, assistant professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary, Yarrow Dunham, assistant professor of psychology and cognitive science at Yale University, and Mahzarin R. Banaji, psychology and social ethics professor at Harvard University, this pattern is shown even in infants as they prefer people who speak languages they have heard as well as accents they are used to.⁵⁹ In fact, most research in this field is done with babies. This is because researchers can see how the brain reacts to a language before a person has other knowledge and preconceived notions that can affect their responses. Even before they can speak, babies recognize different languages. One study performed by various experts, including Janet F. Werker, developmental psychology researcher and professor at the University of British Columbia, comparing monolingual and bilingual infants at six and eight months shows that infants can distinguish between languages even as babies.⁶⁰ Even just through visual speech information, babies can tell if the language someone is speaking is a language they know and even differentiate between two known languages, in the case of the

⁵⁹ Oludamini Ogunnaike, Yarrow Dunham, and Mahzarin R. Banaji, "The Language of Implicit Preferences," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46 (2010): 999, accessed February 1, 2018, https://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~mrbworks/articles/2010_Ogunnaike_JESP.pdf.

⁶⁰ Whitney M. Weikum, Athena Vouloumanos, Jordi Navarra, Salvador Soto-Faraco, Núria Sebastián-Gallés, and Janet F. Werker, "Visual Language Discrimination in Infancy," *Science* 316, no. 5828 (2007): 1159.

bilingual babies in this study.⁶¹ Even from a young age, babies are able to recognize a language that is familiar to them.

Another study performed by Werker looks at the way infants perceive different languages, enabling them to separate sounds based on language and meaning.⁶² At conception, babies could theoretically learn any language just as easily, but as they are exposed—even in the womb—to one particular language, they “become more and more adept at attending to and optimally processing the properties of the native language.”⁶³ At the same time, Werker explains that they become less perceptive to other languages and lose the sensitivity to “variation that is not meaningful in the native language.”⁶⁴ Researchers are extremely interested in the way that babies learn language and the way their “perceptual sensitivities” change as they age, leaving them a greater ability to learn their native language over others.⁶⁵ Even from birth, then, the brain reacts most to the preferred or first language. As sensitivity to the variations of that language become more developed, it is natural to assume an adult would be more attentive to their preferred language, as their brain would identify it before other languages.

This same study performed by Werker also looked at the way bilingual infants perceive and recognize languages. The findings were that the bilingual babies were slower to develop the mechanisms necessary to recognize and differentiate between the

⁶¹ Weikum, Vouloumanos, Navarra, Soto-Faraco, Sebastián-Gallés, and Werker, "Visual Language Discrimination in Infancy," 1159.

⁶² Janet F. Werker, "Perceptual Foundations of Bilingual Acquisition in Infancy," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1251 (March 2012): 50.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

two languages, but once they did, could distinguish both languages.⁶⁶ The bilingual babies listened equally to both of their known languages.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the monolingual babies showed a clear preference for their known language.⁶⁸ The research demonstrates that “listening experience can shape listening preferences” but “cannot overwrite the sensitivity to the rhythmical cues that distinguish the languages.”⁶⁹ This study illustrates the point that the brain, even in a baby, recognizes and responds primarily to the known language or languages. The study shows that infants who learn two languages simultaneously at home will show, at least in the way their brain responds, equal preference to both languages.

Another study performed by Krista Byers-Heinlein, associate professor and research chair in bilingualism and psychology at Concordia University in Montreal, Tracey C. Burns, senior analyst at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, and Janet F. Werker, researching the effect of the languages an infant is exposed to before birth shows that exposure to a language while in the womb is a huge factor in a baby’s preference for a language.⁷⁰ The newborn babies who had been exposed to one language showed interest for that language above other languages.⁷¹ Babies who had been exposed to two languages showed equal preference for both languages.⁷² This shows that the exposure a

⁶⁶ Werker, “Perceptual Foundations of Bilingual Acquisition in Infancy,” 51.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷⁰ Krista Byers-Heinlein, Tracey C. Burns, and Janet F. Werker, “The Roots of Bilingualism in Newborns.” *Psychological Science* 21, no. 3 (2010): 346.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

baby has to a language plays an important role in their preference for that language. Their brain reacts differently to this (or these) languages and, as they grow older, they continue to show a preference for these languages. As mentioned previously, this research is done on babies and illustrates the brain's reaction to familiar versus unfamiliar languages even before a baby can understand the meanings of specific words. This means the results show how the brain reacts to the language and not just to what is being said. Because the brain develops the processes and skills to recognize specific languages, it makes sense that, even as an adult, a person will respond best to that first language. The brain reacts differently when hearing this first language, which is why a person would feel a deeper connection with the speaker of this language.

