TRANSCRIPT · EPISODE 204

Who Are You in English?

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

297 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

There is an experiment I want to tell you about before we do anything else.

Go on.

A group of researchers invited people who spoke two languages fluently.

And they gave them a personality test.

A normal one?

A standard one.

The kind that measures how outgoing you are, how agreeable, how organised.

And?

And then they gave them the same test again.

Same people.

Same questions.

The same week?

In one of their studies, the same session.

So the results were identical.

The results were not identical.

What was different?

One version of the test was in Spanish.

The other was in English.

And that changed the answers.

That changed the answers.

In that study, the same people answered twice in one session.

Some of their answers were different.

Welcome to Your English Toolbox, the podcast that trains your English while you live your real life.

I am Martin.

And I am Julia.

Today we are exploring a feeling many English learners recognise.

Sometimes it sounds like a complaint.

In English, I am not myself.

In my language I am funny.

In English I am boring.

I have a personality and it does not fit through my English.

And every time somebody tells us that, the easy answer is, keep studying, it will come.

That answer is not wrong.

It is not wrong, but it is not the whole truth.

Because what you are describing is real.

People have studied experiences like this, and they have some interesting ideas.

Let us go back to the study, because I want our friends to know it is serious work.

It was published in two thousand and six, in a journal of personality research, by a team led by a researcher called Nairán Ramírez-Esparza.

And the test?

The Big Five.

Forty-four questions.

It is one widely used personality questionnaire in psychology.

And the participants?

Highly fluent Spanish-English bilinguals, in the United States and in Mexico.

And the result held up?

That is the important part.

They studied three separate groups of bilingual people.

A similar pattern appeared in all three groups.

In two groups the tests were at least a week apart.

Which traits changed?

Three of their scores changed on average.

That does not mean every person changed in the same way.

How outgoing people were.

How agreeable.

And how conscientious, which means roughly how organised and dutiful.

And before anybody says it.

Say it.

Maybe the Spanish translation of the test was just badly worded.

They checked.

Their analyses did not find evidence that the pattern was explained by translation or unusual individual questions.

So what is actually happening?

This is where it gets interesting, because researchers have a possible explanation.

People assume you have two personalities.

And you do not.

You are one person, but different situations can bring different parts of you forward.

Explain a frame.

A frame is the whole invisible set of rules about how people behave in a situation.

How close you stand.

How loud you are.

Whether you interrupt.

Whether you say what you think immediately or wrap it in three polite sentences first.

And language can be one of those signals.

Yes.

Language, culture and the situation around us can all play a part.

The mix can be different for each person.

So changing language might bring a different frame to mind.

It might.

But language alone does not explain everyone’s experience.

Researchers call this possible process cultural frame switching.

We also explored a related feeling in episode thirty-two.

Today we are returning to it with a closer look at the research.

And here is the sentence I want you to keep.

You are not being fake in one of your languages.

You may find it easier to show different parts of yourself in different situations.

Now I want to make this concrete, because this is still abstract.

Let me tell you about Camila.

Invented?

Invented from several real people.

Camila is from Belo Horizonte, in Brazil, and she is an engineer in Dublin.

She has been there four years.

Her English is excellent.

Technically excellent?

Technically excellent.

She writes reports that her manager barely edits.

And how do her colleagues describe her?

This is the whole episode in one word.

Quiet.

Quiet.

In her performance review, somebody wrote that she should contribute more in meetings.

And how do her friends in Brazil describe her?

Her oldest friend describes her as the one who never lets anybody else finish a sentence.

The same woman.

The same woman, in the same month.

And the painful part is she believes the Dublin version.

That is the painful part.

She has started to think of herself as a quiet person who used to be loud.

And she is not.

She is the same person in both places.

The language, the workplace and the people around her may all affect how easily she joins in.

And this is the moment to separate two things that get confused, because they are not the same problem.

Go on.

One is vocabulary.

You do not have the word.

That may be a vocabulary problem, and learning useful words can help.

And the other?

The other is timing.

Humour is timing.

Interrupting politely is timing.

Knowing when a group is about to change subject, and getting in before it does.

And that is not in a vocabulary list.

A vocabulary list alone cannot teach you every part of a conversation.

That is why people with very high English still feel like a smaller version of themselves.

So even when you know the words, joining in can still be hard.

Yes.

Timing, confidence and the people around you can all matter.

Right.

Now tell them the strange part, because there is something here that works in their favour.

There is, and almost nobody knows it.

A different language can sometimes change the way people respond to a decision.

Say that again.

In some experiments, people made different choices in a foreign language.

Different does not automatically mean better.

Who found this?

A line of research from the laboratory of Boaz Keysar, at the University of Chicago, with Albert Costa in Barcelona and others.

And what did they find?

In some experiments, people responded differently to risks and to the way choices were presented.

The result depends on the task.

It does not prove that every decision in a foreign language is more rational.

And the strongest one?

One result is uncomfortable.

In one experiment, people imagined pushing one person to save five.

