Saudade and Identity: Navigating Emotions and Cultures Across English and Portuguese

Saudade—when the first flash of the sun hits the bedroom. Saudade when the noise from the kitchen is louder and the news from the television in the living room murmurs while the roast coffee, now steeped in hot water, releases its aroma — the steam now dances through the air. The bedroom door creaks open, and the touch of my mom's hand on my shoulder, with the soft voice, "está na hora, filha!" resonates with the tenderness that only she possesses. The door open is an invitation to my cats—as they notice it, they jump on to purring as they seek solace on the bed. This juxtaposition gently yet compellingly, announces the arrival of a new day.

Saudade—when the only concern was to decide which friend to visit. Saudade of a friend who moved away. Saudade of eating mom's food. Saudade of samba. Saudade of feeling loved without effort and knowing that love doesn't go away after making mistakes. Saudade of experiences already lived. Saudade from the people who are in the past, and saudade of what hasn't happened or even from the unknown. Saudade of saudade.

When I started learning English, saudade was one of the first words I tried to translate from Portuguese. Not only due to the nostalgic tone it carries but because it seemed to encapsulate part of my Brazilian identity and memories. The habit of translating directly when learning a new language can be strong—a logical approach considering that the term "translate" comes from the Latin word meaning "to transfer." I was trying to transfer my life from Portuguese to English and feel the meaning of words effectively. I was trying to transfer my cultural roots and experiences. The phrase "I miss home" might seem like a straightforward translation to "saudade de casa" but “miss” is a monosyllabic and an Old English word—it’s quite simple and basic—direct, and almost blunt. It lacks the very essence of what saudade, and "casa" mean. It's not just about a physical place—but the intangible threads that tie to one's roots

and memories. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o emphasized in *Decolonizing the Mind*, language, as culture, serves as the collective memory bank of a people's historical experiences. In other words, translating emotions into another language becomes difficult when feelings are intricately tied to specific memories and the culture in which they are rooted.

In the Oxford English Dictionary, saudade came up as a part of the Portuguese or Brazilian temperament; "an intensely poetic country, the country of saudade, that mysterious melancholy which sighs at the back of every joy." In contrast, "miss" showed up with five options:

1. Fail to hit, reach, or come into contact with (something aimed at);
2. Fail to notice, hear, or understand;
3. Notice the loss or absence of. E.g. he's rich—he won't miss the money";
4. (of an engine or motor vehicle) undergo failure of ignition in one or more cylinders;
5. A title prefixed to the name of an unmarried woman or girl;

None of the above are like the meaning of saudade, but all of them seem to carry a negative connotation. Even though the most fitting comparison would be the third definition, attempting to translate it into Portuguese as "he won't saudade the money" simply doesn't make sense. For this specific case, we would use "sentir falta de" or "não vai fazer falta" – which still plays the absent role, but for something more material, rather emotional.

While we believe that saudade is a unique term, some linguists and researchers disagree by showing examples of equivalent words in other languages, said Camila Honorato in *"Saudade": the legendary Portuguese word and its unique meaning.* They believe that the English word "miss" and the Spanish word "Soledad," encapsulating solitude, picture the sentiment precisely. Honorato introduces Carolina Michaelis de Vasconcelos, who dedicated her

life to drawing parallels between the Portuguese and German cultures and languages. Vasconcelos affirms that saudade takes roots in the poetry of ancient Portuguese from the 12th and 13th centuries with "cantigas de amor e amigo." In this poetic genre, the Portuguese were able to convert melancholy into lyricism, as male lovers expressed their feelings for a distant lady and the females expressed their emotions and experiences waiting for their lover to return. The word is untranslatable because it also comes from the loneliness when captains and mariners say goodbye to their loved ones on ships.

As American English is slightly different from British, Scottish, Australian, and Irish English, the "Brazilian Portuguese," or "Portuguese from Brazil," is slightly different from "European Portuguese" or "Portuguese from Portugal." Linguistically the two trace their roots back to the 16th century with the invasion of Portuguese and indigenous lands. The interactions with indigenous communities, the forced migration of African slaves, and subsequent waves of migration and attempted invasions from Spain, the Netherlands, and France collectively contributed to the unique elements of Brazilian culture and, by extension, its language. These historical forces have not only shaped the linguistic landscape of Brazil but also its distinctive linguistic identity—as accent, vocabulary, pronunciation, and idiomatic expressions.