While developing deeper connections on a psychological level due to hearing one's first or preferred language is not unique to people from Latin American backgrounds, these principles do apply in that particular culture. As previously mentioned, language is important to people from Latin America. Aside from just the psychological response, a Latin American person will respond emotionally to hearing their preferred language. Family is extremely important in Latin American culture. According to Irma Arriagada, Latin American sociologist, although the Latin American family is changing, and it is more common for homes to consist of just the nuclear family, it is still common for three generations to live together.⁷³ People from a Latin American background, both in Latin America and (to a lesser extent) in the United States,

⁷³ Irma Arriagada, "Familias Latinoamericanas: Cambiantes, Diversas y Desiguales". *Papeles de Población* 53 (2007): 10, accessed February 4, 2018, Red de Revistas Científicas de América Latina y el Caribe, España y Portugal.

tend to remain close to their families both physically and emotionally. According to Guvercin, because a child “connects to his parents, family, relatives, culture, history, identity and religion” through his or her first language, the Latin American person who values their family and history so much feels a strong connection to that language.⁷⁴ The Latin American person’s first language is the way they communicate and build the deepest and most important relationships—those with family.⁷⁵ Therefore, a person speaking this language will have better chances at developing a true and deep emotional connection.

In addition to the way the brain responds psychologically to the familiar, hearing one’s first language before any others, speaking a person’s preferred language can also allow for the possibility of code-switching. Jessica Ball, professor in the School of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, Canada, explains that code-switching is using “more than one language in the same utterance or in the same stretch of conversation.”⁷⁶ According to Erica McClure professor of sociolinguistics, education, and English as an international language at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, this occurs both in the United States when Latin Americans use both English and Spanish in a sentence or phrase as well as in Latin America where people will use some English that they have learned mixed in with their Spanish.⁷⁷ In both contexts,

⁷⁴ Guvercin, “Mother Tongue,” para. 4.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Jessica Ball, “Enhancing Learning of Children from Diverse Language Backgrounds: Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual or Multilingual Education in the Early Years,” *Paper commissioned for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (2011): 59.

⁷⁷ Erica McClure, “The Relationship Between Form and Function in Written National Language- English Codeswitching: Evidence from Mexico, Spain, and Bulgaria,” in *Codeswitching Worldwide*, ed. Rodolfo Jacobson, 1 (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998), 126.

although primarily in the United States, the mixture of Spanish and English is popularly referred to as *Spanglish*. Code-switching, according to Maria Velasquez, an expert on second language acquisition, is not a result of not being able to communicate fully in one language, but rather an intentional choice to use both languages.⁷⁸ Being able to communicate like this helps people to choose a word from either language that better fits what they want to say and allows deeper mutual understanding. According to Paris, using words of another language can help people to feel more connected, even when it is only a few words of the other language mixed in.⁷⁹

Code-switching, according to Velasquez, is also a way that a bilingual person demonstrates their identity.⁸⁰ Velasquez explains that bilingual people from Latin America use code-switching more when discussing topics like “family, school, ethnicity, and friends.”⁸¹ People will use both languages to communicate about themselves when they speak multiple languages in order to show their identity more fully.⁸² To have another person understand both languages, and therefore, both parts of a bilingual person’s identity, allows for a deeper connection as the people will know each other better.

Deep connections can seem difficult to form when two people have two different first languages. However, there has been research done by Ingrid Piller, professor of applied linguistics at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, among bilingual

⁷⁸ Maria Velasquez, “Language and Identity: Bilingual Code-Switching in Spanish-English Interviews,” (Master’s thesis, University of Toronto, 2013), 84, accessed February 4, 2018, https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/25679/1/Velasquez_Maria_C_201011_MA_Thesis.pdf.

⁷⁹ Paris, “The Second Language of the United States,” 152.

⁸⁰ Velasquez, “Language and Identity,” 84.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 85.

married couples, all with different ways of communicating.⁸³ According to Piller, while some couples speak in one partner's first language and others in the other's preferred language, many use a mixture of both languages, so each communicate some of the time in their own preferred language.⁸⁴ This allows for code-switching which can allow multiple aspects of a person's personality to be communicated and each partner, at times, gets to hear the language that their brain responds to as familiar, evoking memories and thoughts of home or family.⁸⁵ Speaking in someone's preferred language can help one to build a deeper connection in every relationship, not just romantic, but marriage is a good example because that is a deeper and usually longer-lasting relationship than a business acquaintance or casual friendship. Regardless of the kind of relationship, speaking to a person in their preferred language is an important tool in strengthening and deepening the relationship, especially in the Latin American culture because of the importance of language within that culture.