And?

Eighteen per cent said yes in their first language.

Forty-four per cent said yes in a foreign language.

That is one experiment, not a rule about everybody.

More than twice.

More than twice.

Why?

One possible explanation is psychological distance.

Researchers are still debating how the effect works.

Explain it simply.

Imagine learning your first language at home, with the people around you.

And the second one?

Perhaps you first met it in a classroom.

So words might not carry the same weight.

They might feel different because of the experiences you associate with them.

But people learn languages in many different ways.

And that distance makes you colder.

It may create a little distance for some people.

That does not mean it always makes a decision clearer.

Now, I want to be careful here, and this matters.

Please be careful.

These are laboratory studies.

The researchers themselves warn against taking them too far into real life.

So we are not saying go and make your big decisions in English.

We are not saying that.

If an email feels easier to write in English, that experience is worth noticing.

Even if we cannot know exactly why it feels easier.

Exactly.

Your own history and the situation may matter too.

Can we talk about love and swearing?

I was waiting for you to ask.

Because this is the part everybody recognises.

Here it is.

For some people, strong words can feel different in a second language.

A swear word might feel less powerful in English.

It might.

But that will not be true for everyone.

And a word in your first language?

It may carry memories and feelings that the English word does not.

And the opposite is also true.

The opposite can happen too.

For some people, I love you may be easier to say in one language than another.

Because each version may carry a different history.

Exactly.

For someone else, the English words may feel just as powerful.

And is that bad?

It is both.

Sometimes the lightness is a loss.

And sometimes the lightness is exactly what lets you say something you could never say at home.

So.

Practical part.

How does our listener get their personality back?

Three things, and the first one is the most important.

Go on.

Give yourself permission to express your personality in new ways.

Explain the difference.

If you are funny in your language, your jokes depend on words, on references, on a rhythm that only exists there.

A direct translation may not have the same effect.

So what do you do instead?

You steal.

Steal?

Find two or three people in English whose way of talking you like.

At work, on television, anywhere.

And take their phrases.

Not their accent.

Not their accent.

Their moves.

The way they start a story.

The thing they say when they disagree.

And slowly that becomes yours.

We often learn ways of speaking from the people around us.

Over time, we make those expressions our own.

Second thing?

Learn the words that buy you time, not the words that sound clever.

Because a little time can help.

Yes.

A useful phrase can give you a moment to find your words.

And if you have a phrase to fill that second.

Then you are not searching in silence.

You are talking while you search.

Give them three.

The thing is.

What I mean is.

Hang on, let me think about that.

And those are not impressive sentences.

They are not impressive at all.

They are the scaffolding that holds your personality up while you build the sentence behind it.

And the third thing?

The third thing is honesty, and you may not like it.

Tell them anyway.

Finding your voice can take time.

The journey is different for everyone, and there is no fixed deadline.

That is not very encouraging.

It is more encouraging than the alternative, which is believing you are failing.

Because if you think it closes next month.

Then every month it does not close feels like your fault.

And it is not your fault.

It is one possible part of learning to express yourself in a second language.

Right.

Three sentences, and these are rescue sentences.

For the exact moment you feel like somebody else.

Listen, and repeat in the pause.

Sentence one, which turns the problem into a joke you control.

To be honest, I am much funnier in my own language.

Sentence two, for the second you need.

Hang on, I am translating a joke.

And sentence three, the most useful sentence in this whole episode.

That came out wrong.

What I meant was.

All three again.

To be honest, I am much funnier in my own language.

Hang on, I am translating a joke.

That came out wrong.

What I meant was.

Notice what the first one does.

It tells the room that there is more of you than they are currently seeing.

It can also help people understand how you feel.

And the third one is the one that saves relationships.

Because sometimes, in any language, things come out wrong.

And most people just let the wrong version stand there.

Do not let it stand there.

Say it came out wrong, and say it again.

And our sentence of the day.

Ready?

You are not a worse person in English.

You are a younger one.

You are not a worse person in English.

You are a younger one.

One more time, with us.

You are not a worse person in English.

You are a younger one.

Say why that works, because it is doing something precise.

Think of that as a metaphor, not a scientific measurement.

Camila has lived in Dublin for four years.

That does not tell us when she started learning English.

But it reminds us that expressing ourselves in a new setting can take practice.

They say, give it time.

Give it time, and give it conversations.

So here is what to do with this week.

One thing.

If you catch yourself calling your English self a worse person, pause.

Boring.

Stupid.

Not me.

You could replace that thought with a kinder one.

Your English voice is still growing.

And if you want a second thing.

Borrow one phrase from somebody whose way of talking you like.

One phrase.

Use it three times this week until it stops feeling borrowed.

Everything from today, the transcript, the vocabulary, and the three rescue sentences, is waiting for you at yourenglishtoolbox.com.

With translations, flashcards and downloadable PDFs, completely free.

Thank you for spending this time with us.

And whoever you are in English.

Give them a few more years.

See you in the next one.