Michael Amoruso in *Saudade: the untranslatable word for the presence of absence,* said that some Brazilian intellectuals have distinguished the Brazilian saudade from the Portuguese one. Osvaldo Orico, a Brazilian writer from the 20th century, described it as a "happy saudade [...] reflected the joyous, optimistic notion of *brasilidade* that emerged during the early years of the first Getúlio Vargas regime (1930-45)." Orico also said that "saudade sings." Figures such as Tom Jobim, Vinicius de Moraes, Cartola, Chico Buarque, Elis Regina, Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and Gonzaguinha are just a few of the influential names in Brazilian music that sing about it.

Each of them is inspired by their experiences, memories, feelings, and emotions to create a narrative that transcends time and communicates with the cultural experience and nostalgia encapsulated in the feeling of saudade. These singers cultivate a shared cultural understanding of emotion and offer a collective guide on experiencing saudade.

Are the Portuguese speakers the only ones who can feel saudade? In my interactions with friends and family, all of them share Brazilian saudade as something that carries personal experiences—independently of its inherent meaning. Some friends expressed it as a recollection of something special that we no longer have, something we hold with care in our hearts. They also agreed that saudade is something good, but it can hurt because "it only exists because you don't have it anymore." I risk saying that saudade is a universal emotion, a sentiment experienced by every human being at some point in their lives. Many may not identify it by name, because it is not a word in their vocabulary, but articulate it through various ideas, expressing it as nostalgia or longing. Recently, I came across a social media post written by a native English speaker who confessed to crying "really, really hard" upon understanding the essence of saudade. They recognized that this feeling was present their whole life but "there was never a proper word to express the complexity of this beautiful expression in the English language."

While I struggle to teach the full essence of saudade directly, I often attempt to share its meaning with my friends who don't speak Portuguese. It's challenging, especially considering I've dedicated an entire semester to crafting this piece to share all these lovely facts about this word. Perhaps they better read this piece to truly grasp its depth and contribute to my effective communication. However, abstractly teaching them about saudade allowed me to seamlessly incorporate it into my conversations, allowing me to define my emotions while assuming my "English-speaker skin" without grappling for the precise words. Despite the enjoyable aspect of

this cultural intersectionality, these experiences have significantly contributed to shaping my identity and influencing how I navigate between these two worlds.

2. Language and Identity

When I moved to the United States, almost three years ago, one of the first cultural shocks was the way people would pronounce my name—"Brehn" + "duh" instead of "Burren-dah" with the emphasis on the "r," as Brazilians usually pronounce it. While speaking English, my country is Brazil. While speaking Portuguese, my country is *Brasil*. It is not only about phonetics; it embraces a cultural and psychological shift. What for years carried my experiences with family and friends, now took on a new cadence. Over time, these experiences have changed into a bridge of 5,128.80 miles, connecting the two worlds I am part of.

Language is not just about grammatical rules, but about communication, understanding culture and, consequently, developing a personality in another language. Thiong'o said that language carries culture, and I gradually immersed myself in the American one adopting a new persona, the "Brehn" + "duh," the one with the American English accent. This cultural assimilation wasn't spontaneous; it evolved as I engaged with the language, delved into slang, embraced memes, explored the propaganda from the 80s, and connected with movies and music. I found myself navigating as a bilingual which made me question if I was losing my identity. However, I was simply in the process of discovering and embracing a wholly different version of myself.

While I was trying to understand my cognitive processes, I came across *The Relationship between Bilingualism and Identity in Expressing Emotions and Thoughts* published by Antonela Bakić and Sanja Škifić at the Íkala, Revista de lenguaje y cultura from the Universidad de Antioquia in Colombia. According to the researchers, the relation of forming different types of

identities—it means, being bilingual—is not only the use of two languages but the management of two cultures where the bilinguals can navigate in both. For some, bilinguals are just those who grow up learning two languages, however, Wilhelmiina Toivo from the Institute of Neuroscience and Psychology at the University of Glasgow told The Guardian that, "Being bilingual no longer means just being exposed to two languages from birth—it can refer to a person who uses two languages in their everyday life, regardless of their level of fluency." Additionally, in *Languages and Emotions: How Languages Impact Different Emotional States for Bilingual People* by Anastasiia Yezhyzhanska*,* the piece affirms that there are two types of bilingual people; those who learn a language from a young age and those who learn it as an adult; For those who learn a language in childhood, their emotions are attached with that language. On the other hand, for adults, the emotional tone may feel more detached or "cold." Yezhyzhanska brings the example of Anton Shammas, an Arab, who lived in Israel, and wrote his novel in Hebrew, even though he used to write in Arabic, his first language — “You cannot write about the people whom you love in a language that they understand; you can’t write freely. In order not to feel my heroes breathing down my neck all the time, I used Hebrew,” he said. Yezhyzhanska also cited the case of Thomas Mann, a German citizen whose proficiency in French was limited, but yet favored to speak it over his first language, “Speaking in French is like speaking without saying anything somehow – with no responsibilities, the way we speak in a dream," he said.