Crossing Cultural Barriers

While hearing one's preferred language can open a person's heart to a deeper personal connection, there will still be a lack of intimacy and barriers to sharing the gospel as long as there are cultural barriers—anything different between two cultures that can lead to misunderstandings or tension. When people come from different cultural backgrounds, they have different experiences, different appearances, different values, different customs, different beliefs, and different ways of interpreting the world around

⁸³ Ingrid Piller, *Bilingual Couples Talk: The Discursive Construction of Hybridity*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2002), 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 149.

them that can cause misunderstanding and distrust. All of these become barriers to interaction between people of different cultures. Fortunately, speaking to a person of another culture in their preferred language, especially a person from a Latin American background, can help to reduce and move past these obstacles. This is because the speaker shows an appreciation for the Latin American culture as they invest time in learning and using the language. Beyond effort, the use of another language will open the non-Latin American person's eyes to a deeper understanding of the culture. Speaking in someone's first language helps to alleviate misunderstandings based on word choices and the connotations words may have, because as one learns a language, they learn aspects of the culture too. Because of this, speaking to a person in their first language can be a key factor in crossing over cultural barriers that may otherwise seem insurmountable.

According to Danilo Martuccelli, professor of sociology at Paris Descartes University, after physical appearance, language and accents are a major indicator that a person is different and from a different culture.⁸⁶ Unlike one's appearance, languages can be learned, and accents can be improved or shed over time, taking away one obvious divider between ethno-linguistic groups.⁸⁷ Because people express their nationality and identity through the language they communicate in, speaking in a different language can allow people to appear more relatable in the culture the language they are speaking represents.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Danilo Martuccelli, "Cartografía y Horizontes de la Sociología sobre América Latina," *Papeles Del CEIC* 1 (2015): 8, accessed February 4, 2018, ProQuest.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 9.

Racial stereotypes are one example of a cultural barrier the members of both cultures must overcome that the use of language greatly influence. Language affects racial stereotypes because, according to Ogunnaike, Dunham, and Banaji, cultural values and attitudes that are “embedded in the language” and can influence one’s identity as well as ethnic prejudices and preferences.⁸⁹ According to Davis and Moore, Latin Americans in the United States encounter discrimination based on their ethnicity as well as the belief that Spanish is an inferior language.⁹⁰ Indigenous people groups, as Bivin explains, find these same sentiments towards them in Latin America.⁹¹ In Davis and Moore’s study of Hispanics in the United States, one participant described feeling discriminated against by the police, not because of his ethnicity so much as due to his use of Spanish and lack of English knowledge.⁹² Racial or ethnic discrimination is a cultural barrier and language plays a part in this. When a non-Hispanic person speaks in Spanish (or whatever the person’s preferred language is) to a Hispanic person, this shows that the non-Hispanic person does not see either the person’s culture or language as inferior.

In a high school in the Western part of the United States described in Paris’s research, non-Hispanic students learned words of Spanish, their Latin American peers’ first language, so that they could be a part of that culture.⁹³ This gesture was highly appreciated and viewed as “both complimentary and necessary” for their community.⁹⁴ Some students would specifically learn and use phrases of Spanish to impress Hispanic

⁸⁹ Ogunnaike, Dunham, and Banaji, “The Language of Implicit Preferences,” 999.

⁹⁰ Davis and Moore, “Spanish Not Spoken Here,” 682.

⁹¹ Bivin, “Mother-Tongue Translations and Contextualization in Latin America,” 72.

⁹² Davis and Moore, “Spanish Not Spoken Here,” 687.

