

Grandmothers and the Mother Tongue of the Portuguese Diaspora

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Twenty years of teaching Portuguese-Canadian students in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Toronto, has allowed me to learn about the significant role parents and grandparents play in first-languaged retention of their children. Year after year, students have acknowledged that they owe their love and knowledge of the Portuguese language and their love of Portuguese culture to their families. They mention, in particular, their mothers and grandmothers, who spend more time with them during their formative years. They recognize that being able to understand the world their families came from has helped them to enjoy lives that are better, happier and more fulfilled.

Daniela's story

"Both sets of my grandparents came from the Azorean Island of São Miguel. When they immigrated to Canada, and left behind that beautiful, little island, they brought with them traditions and ways of life. When I was born, my mother was just beginning her career as a lawyer and was really busy, so it was my maternal grandmother who raised me. Every day, for the first four years of my life, I learned and gained experience from her. Even though she had learned some English, she spoke to me in Portuguese because it was more comfortable to her. The first word that I spoke was a Portuguese word for button, "butão"

(probably not spelled correctly), and it saddens me that I haven't continued to speak it in my own home.

By the time I went to school, I spoke both Portuguese and English fluently. I remember saying sentences like "Eu vou te dar um toque na cabeça" ("I'm going to bop you in the head") to my male cousins, and singing that popular song "Cheira bem, cheira a Lisboa." But my grandmother also added her little touch to the standard language, making almost every noun sound like tiny words by using the diminutive "uma casinha, uma batatinha, um sumozinho" ("a little house, a little potato, a little juice"). I think that she was very proud that one of her granddaughters spoke Portuguese fluently.

Sharing this linguistic connection with my grandmother encouraged us to get very close. When I was older, and wanted to see Portugal and São Miguel, we traveled together just the two of us. São Miguel, a place I have visited three times, is magical to me because of her. With its grand religious processions, beautiful churches, interesting nightlife, and an entire family I see so little, it feels like home. Whenever I go there, I never want to leave.

The older I get, the more I feel that I'm getting further away from that island. The older I get, the less I see her having fun and singing. The older I get, the more worried I become that I will not be able to offer my children what she has offered me. My deepest wish is that, someday, my children will not only want to know more about their roots, but will also learn to love their island with all of their soul. I still speak Portuguese to my grandmother, although now it is broken and unsure. She is the only person with whom I try to talk Portuguese here in Toronto. Whenever I go back to São Miguel, I am able to speak again and I love it. However, São Miguel is far away, and I am not able to go there as often as I would like. If nothing else, my grandmother has allowed me to glimpse a heritage we both now miss. I will be forever in her debt."

*I started with Daniela's testimony because it echoes many other accounts I have read and heard other students talk about. The role of grandparents among Portuguese immigrant families is relevant when we discuss the child's acquisition of her first language and the importance of maintaining it. In many families, parents rely on their own parents to baby-sit their children. It is common to see a grandparent taking the grandchild to school, being there during playground time, and picking her up during lunchtime and after school. For many children, this is their major opportunity of interacting in Portuguese. Grandparents will mostly use the Portuguese language either because that is the language they are most comfortable speaking, or because that is the language they want the children to learn. They might see themselves in a situation where they speak in Portuguese and the child answers in English, or in a mixture of the two languages. However, it is undoubtedly due to the grandparents' effort that they learn Portuguese. **Sandy Furtado**, another one of my students, talks about her experience, confirming what was just said.*

"I think it is of great importance to have lived with my grandparents and gotten to know them. Since I was born, my grandparents have lived with us. This was very convenient for my parents since they never had to hire a babysitter. My grandparents enriched my childhood by telling me exciting stories and giving me wise advice. There is a big connection between my grandparents and how I learned the Portuguese language. My grandparents raised me (while my parents were at work) and, so, my first language was Portuguese. They helped me a lot by giving me insight and they also encouraged me to learn other languages. We only speak Portuguese to my grandparents, and this has helped me and my sister to develop our skills in the Portuguese language. My grandmother never attended school but she would tell me many things about nature, people and daily life. She used to tell me many popular sayings that I will never forget."

Ricky Marques explains his relationship with the Portuguese language and culture, recognizing that after his parents gave up teaching

him Portuguese, he owes everything he knows to his grandmother's presence at home.

"I am proud to be the son of two Portuguese-Canadians. My mother immigrated at the age of five with my grandmother, two years after her father had arrived in Canada in search of a better life for his family. My father arrived at the age of nineteen, a few years after the rest of his family. I myself was born in Canada, but was raised as though I was in Portugal. My first language was Portuguese, and my parents did not think to teach me any English until I began to come home from daycare crying everyday because I was unable to communicate with anyone there. Things did work out. Being a child, I quickly picked up the English language, and feel that I did not really end up traumatized by my first experience alone in a public environment. My parents, on the other hand, may have been. They stopped speaking Portuguese at home in fear that this might be damaging to their own child.

