

A Tale of Two Halves (and More)

I have been teaching in Japan for a few years now – I love teaching at elementary schools, it's such a great way to share my own experiences with languages with young children. Most people doing my job are considered to be 'native speakers' of English. I guess I kind of fall into that category, too, but recently I have begun to think about what being a native speaker means. My name is Nicholas, and I was born into two cultures. Let me share a little of my story with you.

My father was in the air force, and was stationed in the south of Italy, where I grew up. My father wasn't an Italian, so my memories of his home country came from the air force base – it had shops selling food, games, and other things that Italian shops didn't have. So, to my friends at school, this was all really foreign! For instance, they loved my peanut butter sandwiches, because I was the only one who had them.

But, it wasn't all positive. Because I grew up in Italy, most of my friends were Italian, whereas I had two languages and cultures – my friends were whole, while I was 'split.' Even my own name made me a bit self-conscious, because 'Nicholas' ended with an 's,' and Italian names don't end like that. So, as long as I can remember, I was living two different lives. It was difficult to know where I belonged sometimes. I did enjoy some parts of the American side of life – I got access to some things that weren't available in Italy at the time. Like, I got to show off my cool new games – I had the first *Nintendo*, and all my friends were jealous! But for me, Italy was my home. When I was a child, I would say to myself, 'I'm never going to leave this place,' and 'I'm never going to marry someone who doesn't speak Italian.'

Although I grew up bilingual, when I was younger, I would refuse to speak in English. My father would talk to me in English, and I would always reply in Italian. To me, Italian was the 'real' or 'original' language. What I mean is, take a simple glass of water. To me, water was 'acqua.' I knew that it was also called 'water' in English, but to me, that was just like a different name. Water *was* acqua, some people just called it water. It's like, to me, the Italian language represented reality. Italian *was* reality.

A big change happened when I moved to the north of Italy, around when I was in junior high school. Well, here again, I was different. The way I spoke Italian sounded different to everyone else, and sometimes I couldn't understand them. In Italy, especially when I was younger, the North and the South were very different. The North was much richer, and the South, much poorer. I was basically the guy from the South, and everyone else was from the rich North. So, I felt split in two again. But the funny thing is, that my other identity was accepted much more in the North. When they heard my father was on the air force base, they thought it was cool – much cooler than being the kid from the South. You know, because I got all the nice toys and new games and things. So, I began to adopt the other half of my identity more. And I also became more comfortable with speaking English.

So, what brought me to Japan? Well, there was one thing all the kids in Italy shared in the 1990s, both North and South: We all loved Japanese cartoons. Of course, they were dubbed into Italian, but each episode would end with the same three Japanese characters in *hiragana*. I never knew their meaning, but I knew it meant the end of the episode, and that I would have to wait another week for the next episode. I think these cartoons later inspired me to learn Japanese, and now, I have left my home country and live in Japan. Using my third language, Japanese, every day, I now feel much more than two split halves. Oh, and now I know what those three *hiragana* characters meant – 'to be continued,' just like my own story.

Questions, Answers and Hints:

1. Where does the narrator's father come from?

Answer: America.

Hints/Clues: The strongest clue is ‘I did enjoy some parts of the American side of life,’ in reference to aspects of the military base to which he had access through his father. While this is the only explicit reference, other clues include that his father spoke English, the presence of foreign military bases themselves, and ‘peanut butter sandwiches.’

2. How do you say ‘water’ in Italian – try spelling it out (hint: it is also sometimes used in English to refer to things related to water)?

Answer: Acqua (as the students only have access to the audio, ‘aqua’ should also be acceptable).

Hints/Clues: While the word is stated explicitly in the text, students do not have access to the written form. They should be encouraged to sound it out, but also to look up words in English for things related to water, to see if they can find hints (such as aquatic etc.). This can also be used as a discussion point for the Latin roots of some vocabulary shared between two languages.

3. When he moved North, the narrator said that, although his peers were speaking Italian, ‘and sometimes I couldn’t understand them.’ What do you think made it difficult to understand?

Answer: Dialects.

Hints/Clues: Although the only explicit clue is stated in the question, Italy has historically been extremely linguistically diverse – in fact, even Italian for schooling was not standardized until several decades after World War II. Also, in the North, the country borders regions in which several different languages are spoken, which impacts local language use. While students will not likely be aware of languages in the Italian, they should be familiar with the wide variety of accents in Japan, and may be prompted to consider the Japanese context in attempts to answer.

4. What do you think the ‘three hiragana characters’ the narrator mentioned were?

Answer: つづく .

Hints/Clues: The author mentioned that while he couldn’t read these characters, he knew what they meant, i.e. ‘the end of the episode, and that I would have to wait another week for the next episode.’ He also briefly mentioned watching the cartoons in the 1990s, where it was a common trope to end episodes with ‘つづく,’ meaning, ‘to be continued.’

5. The author first refused to speak English, but when he moved, he became more open to using the language. Why do you think this is?

Answer: (answers will vary, but typically should be something related to the ‘desire to fit in,’ or at least to ‘not be excluded’).

Hints/Clues: This seems primarily motivated by a desire to fit in, especially when he was younger – he wanted to use the same language as his peers to fit in better. Although later on, when his Italian made him stand out (and possibly a target for exclusion and bullying), he became more open to adopting English, because his peers in the North thought that was ‘cool.’

6. What do you think the author meant by ‘Italian [language] represented reality’?

Answer: (answers will likely vary).

Hints/Clues: Creative thinking should be encouraged for this answer, including the students’ reflection on their own language(s). While points should be awarded for well-considered answers, more than having a specific answer, this question can be used to introduce and discuss the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, both strong (i.e., linguistic determinism) and weak (i.e., linguistic relativism).