⁹³ Paris, “The Second Language of the United States,” 152.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

peers of the opposite sex and as a “simple cultural bridge” that showed “across-group solidarity.”⁹⁵ By making an effort to speak even a few words in the preferred language of their peers, these non-Hispanic youth were able to show that they appreciated—rather than looked down upon—Hispanic culture.⁹⁶

Another way speaking to individuals in their preferred language can help one to cross cultural barriers is the knowledge one gains of the values and thought-patterns of that culture. Words in any given language reflect the values of that culture solely by their existence in the sense that some languages will have multiple words for variations of something that only has one general name in another language. For example, according to education expert Leo Dubbeldam, some Asian cultures have multiple words to differentiate rice in its different forms, whether growing in a field, uncooked, or boiled because rice is an essential element of their diets and therefore cultures.⁹⁷ Learning the different terms for the variety of rice species allows a person to bridge cultural divides in this context more efficiently. This is a classic example, but there are many distinctions between indigenous languages and Spanish, or Spanish and English. According to New Testament and Greek scholar Stanley E. Porter, English does not assign every word or object a gender as Spanish does.⁹⁸ On the other hand, the male word *brother* and neutral word *sibling* are visibly different in English, whereas *hermano* serves for both male and

⁹⁵ Paris, “The Second Language of the United States,” 150.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Leo Dubbeldam, “Towards a Socio-Cultural Model of Literacy Education,” in *Functional Literacy: Theoretical Issues and Educational Implications*, ed. Ludo Verhoeven (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1994), 407.

⁹⁸ Stanley E. Porter, “Problems in the Language of the Bible: Misunderstandings that Continue to Plague Biblical Interpretation,” in *The Nature of Religious Language: A Colloquium*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 33.

unspecified genders. Every little difference in the semantics of different languages reveals aspects of the culture and what is valued in each culture. When non-Hispanic people learn to speak the preferred language of someone from a Latin American background, they will not only become aware of the differences between the languages but also of the overarching value systems behind the language.

In fact, speaking in another language helps a person both to become more aware of cultural values and beliefs and to adopt other ways of thinking in many cases. According to Ogunnaike, Dunham, and Banaji, speaking a language other than one's own first languages "entails playing the role... of a member of that linguistic community," by temporarily adopting the thinking patterns of the culture that language represents.⁹⁹ According to a group of researchers including Guillaume Thierry, psychology professor at Bangor University, over 1200 years ago, Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, is reported to have said that speaking another language is essentially having "another soul."¹⁰⁰ The idea behind this was that people seem to have a second identity of sorts when they speak another language.

Thierry and his colleagues explain that when a person speaks another language, their brain processes information based on the cognitive patterns that are part of that language as opposed to their first language.¹⁰¹ Their research on this subject shows that a person's perception of things such as the endpoint or goal of an action depends on the

⁹⁹ Ogunnaike, Dunham, and Banaji, "The Language of Implicit Preferences," 1000.

¹⁰⁰ Panos Athanasopoulos, Emanuel Bylund, Guillermo Montero-Melis, Ljubica Damjanovic, Alina Schartner, Alexandra Kibbe, Nick Riches, and Guillaume Thierry, "Two Languages, Two Minds: Flexible Cognitive Processing Driven by Language of Operation," *Psychological Science* 26, no. 4 (March 6, 2015): 518, accessed February 4, 2018, doi:10.1177/0956797614567509.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

language they speak, as some languages are more apt to describe the endpoint while others describe the current action and ignore the future goal.¹⁰² When bilinguals are asked questions designed to demonstrate whether they focus on the end-goal or the action, they answer in a way that reflects whichever language they are speaking.¹⁰³ In one study, bilinguals would choose the answer to the questions that was most similar to that of monolingual speakers of whatever language they heard—even when that was not their first language.¹⁰⁴ Because the culture represented by the language the participants were hearing focused either more or less on the present actions or future goals (depending on the instance), the participant would follow suit and adapt those same values and ways of categorizing information.

Ogunnaike, Dunham, and Banaji's study, looking specifically at people's opinions about different socio-linguistic people groups, found similar results.¹⁰⁵ When answering a survey designed to gauge ethnic preferences in both languages they speak, bilinguals had more "favorable attitudes towards the linguistic ingroups" of whichever language they were answering the survey in.¹⁰⁶ This is because they pick up on the attitudes and values that are entrenched in each language.¹⁰⁷ If people from a culture generally feel a certain way about a different people group or culture, that is generally reflected in the language. An example of the feelings of the majority being represented in the language itself is the terms used to refer to Native Americans—in both English and Spanish. These diverse

¹⁰² Athanasopoulos, et. al., "Two Languages, Two Minds," 519.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 522.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 524.