During my sophomore year in college, my writing professor at the beginning of the semester asked us to embrace vulnerability in our class assignments, aiming to convey ideas that would resonate with our readers on a deep emotional level. The assignment sounded easy at first, but I soon realized that all my profound emotions up until that point had been felt in Portuguese. How would I be able to translate my years of emotions from Brazil to my American readers? I

initially attempted to draft in Portuguese to organize my thoughts; it felt illegal to read all those emotions right in front of me. So, I changed the approach—outlining in English which allowed me to distance myself just enough to navigate that emotional state without feeling overwhelmed. Yezhyzhanska said that bilingual writers experience different emotional states when they write in their first or second language. The first language, also known as the "mother language," can be perceived as a symbol of care and connection to our roots. It serves as a metaphor linking our emotions to a mode of comprehension and self-expression, akin to the authentic connection individuals typically share with their mothers.

In her experiment, Catherine Caldwell-Harris from Boston University demonstrated that individuals react strongly to certain statements when expressed in their first language. "Humor, swear words, emotional phrases like “I love you” or “aren’t you ashamed” don’t sound the same in first and second language," she said. "This phenomenon is attributed to what is known as "emotion-memory effects" [...] It happens because phrases are connected to their memories." When my friends casually express affection with "loveu," it feels entirely natural, and my immediate response is a warm "Aww, cute! Loveu too." However, when it comes to "eu te amo," it feels like an exchange of hearts, a genuine sharing of emotions. It's a declaration that shows my history—my journey as a lover, as a daughter, as a sister. Saying it to another person requires more thoughtful consideration, a pause, an acknowledgment that goes beyond the casualness of seeing a friend on the street.

According to Yezhyzhanska, to some bilingual people, the first language is stronger in emotional power, and the second is more rational and easier to use and share with others. Yet, the second language often represents a bridge to new perspectives, cultures, and opportunities — as mentioned previously, it is not just about learning it, but being part of a new culture. Bakić and

Škifić said that "being bilingual includes not only the use of two languages but, in most cases, also management of two cultures in the sense that bilinguals might feel they are part of two different cultures to varying degrees." In the almost three years that I have been living in a different country, I could identify a couple of things that made me notice that more than bilingual — I am bicultural, and the importance of learning how to navigate these two different spaces.

I left Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic, where I was already a year and a half without having in-person and public interactions with people who weren't my family. With the cases being under control, my life returned to the old normal while living abroad — and so did my interactions. When I come back to Brazil during the breaks — usually an "excuse me!" will escape my lips instead of "com licença!" — not because I want to show my English proficiency, but because my mind associates the situation where I need to pass in front of someone with my English/American routine. During my third year, I can also identify some difficulty in expressing myself in Portuguese without saying an English word to express an emotion — as "overwhelmed." While Portuguese does offer some analogous words or emotions to express the concept, using "overwhelmed" allows me to precisely capture the mental and physical state that embodies the meaning. Portuguese lacks a direct translation to "over" – the closest one would be "além de" which would mean "beyond." Translating "Overwhelmed" as "além de exausto" — "beyond exhausted" — emphasizes a more physical aspect, addressing physical fatigue, as opposed to the mental strain, stress, and pressure associated with feeling overwhelmed.

Feeling part of more than one culture at the same time can also contribute to the formation and expression of the overall identity of bilinguals, Bakić & Škifić said. My bilingual identity, for instance, highlights a sense of foreignness both in the United States and in Brazil. Simultaneously, during breaks, I feel like I am leaving one home to return to another. These

challenges not only impact my comprehension of culture but also influence how I communicate within my cultural context. When I go to Brazil, I can't articulate that I am feeling overwhelmed to my friends or family as the word is not part of our language. Similarly, in the United States, I am not able to translate *saudade* to my American and international friends, as their language lacks the cultural depth of the term.

