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ESSAY

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Language Isolation on the Migrant Trail

"What countries speak English? I don't care where I go. Just get me to a place where I can talk again . . ."

—Feliz, from the Anglophone region of Cameroon

One of my colleagues and I were interviewing migrants in the outskirts of Capurganá. We were waiting outside of a migrant hostel while smugglers were inside, collecting money and preparing a group to begin their trek into the Darién jungle. The mood was tense. We waited, hopeful of interviewing a few people. We noticed a young local boy, maybe eight years old, watching us from down the road. He started walking towards us. He was holding a two-foot-long machete. "Madison, hey, do you see this kid?" I said to my colleague. She nodded.

The boy eventually came up to us and said something. I don't speak Spanish, so could only observe what was happening. The child twirled the machete in a circle like a baton as he spoke. Madison's shoulders raised up to her ears and she took a slight step back. "No, no . . ." she said in stern response to the boy. She looked back at me, her face riddled with concern. To me, all of these nonverbal cues—weapon, tensing, stepping back—communicated danger. The child asked his question again, more forcefully this time. "No . . . No . . . Por favor . . ." said Madison, her body tensing more.

Was the boy threatening us? Did one of the smugglers ask him to watch us, even harm us if we got too close to their action? "Let's walk away from him," Madison said to me. I was panicked and slowly backed away from the child, keeping my eyes on his weapon. A pre-teen was going to cut off our hands with a machete because we'd gotten too close.

Madison said: "He asked if we'd buy him a coke. I feel bad saying no, but we probably shouldn't do that here, right now. I just feel bad saying no . . ." The kid wanted us to buy him a soda. It turns out the nonverbal cues I interpreted as fear were actually Madison's way of communicating regret.

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I connected to most migrants I interviewed using the same first casual topic: "I'm struggling to get around without Spanish. What about you?" Despite having the help of two Spanish-speaking colleagues, I still found that traveling through Colombia without Spanish language skills was an immense challenge. Lack of facility in Spanish proved especially difficult in situations that seemed menacing, like being near smugglers conducting their business, or interacting with state authorities. I could feel firsthand some of the isolation and confusion many migrants described to us as a result of not being able to speak host-country languages.

Several of our interviews in Turbo and Capurganá, especially with West African migrants from Anglophone countries, focused on this cultural disconnect. Not speaking the local language led to countless problems while travelling: the inability to order food, to ask for help, to secure a job, even to read road signs. One of the Cameroonian men we interviewed, Feliz, had run out of money but said he couldn't find work because he didn't speak Spanish. He had resorted to walking down the street, from business to business, pantomiming the act of sweeping to store managers. He hoped someone would understand his game of charades and offer him money for the task. In Capurganá, we ate lunch with Serdio, a man from Ghana. My colleague, fluent in Spanish, helped him order the food he wanted: beef soup with a side of rice. He told me he hadn't eaten plain rice in over a month because he couldn't ask for it—he didn't have the words to communicate. It was his favorite staple food from home. And it was especially frustrating now because, with diminishing funds, it was his most affordable option. But without the skill to name it, the distance between Serdio and his comfort food was too wide to bridge. Lack of language skills connected me to migrants in a profound way: it is *really* hard to get by in Turbo or Capurganá if you don't speak Spanish.

The stakes change when immediate danger is involved. During my second interview with Serdio, he mentioned that his ocean crossing from Turbo to Capurganá had been especially terrifying: men were crying and clasping hands as the swells rocked and shook their fragile boat. He didn't believe the boat was going to make it across open ocean. He was unable to ask the captain any questions—How much longer? Will we be ok? Is this normal? He said the ride concluded when the boat entered the Capurganá port. But the drama wasn't over. A thicket of local authorities, indiscernible in title or station, shouted and screamed at Serdio and his fellow passengers as their boat docked. Again, their yelled words arrived in a language that Serdio didn't understand. His inability to distinguish what authorities seemed to demand added to the chaos of arrival and to his own panic.

This was something I also experienced firsthand, with terrifying outcomes. One day in Capurganá, another colleague, Conor, and I walked to the port during the hour when boats typically arrived. We saw a boat full of migrants unloading, seemingly being assisted and whisked away towards safe houses and hostels by formal migration officers. Shouldn't they be taking migrants to their office, maybe even to detention? I filmed some of the commotion on the street—African and Asian migrants moving quickly, trying to stick together, becoming confused.

Conor and I walked down an alley to avoid the commotion and realized we were following a group of Africans. The Africans turned a corner and suddenly, from out of nowhere, a migration officer was standing in front of me, screaming in anger. I was stunned. "No habla español!" I responded. The officer yelled again, pointing at the camera by my side, at my backpack, and then at Conor, who was apologizing in Spanish.

Conor tried to talk with the officer but the man was clearly enraged. He continued yelling. I caught words here and there: migrants (migrantes), video (video), prohibited (prohibido), illegal (ilegal), police (policia), detained (detenido), Conor saying sorry, please, error, sorry, go. The officer escorted us two blocks away to the migration office where he sat us down, yelled at us some more, and closed the barred metal doors to the compound. He and Conor conversed intensely. I could only discern that the officer was furious and that we had likely caught him doing something he didn't want others to see. I asked Conor to translate but the conversation was so fast and heated that he wasn't able to keep me fully informed. "Are we being arrested? Are we going to be OK?" I asked. The officer demanded our passports and took them from us.

We were detained in the migration office for about an hour with the officer yelling at us and threatening us throughout the meeting. He eventually gave us a strong warning, returned our passports, and told us to leave. Note, I was a university researcher with a US passport, with explicit permission to be in the country.

The migrants we interviewed did not have these protections. They understood they were breaking formal rules as they traveled without passports or requisite visas. They knew they had few options to summon help if things went wrong. Their interactions with authorities likely would be less benign than mine.

Our mutual inability to communicate bonded me with the migrants I interviewed. Their inability to take on work, receive a remittance, or order the cheapest food, all because of language or lack thereof, threatened their financial stability and also more generally their safety. Feliz couldn't ask for a job, Serdio couldn't ask the boat driver if they were safe, a group of Haitians didn't even know what city they were in. If you are traveling off the standard international tourist path, such as in places like Turbo and Capurganá, your only hope of finding the information you desperately need is to speak Spanish.

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