¹⁰⁵ Ogunnaike, Dunham, and Banaji, "The Language of Implicit Preferences," 1002.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

people groups were all called *Indians* (or *Indios* in Spanish) at first, based on the incorrect assumption that the continent Columbus sailed to was India. Although this assumption was proven untrue, in early colonial America, these people groups were referred to as *savages* and other uncomplimentary terms, showing the beliefs many of the settlers had. The term *Indian* reflects the fact that people did not (and sometimes still do not) care enough about these people to correct a geographical error in the term they use to refer to them. While there were certainly people who did not share these beliefs and assumptions, they still associated with the assumptions and preferences of the general culture by using these terms.

Fortunately, when a person speaks another language and adopts its values, it is not usually as harsh or negative as using the term *savages* to refer to any native people groups. Even when it is a positive preference for a people group or even a specific action or object, people are voluntarily or involuntarily aligning themselves with this preference when they speak a language. According to Ogunnaike, Dunham, and Banaji, even the act of using a particular language is “a form of cultural and linguistic affiliation.”¹⁰⁸ When interacting with people from another culture, this is beneficial because it shows solidarity and common opinions shared between the members of both cultures.

Because speaking a language connects a person to the culture that language represents, people from that culture will feel less of a cultural barrier between themselves and the speaker of their language. More specifically, when a Hispanic person in the United States hears someone speaking Spanish (or whatever their preferred language may

¹⁰⁸ Ogunnaike, Dunham, and Banaji, “The Language of Implicit Preferences,” 1002.

be) to them, both parties will feel a stronger bond based on the cultural preference the non-Hispanic person is showing in speaking the language. The same thing occurs when, for example, a Mexican person of Spanish descent speaks a certain indigenous language to a native Latin American person, adopting not just the words and grammatical structure, but also the thought processes behind the language. While the speaker cannot become part of a culture solely by speaking the language, the speaker does gain a deeper understanding of the culture through the way the language works and shows solidarity with people from that culture. Because of this, speaking to a person from a Latin American background in their preferred language can help one to cross not just language, but also ethnic and cultural barriers.

Sharing the Gospel

Using someone's first language helps in building connections and crossing cultural barriers, which are important things on their own. However, for Christians passionate about engaging people of other cultures in conversations about God and the gospel, these things can be important bridges in approaching these conversations. In order to approach a topic as sensitive and important as an individual's personal belief, it is highly beneficial to have established a close relationship based on mutual trust and admiration. It is also difficult for people to communicate well if they feel there are too many cultural barriers separating them. When cultural barriers are taken away, or at least lessened, people can have deeper conversations and not feel as misunderstood or distant due to cultural differences. Beyond these, however, speaking to a Latin American or Hispanic person in their preferred language can be essential in sharing the gospel because

it helps prevent the assumption that God is a foreign God, worshipped by other people but not within one's own culture. It also allows people the freedom to worship God in the language that they know best. All these components are important when sharing the gospel with anyone from a different culture and, specifically, within a Latin American culture.

Because of the history of Latin America and the way the Spanish promulgated both language and religion onto the indigenous people groups, the Spanish language is intrinsically linked to Catholic tradition in Latin America. As the previously mentioned sociocultural anthropologist and professor William F. Hanks explains, Spanish was the language used to spread Catholicism, which set it apart from indigenous culture as something foreign.¹⁰⁹ When this occurs, there are two usual effects: syncretism and dissociation. William E. Bivin, a Bible translation consultant, writes that the two religions—in this case Catholicism from Spain and the indigenous religions practiced by the native Latin Americans—are blended together because the formal traditions spoken about in another language seem so far removed from the practices and beliefs commonly thought and spoken about in the indigenous language.¹¹⁰ In instances where one is speaking with a person from a more indigenous background, speaking in their language will combat the belief that their language is somehow less worthy, or less acceptable to God, according to Hanks.¹¹¹ Since there have traditionally been few Bibles and little theological resources translated and contextualized into indigenous languages, according

¹⁰⁹ Hanks, *Converting Words*, 1.

¹¹⁰ Bivin, "Mother-Tongue Translations and Contextualization in Latin America," 74.

¹¹¹ Hanks, *Converting Words*, 8.

to Bivin, interpersonal communication in these languages could be the only time an indigenous Latin American hears about Jesus in their preferred language.¹¹² There are more and more Bible translations and religious resources in indigenous languages, but there is still a lack. Regardless, a person investing time and effort into learning and speaking an indigenous Latin American language—many of which can be quite challenging to learn and some of which are tonal languages—shows that the language is acceptable in speaking to and talking about God.