When in the States, I do feel a sense of belonging to certain communities, witnessing the growth of my American identity and the molding of certain personality traits—manifesting in my speech, thoughts, expressions, and even my mindset related to clothing, diet, and emotional well-being. This evolution is understandable, given the considerable time spent in the U.S. speaking my second language compared to my time in Brazil speaking Portuguese. However, upon returning to Brazil during breaks, it seems that part of my "American personality" gets behind after some days back home. The remaining parts of it make me feel like an outsider in my mother-culture. The same sense of alienation intensifies upon returning to the United States, where I struggle to find ways to express my "Brazilianess." This back and forth has been building my personality while I am aware that my identity is fluid.

One of my American friends, who has learned Portuguese, pointed out that I seem like two entirely distinct individuals in Portuguese and English—sassier in Portuguese and a "business-woman" model in English. During our conversations that seamlessly transitioned between Portuguese and English, I observed shifts in tones and expressions from my friend. It was as if we were both embodying two different personas—navigating in two languages and two cultures. Yet, they are among the few individuals with whom I feel entirely comfortable being my authentic self in both languages, allowing me to freely express my thoughts, emotions, insecurities, and communication nuances. Recently, I have noticed that I had issues expressing

myself not because of lack of fluency in the language —English or Portuguese— but because I was going through a rough time that was preventing me from understanding my emotions and organizing my ideas. I was completely lost in my career, goals, and things I wanted to achieve as a college student. Certain English speakers mistakenly believed that my struggles during that challenging period came from an inability to express myself in my second language. This was not the case, as I regularly communicate in my second language. How would they know? The misconception arose from a broader notion that individuals from foreign backgrounds might encounter difficulties expressing certain ideas.

Imagine someone who shares your native language discussing quantum mechanics, a topic you've never had the opportunity to explore. In such a scenario, you could find it challenging to engage in the conversation due to your lack of familiarity with the subject. Now, consider a situation where you haven't studied quantum mechanics, and the person talking with you speaks a different first language. In this case, they might mistakenly assume that you don't comprehend their discourse due to a language barrier rather than realizing that your difficulty arises from your limited knowledge of the subject. Lacking knowledge in a specific subject can prevent your ability to articulate your thoughts in any language. How can one express to another that their struggle with a particular subject is rooted in the topic's complexity rather than a limited proficiency? Within college students, it's common to overhear student conversations in the hallway saying, “I don’t understand a word my professor said today…” Is this frustration related to the professor's phonetics, fluency, or simply the nature of the subject? Are these merely empty sounds, lacking the contextual meaning needed for students to comprehend the topic?

3. Katy

“What exactly do you mean?”

– “Well, during our practices and conversations, you often use words like ‘f*ck’ and ‘sh*t,’ and we can’t tolerate this language around our children.”

Last Spring, I was in a café with my Brazilian friend Katy. During our back-and-forth sharing of experiences, Katy recalled this odd situation where a fellow circus practitioner wanted to have Katy as a new instructor for the circus kids but wouldn't hire someone who cursed so frequently. Intrigued, Katy sought clarification.

Katy was born and raised in Brazil but is a U.S. citizen, and her first language is Brazilian Portuguese. While we were hanging out, she genuinely shared her indignation and discomfort during the encounter with her peer. Katy elaborated justifying that swear words used during the practices and chit-chat with her fellow were typically used as an intensifier for her emotions, rather than to offend or be impolite. Katy, as a bilingual person, also felt in her skin the challenges of navigating in more than one culture. Thiong'o said that communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture. When individuals engage in similar kinds of things and actions repeatedly under similar circumstances, certain patterns, moves, rhythms, habits, attitudes, experiences, and knowledge emerge. Katy in this scene, replicated what she had encountered during her time abroad. More than that, she was being to this fellow friend who she was when surrounded by her friends—aligned with her cultural understanding. She reflected on being fluent in both Brazilian Portuguese and English, sharing personal difficulties that come with two linguistic worlds. Her experiences highlighted the dynamic between language and culture, emphasizing how the nuances of expression can vary significantly—as in saudade and overwhelmed.