I did manage to maintain my Portuguese language and culture. After those first few years, my mother, who had been home taking care of me, went back to work, leaving me in the care of her mother during the week. I spent my afternoons (after school until my mother came home from work) in my grandmother's care, from the age of three, until I finished elementary school. Summers throughout those years were spent entirely in Portugal with my grandparents, which further enriched my knowledge of my ancestral culture. To this day, my grandmother neither speaks English nor cooks anything that is not authentically Portuguese. To her credit, I have maintained fluency in Portuguese, and am not afraid to eat fish or rabbit, as are the majority of my friends.

I am very proud of my Portuguese roots and I am eternally grateful to my grandmother for developing my Portuguese half. Speaking Portuguese has facilitated my learning of French and Spanish, languages that have proven to be useful in the past and will surely help my career and

my life in the future. Since my grandfather passed away a few years back, my grandmother now lives with us. Looking back, I don't know how I could have managed without her. I am eternally grateful for her contribution to "my Portuguese life" and will never forget the impact she has had on me."

*Ricky's account is similar to many others. Parents who are fluent in English have to make a much bigger effort to continue to speak Portuguese at home. If they are told in school that their children are having problems, they often believe that it will help them if they stop speaking in the first language. They sacrifice it in favor of English. Other parents are firmer in their beliefs and maintain their mother tongue as a link between children and grandchildren. Even if the grandparents are not living in Canada, they are often the main reason why parents speak and teach Portuguese to their children. They value the knowledge of the language because they know that it will be the link between the younger and older generations. Finally, **Roger Coelho** describes how and why, with the help of his parents, he learned Portuguese in Canada.*

"Unfortunately, because of economic reasons, my relationship with my grandparents has been limited. I never had the chance to meet my mom's mother since she passed away when I was only months old and circumstances at the time did not permit a trip to visit. Nevertheless, my relationship with my mom's father, although limited, was unforgettable. Unfortunately, he too has since passed away.

Perhaps the most special memory I have of my grandfather is when he came to visit us in 1988, during the Christmas season. It was his first time on a plane and he loved it. To me he was a bold and fearless man who spoke his mind. Although I was only six at the time, my grandfather's visit left a mark. He taught my brother and me many things such as playing cards, but perhaps the thing that impressed me most was the way he told inspiring stories. Those four months that he was here were unforgettable; they allowed me to have a grandfather, which I so much desired, even if it was only for a short time.

Similarly, the relationship with my dad's parents has been limited. Unfortunately my dad's dad passed away about four years ago. I thank God for having had the opportunity to communicate more with these grandparents while I was still growing up. From visits to Portugal, to written Christmas wishes, communication has been extensive. This contact has been possible because of my ability to speak and write Portuguese. If my parents had not insisted that Portuguese be spoken at home, my connection with my grandparents and subsequently, with the rest of my family, would have been very limited, if not impossible.

I feel great satisfaction in being able to speak Portuguese and continue to improve my knowledge. Today, Portuguese is not just a language to me; it is a bridge which connects me to my dual realities, my life in Canada and my family in Portugal. If I did not speak Portuguese, the connection that I have with my aunts, uncles, and cousins would be nonexistent. My parents were the ones who ensured that my brother and I learned Portuguese since my grandparents were in Portugal.

I believe that the younger generations will think differently. I'm sure of this because I know people who were raised here and have subsequently gotten married and have children. They may not speak Portuguese at home, but it is when their kids go to their grandparents' house that they learn to speak Portuguese there. They will learn not only the language, but also all the other aspects of the culture which parents may not necessarily teach. This idea of considering the language as a responsibility of the grandparents is even more significant as more and more people marry outside of their ethnicity. In these situations, the grandparents definitely play a large role in teaching their grandkids their language and culture."

Daniela, Sandy, Ricky and Roger are a few examples of the large numbers of bilingual Portuguese-Canadian youngsters who have had the privilege of learning and retaining the language of their ancestors, "their language of sentiment," thanks to the role that their families have had in

their lives. They recognize that grandmothers have played a major role not only in their language acquisition and retention, but also in the transmission of a valuable heritage. Children are born with "bilingual brains," as the educator Mary Ashworth advocates. If our Portuguese-Canadian young people lose their language of sentiment, the search for this dual-sided personal identity will take longer, or might never happen. People who do not know who they are or where they belong live miserable, unfulfilled lives. It is everybody's responsibility to ensure that all children be given the opportunity to live a happy life and to be proud of their identity. As they transmit their mother tongue, their language of sentiment to their descendents, the grandparents of the Canadian immigrant communities, the grandparents, and especially the grandmothers, of the Portuguese diáspora have had a fundamental role in this learning process, in the formation of the cultural identity of our young people.

NOTE: I would like to thank Daniela Pacheco, Sandy Furtado, Ricky Marques and Roger Coelho for sharing their thoughts on a topic that I find particularly interesting.