In other cases, whether among Spanish-speaking Latin Americans in their home countries or bilinguals in the United States, hearing the gospel in one's preferred language can make the message more relatable. Bivin argues that when people hear about God in another language, they will sometimes feel that God is more distant from them and their culture than He is from another.¹¹³ God is not the God of one language or culture more than another. Jesus grew up in Jewish culture and the Jews were the people God chose to use in the beginning, so if He represents one culture in particular, it would be that culture, not Western or American culture. However, Jesus' command in Acts 1:8 is to be his witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."¹¹⁴ This demonstrates that Jesus wants every culture and people group to know Him. Additionally, the Bible says in Acts 17:26 that God created every nation and people group, and He decided where and when each person should live. As Bivin explains, this verse shows that God is involved and invested in every culture.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Bivin, "Mother-Tongue Translations and Contextualization in Latin America," 72.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹⁴ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture references are from the English Standard Version.

¹¹⁵ Bivin, "Mother-Tongue Translations and Contextualization in Latin America," 75.

When people's knowledge of God comes from a language that is not their own, they tend to think of God as a foreigner's god, and Jesus as someone who does not fit in their own culture.¹¹⁶ Whereas God, outside of all human culture, desires to enter into each culture and meet people where they are, people get the idea that He is part of another culture different from their own, and therefore, does not understand their culture. When a conversation about God is approached in the preferred language of a person from a Latin American background, that individual is able to relate to it and to God in a more personal way. This is true for people whose preferred language is any of the many indigenous languages spoken throughout Latin America, Spanish, English, or any other language. Just as speaking in someone's preferred language can build a deeper connection between people and break down cultural barriers that may separate them, speaking to someone about God in their preferred language can be instrumental in the connection and breaking of barriers between that person and God.

Christians believe that it is God, through the Holy Spirit, who works in a person to cause them to respond to Him, as Jesus says in Matthew 16:7 when He tells Peter that he only knows who Jesus is because God revealed it to him. God is not limited by the languages people speak to share Him with others. However, Christians should still make the most of their opportunities to connect cross-culturally with people in their preferred language, as the believer may be the tool God desires to use to connect with someone in their own language.

¹¹⁶ Bivin, "Mother-Tongue Translations and Contextualization in Latin America," 76.

Another important benefit of using people's preferred language when sharing the Gospel is that it allows them to communicate with God in the same language they think and dream in. While some people may learn about God or attend church services in a language that is not their first language and then use their language to speak to Him, oftentimes people will use the same language and vocabulary they hear used to talk about God in their personal interactions with Him. Examples of this are found both within Christianity and outside of it, such as traditional Roman Catholic services and prayer all being in Latin and Muslims being taught to pray in Arabic even if they don't speak it. According to Bivin, in Latin America, there are many people from indigenous backgrounds who use their own language for most areas of life but use Spanish for anything related to God or Christianity.¹¹⁷ This occurs because a church may teach people to use this language or because people do not always know the same religious vocabulary in their preferred language as they have been taught in another. If people have only ever heard words referring to God and the community of people who follow Him in another language, they may not know how to express these concepts in their preferred language. Sharing the gospel with people in their first or preferred language takes away this difficulty and allows them to worship and pray to God in the language they most commonly use, instead of feeling like they must use a different language to interact with Him. When sharing the gospel with someone from a Latin American or Hispanic background, it is important to use their preferred language to not just establish a deeper

¹¹⁷ Bivin, "Mother-Tongue Translations and Contextualization in Latin America," 74.

connection and cross over cultural barriers, but also to show that God can enter into their culture and interact with them exactly the way they are and in their own language.

Conclusion

Based on the idea that language and culture are intrinsically intertwined due to emotional connections, historical considerations, and feelings of inclusion or exclusion from a community, speaking to a person, especially a Latin American or Hispanic person, in his or her preferred language is extremely beneficial, as it can help to build a deeper connection and stronger relationship because people's brains respond to the familiar, and because people will feel they can communicate more fully. Speaking to individuals in their preferred language can also help to cross the cultural differences between the two people, as an appreciation for the other culture and language is demonstrated and the speaker shares, to an extent, in the cultural identity represented by the language. These are important outcomes on their own, but also contribute to a more effective way of sharing the Gospel. Speaking to someone in their preferred language will make them more likely to listen and understand because they will not feel that they are hearing about a foreign God, outside of their culture, and will feel freedom to worship and pray to Him in their own language. When attempting to share the Gospel, or even just connect on a deeper level, with a person from a Latin American or Hispanic background, it is important to make the effort to share in this essential part of culture: their language.

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