In *The Case for Cursing* by Kristin Wong published in the New York Times, "Curse words can help you more accurately communicate your emotions, which contradicts the folk

belief that people use profanity because they lack vocabulary skills," she said. In the same article, Wong explores a study published in the journal Social Psychological and Personality Science, which said that "profanity was associated with less lying and deception at the individual level." Some studies mentioned in Wong's article highlighted the research of Dr. Jay who with his colleagues, discovered that individuals who demonstrated proficiency in generating numerous words, also exhibited a greater ability to profanity. Additionally, a connection between swearing and honesty has been identified—indicating that individuals who use profanity are often perceived as more honest.

While I was with Katy, she also emphasized that she had never anticipated that these cursing words would have such a profound impact since she used to hear native speakers saying them everywhere—in real life, songs, and movies. For Katy, these curse words were just letters strung together with no real meaning. Yezhyzhanska said that swear words in a foreign language don’t have a great emotional context and sound not as bad as in a first language. As a result, there is an emotional gap between languages and that’s the reason when a person says swear words in a foreign language it sounds like a person doesn’t feel the meaning of the words and it can be surprising or even offensive for native speakers.

Being Brazilian, I can relate to Katy's experience. Not only because of our shared nationality and life abroad but because there are times when I feel the need to be excessively polite in my English interactions. A study from the University of Chicago revealed that bilingual individuals tend to exhibit a greater inclination toward making rational decisions when contemplating a language that is not their native tongue. At the same time, I am aware that certain words may carry different weight and potential offense in English compared to my first language. Recognizing this, I take precautions such as searching it online, seeking advice from

close friends, or reflecting on whether a particular choice of words is appropriate in each context. However, I feel profoundly uncomfortable in certain situations, leading me to step back from contributing to conversations or debates. This hesitation stems from a fear of expressing my ideas in a way that could be misunderstood or result in a judgment based on my perceived communication. My intelligence and integrity could be at risk just because of the way I learned to express my ideas and how I communicated them.

I recall when one of my classes established norms for handling misreading situations. We would take responsibility for addressing those privately, aiming to foster a more harmonious environment. This initiative aimed not only to improve interactions between native speakers and foreigners but also to enhance communication among English speakers themselves. If such misunderstandings can occur within a shared language, how are non-native speakers expected to navigate similar situations when they encounter them outside the academic environment? I am proficient in English as my second language and feel confident while speaking it. However, the delightful feeling of not needing constant caution in my vocabulary use or how my speech sounds to others is precisely why I empathize with Katy and her frustration.

4. Why is it important?

If more people were aware of the struggles bilingual individuals face with their own identities as they navigate different spaces, it would contribute to greater empathy and understanding. More than that, it would help us understand how misinterpretations can arise when we impose English-language emotional concepts and pragmatic norms onto non-English speakers avoiding language prejudice which involves but is not limited to judgments about a person's intelligence, social status, education, or cultural background based on their language or dialect. Toivo expressed that with the increasingly globalizing world where study abroad and

immigration are more common, as well as pervasive issues in international politics, understanding the realities of bilingual people is crucial.

Bilingual individuals often struggle with their identities as they move between languages. The example of Katy, a non-native English speaker, makes us ponder whether her fellow's approach would differ if she were an English native and what would be different in this communication. "As the number of people with versatile language backgrounds grows, understanding all aspects of language and how these mediate our lives become important," Toivo said. "Language is so much more than just a communication device; it is a way to understand the world around us, defining our reality and what it actually means to be human."

The existence of a word like saudade highlights the cultural and linguistic specificity of emotions and culture clash. Different languages encapsulate distinct emotional landscapes, and this linguistic gap emphasizes the limitations of imposing English emotional concepts on non-English speakers and underscores the need for understanding diverse linguistic expressions. Bakić and Škifić highlighted that the overall identity of each bilingual speaker is unique and can hardly be compared to the identities of monolingual speakers, primarily because it is much more complex and includes affective and cognitive factors.

When being bilingual and bicultural, the individuals may experience social integration and isolation. Exploring how language can be a bridge or a barrier in social interactions provides insights into the dynamics of community building and the challenges faced by individuals who navigate in multiple linguistic communities. More than everything already mentioned here, they are often responsible for preserving and passing on their native languages to future generations. The decline of certain languages poses a risk to cultural diversity. Understanding how

bilingualism contributes to language preservation emphasizes the importance of supporting linguistic diversity and heritage.

Saudade or overwhelmed, each language carries the culture attached to its roots, a symbiotic relation. The richness of this connection lies in the ability of people from different cultures to learn from one another, to adapt, and to grow while preserving the essence of their unique identity—or to adapt to new ones.